



Christ and the Feminine Heart

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"Before all, my husband first, even before myself." This ancient Japanese saying sums up the whole essence of a bride's troth. With the words "I do" she seals this pledge and commits herself to an acceptance of the love-challenge—the total, unreserved self-offering to her spouse. In one moment she surrenders her most precious possession, her feminine heart. This heart vivifies and defines her being—it embraces a glorious bouquet of qualities that are female—it is an inexhaustable fount of ingenuity in the intricate, intimate facets of love—it is selfless with warmth and tenderness—it is made to be given.

Paradoxically, this priceless dowry-treasure must be sacrificed in holocaust to her spouse and yet never be destroyed. Her heart must become transformed into a dynamic, animate part of her husband, but nonetheless retain its individual identity as feminine in this love-bond. In the words of

Erich Fromm, it is "a union under the condition of preserving one's integrity, one's individuality." He continues by way of amplification:

Love is an active power in man; a power which breaks through the walls which separate man from his fellow men, which unites him with others; love makes him overcome the sense of isolation and separateness yet it permits him to be himself, to retain his integrity. In love the paradox occurs, the two become one and yet remain two.¹

Perhaps the best way to describe this metamorphosis of heart is to call it a delicate state of equilibrium which demands constant sensitivity; it is not a static state, rather, it is a turbulent struggle to sustain an achieved ideal. The bride, therefore, must strive to unite the femininity, which is her heart, to the heart of her beloved so that their union forms a single, indistinguishable life-source for the two, while at the same time, the two hearts remain separate and distinct entities complementing and being complemented, fulfilling and being fulfilled.

Every bride, then, as a consequence of her marriage promise, must consider that the thing first to be sought is a perfect communion of hearts, since the intensity of the marriage's life-source depends directly upon the degree and success of the heart-union. Naturally, in the actual accomplishment of this new heart formation each particular marriage will encounter its own peculiar problems due to the fact that individuals are involved in the re-creation process.

In this article the query will center around a particular but unique marriage, the marriage to divinity, in which a woman accepts the Christ love-challenge of the religious state. However, we shall not extend our investigation to the woman who chooses to live a purely contemplative marriage in Christ. Our concern will be the woman in the contemplative-active marriage. First we will describe the bride-heart and the nature and meaning of its challenge, and then, in terms of today, we will discuss its response to this challenge. In particular, we will study the factors involving the task of the feminine heart in its conformation to the divine heart of The Spouse.

The Bride-Heart

In every feminine heart there is implanted the seed of bridehood even

¹ Erich Fromm. *The Art of Loving*. (New York: Harper, 1962), pp. 20-1.

as the heart awaits the life-stimulus in the mother's womb. Here, where the seed sprouts and receives nourishment, it absorbs knowledge of the secrets one day to be its heritage. At first there is no distinguishing note which indicates that this is a bride-heart. During the cycle, the heart grows strong and soon there follows the maturation of the feminine qualities: charm, gaiety, sensitivity, joy, warmth, beauty, and all else that God destined to be the heart of a woman. Each beat of this heart now causes a tranquil delight as a result of the experiential knowledge of being a woman. She revels in this recognition for she has attained the first goal God intended for her—womanhood. This initial stage of the bride-heart evolution might be looked upon as a preparatory period in which the heart brings forth the fruits that render it presentable as the cherished gift-offering for the bridegroom.

At this point the kernel of the bride-seed cracks and deposits in this joyous feminine heart a longing for fulfillment. As Fr. Schwarz puts it:

A woman has been endowed by almighty God with a need which suffuses every fiber of her being, every facet of her personality. . . . She needs the nourishment of acknowledgment, of normal human attention paid to her as a distinct person created by God. She needs to receive love and to give love. . . . The Lord has endowed her with these needs precisely so that she will in fact find herself powerfully attracted to marriage according to His design and at the same time achieve her own personal fulfillment, physically, psychologically, spiritually.²

In a sense the woman, no longer able to contain her joy, feels compelled to share this thing of beauty—this feminine heart—with another. Thus begins the quest for the heart of the beloved whose nature it is to receive this bride-heart.

How then does the heart of the *Christ-bride* differ from this? All women, as we have said, bear the seed of bridehood in their heart. Its fruition is realized in marriage to man, who is the perfect complement intended by God to fulfill woman. Not so for the *Christ-bride*. She renounces this happiness for a far greater realization of fulfillment in betrothal to Christ, the God-Man. Such a woman, writes Sr. Jerome Marie, has:

at least some intuition that the deep needs of her womanly nature

² John C. Schwarz, S.J., "The Charity of Interest," *Review for Religious*, v. 22, 1963, p. 552.

