

SANCTITY AND MARRIAGE

THE canonization of Blessed Thomas More is extremely significant for many reasons: he was an Englishman, a layman, a man of great learning, a humanist, and he died a martyr to his belief in papal supremacy. More than any other man, perhaps, he was the typical Englishman. His humour, versatility, and literary achievements have endeared him to multitudes of readers in every part of the English-speaking world. His canonization is notable also for the fact that he was a married man—indeed twice married. It is a long time since any married saint has been officially canonized by the Catholic Church. That so few married people have been raised to the Church's altars since the present process of canonization was initiated, raises the query whether sanctity is in any way incompatible with married life.

To answer this question we must first clarify our minds as to what are the constituent elements of sanctity. Many think that a saint is simply one who lives according to high moral standards. But one can live such a life without any conscious relationship with God. A saint is one whose whole life is motivated by the love of God, and who tries daily to do the will of God, as that will is made known to him through vocation and circumstances. According to the degree of sanctity, saints are divided into common and heroic saints.

For obvious reasons it is only the heroic saints that are canonized by the Church. Before any servant of God can be enrolled in the canon of the saints it must be established beyond peradventure that his or her life was distinguished by the heroic practice of faith, hope, charity, justice, temperance, fortitude and prudence. That is the norm according to which the Sacred Congregation judges in the process of canonization.

In the cloistered life heroic love of God may be manifested in self-abnegation, continence, the cheerful acceptance of poverty and suffering, prayer and obedience. In married life it shines forth in patient endurance, mutual forbearance,

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sacrifices for the children, mutual faithfulness and affection, control of the sex instinct, and extraordinary self-denial. Under both sets of circumstances saints are developed—whether in the same proportion God only knows. Not even all heroic saints have been formally canonized by the Church. Religious orders are more likely to take the necessary steps towards the canonization of one of their members than a private family, especially if the living members of the family are either worldly or poor, or if they think that the saint was too generous in distributing the family inheritance.

Unusual mystical experiences, such as visions, ecstatic prayer, or the awareness of the divine action in the soul, are not essential to establish the heroic sanctity that is required for canonization. They are given at God's pleasure and possibly may be conditioned in some way by natural character and temperament.

The Catholic Church asserts the rights of all her children to sanctity. This teaching of the Church found special expression in St. Francis de Sales, who delighted in leading men and women of the world into the sanctuary of perfection. He taught that one could live the saintly life anywhere—in the army, the court, the university, the world of commerce or the home.

Retirement from the world, though good both for the souls who are called by God to leave the world, and for the world which they help to sanctify by their prayers and vicarious sufferings, is not the only road to sanctity. In this and every age, there has always been an urgent need for saints who are in the world but not of it, engaged in secular work, and committed to the ordinary human relationships—family life, business activities, politics, art, science, literature. There is no reason why we should not have such saints.

Such an outpouring of divine grace would make Christian standards of living more familiar to the indifferent and worldly, hasten the return of the world to a Catholic culture, and diffuse more widely the leaven of Catholic sanctity. They have taken up their abode in the land of far distances,

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in peaceful valleys amid majestic mountain peaks; but the friends they have left behind sometimes feel that they have been deserted. However, those who have renounced the world have obeyed the call of God, and God's wisdom may not be questioned.

Is sanctity then incompatible with marriage? Not a few would hold that it is, and perhaps on a superficial view of the facts a plausible argument might be constructed. St. Paul went so far as to say: "He that is without a wife is solicitous for the things that belong to the Lord: how he may please God. But he that is with a wife is solicitous for the things of the world; how he may please his wife." That might suggest the inference that, in the opinion of St. Paul, a married man could not be a saint.

Most of the saints commemorated in the Church's Calendar have been bishops, priests or religious. Many of the canonized married saints were either martyrs, or royal saints who married for reasons of state or they separated by mutual consent and became religious, or when the husband or wife died the other embraced the monastic life. It must be admitted that few married women whose husbands have outlived them have been canonized. There have been many saintly widows, but a husband in the flesh seems to be an obstacle to sanctity. Wives have not so often been obstacles to the sanctification of their husbands. Nevertheless it is noteworthy that, while the number of saints who have been beatified or canonized in the last four centuries has been between four and five hundred, of these more than three hundred belonged to religious orders. From this it might be inferred that both the Church and the saints have been lukewarm in their devotion to the married state.

In reply to this argument we may say that it is only to be expected that the religious life should prove to be pre-eminently the school for sanctity. Nevertheless a sufficient proof that marriage and sanctity are not mutually contradictory is to be found in the actual practice of the Church in canonizing many men and women who were married.

