

Now to fail to recognise the absolute necessity of Church membership is to fall into Rationalism. For unless we acknowledge that human nature in itself is all sin, and therefore that it could only be restored by the union with the perfect nature of the Son of God, which is effected through the Church, we must necessarily hold that man in his fallen state can yet apprehend God and attain to the knowledge of His truth. In other words, we are forced to admit that there is inherent in our nature a germinant principle of perfection which at any time might be developed by man's unassisted effort. Thus the Sacred Humanity of our Lord is overlooked, the effect of the Incarnation nullified, and Original Sin practically denied.

But the Church of God deals with us as members of a fallen race, which we are conscious to ourselves of being, and thus it takes us and unites us one by one to the great Head of our renewed nature, and puts us, even while on earth, to sit in the Heavenly places, partakers of the never-ceasing intercession of the one Mediator, borne up and strengthened by actual contact with His perfect Manhood, fed and sustained by that Body which was given for the life of the world; and through our union with the Humanity of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, we are actual partakers of the Divine Nature.—*Irish Ecclesiastical Gazette.*

OUR MARRIAGE SERVICE.

It is something of an anomaly that there should be a tendency in current thought to regard social institutions, however venerable, as upon their trial. It is strange that there should be a class which effects to regard usages and customs which form an integral part, not only of the life of nations, but also of civilization itself, as only makeshifts to be tolerated until some more perfect condition of social life shall be excogitated. Institution which have stood the test of centuries are haled by any self-constituted accuser to the bar of so-called 'advanced thought,' where their antiquity, if it do not at once procure their condemnation, is at least remembered against them. There is no need to be either a pessimist or an alarmist, but one would be blind indeed who did not see in the latest manifestation of this spirit at once a menace and a warning. That it should have occurred to any one to consider seriously, as likely to furnish conclusions of more than personal application, whether any substitute can be found for monogamy, indicates a lamentable departure from a healthful standard—we will not say of morality—but of right thinking and well-being, for moral no less than physical health is to a large extent not self-conscious. Evil times must indeed be at hand if the very basis of the body politic is thus to be attacked, and if the sanction of centuries of Christianity are to be deliberately weighed against a chimera and a theory which has failed where, and whenever tested.

It will, then, be but a minor wonder that the Marriage Service of the Church of England should be made the object from time to time of criticism and of avowed dislike. It is not intended here to offer any apology for this office of our Church, still less to defend that state of life the entrance to which this service consecrates and hallows. Nothing more will be attempted than to endeavour to make clear the Church's view of the married state as set forth in her formularies, and to present what we conceive to be the central or germ idea of the whole.

It is an extremely significant circumstance that in the very first sentence of the opening exhortation, the mystical meaning of human marriage is brought out. We are none too ready to see in earthly things and earthly relationships types of the heavenly. The whole tendency of modern thought is to assert

the reality of the world of sense. But here we are placed upon a widely different plane. If from the few words of this exhortation we might presume to generalise, it might be said that this appears to be the argument from design carried into a more spiritual region than that in which it is ordinarily employed. If we find it difficult to conceive of the visible universe without a mind which has formed and fashioned the various parts with direct reference to their uses, then it is still more difficult to comprehend the facts of man's emotional and spiritual life, unless we admit that they have reference to some eternal reality external to humanity. The facts of our higher nature—truth, love, justice—are relative only, relative that is to some mightier and grander reality of which there are but the earthly adumbrations. Here is a case in point: The wedlock of man and woman is only the shadow of that perfect bond of union which subsists between Christ and His Church; it is the stepping-stone by which we may rise to that eternal verity, the full apprehension of which at present escapes us. An unhappy marriage, therefore, implies more than the saddening of two lives, it is the *depravation of a spiritual image*, the darkening of a spiritual type.

And then the opening exhortation proceeds to speak of the care, the forethought, and the circumspection, with which this estate should be adventured. This theme, in its worldly bearings, at any rate, is trite enough: has not Malthus written? But the admonition has a far wider scope, and is not concerned alone with mere temporal well-being. We are to learn that this estate of matrimony should be entered upon by none save those who feel themselves called thereto by God; that just as some few men and women have a vocation for the celibate life, so to others, and these the majority, God sends a call to the married state, and that the vocation is as true in the latter as in the former case. Marriage is looked upon far too much by both sexes as an inevitable and ordinary incident in life, and as requisite for its completeness; it should rather be regarded as something to be consciously undertaken in conformity with God's will and for His greater glory, and as distinctly not necessary to complete self-realisation and development unless seen and felt to be in harmony with the spiritual life.