—to love and be loved, to be bride and mother—will be supereminently realized in religious life. However vaguely, she knows that religious life will bring her to the realization, the fulfillment of her yearning for love, and that its fulfillment will be realized in God.³

What has happened is this: the Christ-bride has been endowed with a superabundance of all that other women possess—not that she is better—but rather, that she is necessitated to give what is hers to more than one man, to more than one child, to more than one family, to more than one world. There is One alone Who is the Bridegroom for such plenitude—Christ. And this is the heart of the Christ-bride.

The Christ Love-Challenge

On the pages of salvation history, the feminine figure stands out most strikingly; and traditionally it represents the chosen of Yahweh, but it can in fact stand for the whole human race. The familiar woman-to-man figure typifies the ideal that should exist between mankind and God: just as the bride receives her name, her fulfillment, her glory from her husband, so too, does man receive his name, his fulfillment, his glory from God. The keynote of this relation is surrender—a free, loving surrender to God. This means to possess Him and be possessed by Him, to love Him and be loved by Him, to understand Him and be understood by Him, to serve Him and, yes, even to be served by Him.

In this sense, every Christian, in fact, everyone is able to be a bride in spirit. However, woman alone is able to be a bride by nature, and thereby she can give visible witness to the mystery of marriage to God. And among women it is the nun who is the living witness *par excellence* to this divine wedlock. For this reason, we must show how her love-challenge differs from that of all other Christians. First of all, recall that the nun enters into a contemplative-active marriage with Christ. Hence, her love-challenge will be necessarily two-fold.

To analyze these two aspects most profitably, let us turn to the two feminine figures in Scripture who stand as the prime archetypes embodying the love-challenge of the Christ-bride. These are the bride of the Canticle

³ Sr. Jerome Marie, C.S.J., "The Way of Lonliness," *Review for Religious*, v. 22, 1963, p. 559.

of Canticles, as the exemplar of the active aspect, and the most blessed among women, Mary, as the exemplar of the contemplative.

The Cantic bride depicts the role of the bride to be one of steadfast love in the midst of separation from her beloved. She roams the streets of Jerusalem searching for her bridegroom. She tells all whom she meets of his charms. Her every act, her every word, her every gesture is pervaded with her burning love for the groom. She is at once a herald, proclaiming the groom's lovableness in the language of her feminine heart, and a witness, testifying to the love that they share for one another. Nothing can extinguish the fire of her great love. No other can seduce her heart.

Such is the love Christ demands of His bride. She must be faithful to Him as she roams the streets of earth searching for Him in the hearts of men. The Christ-bride's separation, however, is not one of space, for Her Lover always dwells deep within her heart; it is, rather, a separation of attention. By this we mean that her attention, which naturally seeks to give itself entirely to Her Beloved, must turn from Him, as He dwells in her heart, and go out to Him dwelling in the hearts of men. The nun's heart, then, is a paradox-center, in that she possesses Her Beloved and yet seeks Him as though He were lost. Consequently, the nun goes forth from Her Beloved, though never really leaving Him, and seeks Him in every nook and cranny of His creation. Wherever she finds Him, she must embrace Him and take Him to her heart; wherever she finds Him not she must proclaim Him so that others will see Him in her and find Him in themselves. In this way, she, like the Cantic bride, is a herald and a witness to Her Beloved, Christ. As herald and witness, however, the nun must in the first place be faithful to her nature as woman; this after all is what God in His infinite wisdom wanted and made her to be. Besides, we should note how extremely important it is that if the normal psychological needs are not adequately fulfilled, then the person will be limited in responding to divine grace. Therefore, it is essential that she carry out these functions as a woman, that is, in the way so natural to her, the feminine way—the way that most endears her to the heart of Her Beloved and most endears Her Beloved to the hearts of men.

Perhaps, this is the most important lesson she derives from the Cantic bride. Just as that biblical figure remains true to her characterization as a woman obsessed with the love of her beloved so too, the nun, in living her life of steadfast love, must be true to her character as a woman obsessed with the love of Her Beloved in every encounter and situation of life. The reasoning behind this is simple enough as Sr. Jerome Marie points out:

"... this singleness of purpose is the source and strength of her action which, as her vision deepens and her charity broadens, will leave the religious little time for self-pursuits. As life becomes exteriorly more complex her interior life simplifies in the unity of seeking and finding God in each contact."⁴ Therefore, the nun must primarily be a woman deeply involved and taken up with the love of Her Beloved, and only secondarily is she a teacher, a nurse, a cook, and accountant, a social worker, or whatever other occupation this love of hers places her in. It is imperative that she be aware of this and project it into her life, since God loves and chooses her simply because she is a woman, and not an official performing a task. In other words, what God desires is to use her femininity in the salvation of men. Hence, He wants a feminine apostle: alive, sensitive, human, not a nun who forfeits her femininity for a work of dedication—an I.B.M. machine can fulfill this kind of dedication. Cardinal Suenens makes this same point in the following way:

One can dedicate a whole life to the care of the sick, but one does not begin to be apostolic until one confides in them the secret of one's devotion, until one leads them to know Christ and does one's best to make Him loved. Devotedness opens another's soul to sympathy, disposes him favorably, and renders him attentive to what you have to say. Yet, there still remains the passing on of the message and the imparting of life.⁵

Therefore, the essence of the active challenge is that the nun should not destroy her femninity but adapt it to the work of Her Beloved so that He may channel it into various streams to effect His plan in the world through her. If she abides by this guiding principle, the nun not only successfully fulfills half of the Christ love-challenge, but she also becomes a powerful, effective instrument of salvation. The secret longings of such a woman are captured and recorded for us by Cardinal Suenens:

She will dream of giving to Our Lord and her fellow-men twenty-four hours out of the twenty-four. She wants her life to be even more unified. One love inspires her, a double love. She

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 561.

⁵ Leon Joseph Cardinal Suenens. *The Nun in the World*. (Westminster: Newman, 1963), 23-4.

wants to go from God to God in prayer, and from God Himself to God in her fellow-creatures in the apostolate.⁶

In addition to this active aspect of the Christ love-challenge, the nun has also a contemplative challenge which gives authenticity and support to the active dimension. And that is her challenge to sanctity. Here, Mary is of invaluable help, for in her perfect sanctity is clothed in the flesh of a woman. How fitting that the Christ-bride gain her insights regarding the Bridegroom from Mary. Mary knew and loved Him more than anyone else on earth. She gazed upon Him silently and prayerfully in loving contemplation for over 33 years: from His birth, through His childhood, to His manhood, and even long after His cruel death, she continued this love-vigil. She realized that Christ had no need of her, yet it pleased Him that



she should bring Him into the world, that she should shower her affections on Him, that she should enjoy His presence, that she should suffer and die with Him; further, it pleased Him that she should rise and ascend to Heaven with Him. Such is the attitude that should color the life of His Bride.

No one will deny that the nun's guides in her way of personal sanctity are the Holy Spirit, Holy Mother Church, and the particular community to which the nun belongs. Still Mary offers the nun something very special for this sacred journey too. Mary manifests to the nun how to live an entirely feminine life of perfect sanctity in the world, being active in the affairs of the world and yet remaining above and beyond the world. Mary was able to so live because her whole world was Christ. This meant that Christ was first, and thus, she developed an active type of contemplation

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 58.

in which all she saw and did was related to Christ. This is Mary's contribution to the bride.

Therefore, this part of the love-challenge demands that the Christ-bride now strives to incorporate His sanctity into her heart and to perfectly express it in her apostolic endeavors. In effect, the nun's spiritual life is to be the dynamo from which all her activities generate and, hence, her inner holiness at once gives witness to Christ and safeguards her in withstanding the raging currents:

In a world of men filled with a sterile loneliness of yearning, she is aware of Him whom all are seeking. She reaches out and within with the vision of the Unknown for which men are groping, communicating to them, if not in words, perhaps more significantly by example, and certainly most fruitfully by living in this vision. To live, to walk in the vision of God: this is the source of the dynamic recollection of the apostolic soul.⁷

From the foregoing consideration, then, the Christ-bride's love-challenge can be thought of as a challenge to adapt herself to meet the demands of both the eternal spiritual order and the temporal material order; and if stated, it might go something like this: "If you love Me, be first and foremost a woman, being on guard never to lose this rare gift I have given to you. Let this beautiful token of my love for you—this femininity—permeate your whole being as well as your love for Me, your love for my creatures, your sanctity, your community, your work, My Church, in which your heart will serve as Her heart circulates the fire of my love to each of Her members."

A Modern Heart Responds

In living this Christ love-challenge, marriage to divinity poses a continual challenge to the feminine heart, for the nun must constantly adapt her womanliness to fit the circumstance, and at times, adapt it to a multitude of seemingly incompatible tasks and execute these tasks without diminishing her love of Christ or destroying her femininity. This she has done admirably in the past.

Today, however, this heart of hers is being bombarded from all sides. From the outside, she hears:—you cannot be an accountant or a theologian,

⁷ Sr. Jerome Marie, C.S.J., *op. cit.*, p. 561.

these are men's jobs—stay in the kitchen and kindergarten where you belong—get rid of those weird wimples and those frightful habits—better yet, get out of the convent, you've outlived your usefulness. From the inside, she hears:—let's revise our constitutions, our formation, our dress, our outlook—or let's leave everything just as it is—let's put on the new look of the Church—or let's forget about all these crazy things and they will pass away.

The nun cannot ignore such clamor, and neither can she follow each voice that calls to her. Her heart is divided, sad, confused, pierced. She wonders: Who is right? What shall I do? Who can I listen to? What does all this mean?