In Our Lord's teaching both marriage and celibacy are approved. After He had laid down the principle of the

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indissolubility of marriage, His disciples concluded that it might be better not to marry. "If the case of a man with his wife be so, it is expedient not to marry."¹ In His reply He emphasized two points. First, He reaffirmed His previous declaration that the marriage bond may not be dissolved. Secondly, He explained that celibacy, when chosen for supernatural motives with a view to the heavenly life, is praiseworthy. This state of life, however, is only for those who have been favoured with a special grace of illumination and fortitude. "He that can receive it, let him receive it." Every one is free either to marry or not to marry. The choice of the single state must be free from constraint. There are three classes of celibates in the world: those who are naturally inclined to continence; those who are unwillingly compelled to live a single life; and those who voluntarily adopt celibacy "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven"—that is, to be more free to serve the Church.²

Thus Our Lord both restored marriage to its pristine purity, and made celibacy and virginity a matter of vocation. Just because He sanctified marriage, rendered it indissoluble, and made it a sacrament of His Church, He thereby gave His divine sanction to the life of continence and chastity. There will always be those who feel that they cannot submit to the indissoluble bond of marriage, but wish to preserve their individual liberty of action. With all their hearts they aspire to the ideal and heavenly life, and desire to be free to make as generous an offering of themselves as possible to the service of God.

St. Paul settled the question of the relative good of continence and marriage in these words: "I would that all men were even as myself. But every man hath his proper gift from God: one after this manner and another after that."³ Sanctity, therefore, may be attained in either state.

The conclusion, therefore, to which we are led is that both celibacy and marriage are in accordance with the will of

¹ Matt. xxix, 10.

² *Méditations Sur la Vie de Notre Seigneur Jesus Christ*, by Rev. P. M. Meschler, S.J., Vol. II, p. 369.

³ I Cor. vii, 7.

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God, and that it is entirely a matter of vocation which state anyone shall enter. That being so, it is abundantly clear that one may attain to sanctity either in the single life or in the married life.

The reason why so few married saints have been canonized is probably to be found in the fact that the marriage state from its very nature does not provide such a favourable ground as the unmarried state for heroic sanctity on the grand scale—that is, for such a complete holocaust of one's life as to make it possible for the heroism involved to compel the notice of onlookers. It will be only in such latter cases as a rule that sufficient evidence of heroicity could be available. Just as the military authorities in a war can only single out for the award of an honourable medal those cases of courage which are readily observable, so the Church can apply her formal process of canonization only on similar principles.

To assert that men and women may become saints in the married state, if marriage is their vocation, is not to assert that there is no difference in merit—that is, in the rewards they will receive in heaven—between those who follow the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience, and those who live merely according to the commandments. It can hardly be denied that those who forsake all to follow Christ will lay up greater treasure in heaven than those who direct their own affairs in the midst of possessions and family life, even though their wills be perfectly conformed to the will of God.

That the life of the counsels is considered by the Church to be on a higher plane than the life of the precepts is clear from the declaration of the Council of Trent: "If anyone shall say the married state is to be placed above the state of virginity or celibacy, and that it is not better and more blessed to remain in virginity or celibacy than to be joined in marriage, let him be anathema."

Every one is free to choose between the married state and celibacy, but he cannot attain to sanctity unless he makes his choice in the light of divine vocation. The choice may be determined by personal taste, capacity, natural inclina-

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tion, temperament and so forth. Before coming to a decision, it is well that one should seriously count the cost of either course.

Whether people marry or remain single, sanctity is out of the question for them unless they are obedient to the call of God. This point has been well brought out by Father Bede Jarrett:

There are souls that can only develop the gifts within them through the married life. Their souls left solitary would be maimed, never achieving their real richness. There are others whom God has designed for the way of the cloister—separate, untouched, alone. Each has to find the place to which God calls him and for which he was destined and endowed. His vocation is a positive way of life. The married life, if it is God's choice for you, will contain for you the highest thing you can ever do. One way of life may be higher than another, but this can only be in the abstract, for that is highest for me which God has called me to—whatever it may be. To do God's will is the noblest thing; by this only are both cloister and the way of marriage justified.

Those who would like to marry, and feel that it is their vocation, but are denied the means or the opportunity—and there is an increasing number of such in the modern world—must learn to convert the sex instinct into energizing forces in their work, and in the human relationships which God brings to them. An involuntary celibacy is their vocation, and it is often a more difficult one than marriage or the religious life, just because it is so contrary to their desires. These people are deserving of our utmost forbearance and sympathy. In the Middle Ages, when life was more simple, people either married or went into the priesthood or a religious order. Our modern industrial civilization, the high cost of living, and the economic independence of women have changed all that. These involuntary celibates—both men and women—who must live in the world, have a real opportunity of becoming saints.

In these days, when so many look upon marriage as a union of pleasure or self-interest, a step towards money and position, or merely as a means of perpetuating the race, there is need for insistence on the fact that Christian marriage is the union before God of two souls who wish, by the

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grace of the sacrament to perfect one another, to love one another, and to give children to the Church and saints to heaven.

This higher aim has been stressed by His Holiness Pius XI in the Encyclical *Casti Connubii*: "The love, then, of which we are speaking is not that based on the passing lust of the moment nor does it consist in pleasing words only, but in the deep attachment of the heart which is expressed in action, since love is proved by deeds. This outward expression of love in the home demands not only mutual help but must go further; must have as its primary purpose that man and wife help each other day by day in forming and perfecting themselves in the interior life, so that through their partnership in life they may advance ever more and more in virtue, and above all that they may grow in true love towards God and their neighbour, on which indeed 'dependeth the whole Law and the Prophets.' For all men of every condition, in whatever honourable walk of life they may be, can and ought to imitate that most perfect example of holiness placed before man by God, namely Christ Our Lord, and by God's grace to arrive at the summit of perfection, as is proved by the examples of many saints."

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