In connection with the impediments to marriage, there is only one thing to be pointed out. Next to the frequency of divorce among us, the gravest scandal is the carelessness and the levity with which engagements to marry are broken off and set aside. A contract to marry which has not been cancelled by mutual consent of both parties to it is really as fatal a bar to the marriage of either with another, as though the marriage had been consummated. If, instead of that solemn farce known as an action for breach of promise of marriage, the defaulter were held to be barred from marriage with a third party, the reform would be a most salutary one.

Now, although the consent of the parties, formally and publicly stated, plays a very important part in the conception and in the structure of the marriage office, yet the mutual declaration which follows the charge in reference to any known impediment cannot be taken as constituting the essence and gist of the service. The declaration—couched, be it noted, in the future tense—is the surviving representative of the ancient betrothal—formerly a separate service—and though now incorporated in the marriage office, is still purely introductory. This is obvious from what follows. Although the parties to be married have mutually declared their consent, yet after that the priest inquires, 'Who giveth this woman to be married?' implying that she is still in the power of some one other than her husband. The idea seems to be this. *The woman's relations yield her up to the Church in the person of the officiat-*

ing minister, and *the Church gives her to the man*, who thus, like Adam, receives from God a *helpmeet for him*. This may seem an unimportant distinction upon which to insist, but much flows from it. If it be admitted that the essence of the marriage rite is the consent of the parties, and that all the Church does is to witness the consent and to bless the union, then the indissolubility of marriage can no longer be logically defended. We shall only be playing into the hands of those who confessedly wish to see the marriage contract placed upon precisely the same footing as any other social or even commercial agreement, by adopting such a view of the marriage rite, which is indeed nowhere to be found in the Prayer-book. If, on the other hand, it is seen that the man and woman have *really* been joined together by God, and that the marriage rite is the *authoritative* act of an accredited representative, than any separation short of that effected by death will be rightfully abhorrent. It seems difficult, looking at the express language of the office, to hold any other view but this. 'Those whom God has joined together let no man put asunder.' Could anything be more explicit? However much this may traverse the sentiments of the age, it is pretty plain, and only that this is the central thought of the marriage service, but that it is also one of the *fundamental conceptions upon which the institution rests*.

We go back a little, to notice the phrases in which the woman plights her troth—a point which more than any other in the service has provoked, and does still elicit, much animadversion. The promise to *obey* naturally comes in for a great deal of vituperation: how should it be otherwise when the sense of authority is practically dead among us? Moreover, there can be no doubt that the position of woman is gradually being considerably modified. The entrance of women upon various worldly callings necessarily produced an important variation in the relation in which they stand to men. And so people begin to think that the family is a republic in microcosm. But it is nothing of the kind—an absolute monarchy would be a fitter comparison. Christianity has, it is true, effected an enormous revolution in the social position of women, and so there are those who claim for women an equality with men which Christianity can never be made to sanction. The whole trouble is due to the fact that democratic nations have permitted almost every relation of life. Accustomed to a belief in a theoretic equality of all men which nowhere exists, men imagine that *authority* is only to be derived from the *consent of equals*. This may be true of the body politic, but it is in no sense true of spiritual offices. The Member of Parliament may derive his authority from the consent of his fellow-electors, but the *Bishop* does not derive his authority from the *clergy* of his diocese, nor the *parish priest* his authority from the *members of his congregation*. If secular authority is derived from below, *spiritual* authority is always derived from *above*. If, therefore, there is to be an order in family life, any obedience due and rendered, the authority of the head, as the representative of the Divine authority, must be derived not from the consent of those beneath, but as the gift of the power above. Fitly, therefore, does the woman promise to obey her husband—not as yielding something which might be withheld, but as recognising an authority which demands obedience. To regard marriage as the union of equals is neither in accordance with Scripture nor with the Prayer-book.

With the rest of the service, which is hereafter purely one of benediction, we are scarcely now concerned. It may be added, however, that they greatly err who think they do well to embark upon life together without the Church's blessing, and without recognising in the holy estate of Matrimony types and shadows of the sublimest truths of the spiritual world.—*W. H. Wade, in Church-Bells.*