Since Christ's love for her has certainly not changed, and, since her love for Him has not changed the whole turmoil seems to be merely a new enunciation of the Christ love-challenge. Furthermore, if we pay close attention to the shouts being raised, we can discern that this enunciation concerns the perennial problem of feminine adaptability.

The key to the dilemma can be found in the answer to: what is femininity? Unfortunately, femininity is nearly impossible to define. True, we can proffer phrases, descriptions, and characteristic functions in this direction, but we, including woman herself, have not yet sufficiently exploited the potentialities of femininity to enshrine it forever in a terse definition. The femininity we are thinking of goes beyond the frills of lace, beyond the soft lines of a woman's body, beyond all these. The femininity we are thinking of is not merely affectivity, sensitivity, a concern for details, and the rest of the female psychological litany; nor are we thinking of the familiar expressions of such specific aspects of femininity as those contained in the role of bride, of wife, of mother, of grandmother. What we are thinking of is the feminine personality as it exists in the mind of God: free from the restrictions mankind has placed on it by convention, misunderstanding, ignorance, or fear. Yes, what we are thinking of is that beautiful personality which God intended when He said: "It is not good that the man is alone; I will make him a helper like himself" (Gen. 2:18). And so, what we have in mind is the living force that was to join in sharing the joy of Eden, and later to join in effecting the salvation of mankind. So you see what we are looking for not only contains all of these things we already know about femininity, but much more; for, just as we are still gaining insights into the Genesis meanings of woman's role in the sharing of Eden's joy, so also we are still in the process of learning about the salvation of mankind.

Until the present our knowledge has progressed steadily regarding the "these" of femininity, now is the time for us to grasp the "more" of it. In other words, the essence of femininity is complete and developed in the mind of God. However, in the minds of men and women too—it is incomplete and evolving. Hence, it is our task to make our knowledge like unto God's. How are we to do this? In the natural way: by experimentation and by raising questions. In fact, is not all the unrest with regard to this ply of the nun just God's way of prodding us into a period of experimentation and inquiry, a period from which we will emerge with a more plentiful knowledge of femininity? If the answer is in the affirmative, and it is safe to think it is, then, this is how we learn the "more" of femininity, even if it is just a "little more." The Christ love-challenge of today contains two elements: an exploration into the nature of femininity and the application of this knowledge to the life of the nun.

The one who is the best qualified to teach us is the nun herself, for she is the possessor of femininity. The regents of her doctrine are the Holy Spirit, Who whispers the great truths gently into her ear, Holy Mother Church, who gives her the broad outline to follow, her superiors, who specify the details, and her spiritual directors who will lead her to the conclusions that she will present to the world. In order that the study be successful two things are necessary: on the part of all, charity, patience, and open-mindedness; and on the part of the nun, courage, fortitude, and humility.

The nun today is fulfilling her part most generously in this investigation. She is plumbing the shadows of self-knowledge: by trying out new ways never before tread; by rearranging her prayer life, her convent life, her apostolic life, her personal life; by studying modern psychology, philosophy, theology; by forming consultation groups of experts such as the Better World Movement, and the Sisters Formation Conference to name but two.⁸

Certainly, there are evident signs of tension, impatience, confusion, fear, and sorrow. These ill-effects are understandable, and hence, should not offer hindrance to this work of God. They are nothing more than the reactions that grow between the two extreme forces residing at opposite ends of the polemic. These forces are the very old: stable, secure, and settled; and the very young: surging, swaying, and searching. Both are

⁸ Cf. Sr. M. Angelica. "Rededication Program," *Review for Religious*, v. 22, 1963 pp. 397-401.

excellent and necessary elements for the exploration of femininity. The old furnish the bedrock principles of our knowledge of femininity and the young sow the seeds for our new knowledge, for as Cardinal Suenens points out:

Young religious who have been in touch with the contemporary world are aware of the values appropriate to our times. They feel that certain customs of the religious life no longer fit it. A more direct and less inhibited manner, a wider human culture, and above all experience of apostolic movements before their entry into the novitiate, have opened new horizons to them and given them a sense of responsibility. They come to the convent not to give less of themselves but to give more, and they are very sensitive to anything which puts the brake on or lessens the apostolic ardour with which they enter. They want a religious life which, albeit different in expression, is yet a piece with their immediate past.⁹

Even in this natural conflict of hearts, we see just another face of the same Christ love-challenge. The young must not lose their effervescence, nor should the old fear it and try to quell it. By the same token, the old must not lose their prudence gained from a life rich with experience, nor should the young scorn it. Both the old and the new, then, must lovingly share what they have, selecting the best part of femininity that each possesses so that these things may be blended and used for their mutual benefit as well as for the benefit of Christ and the world. In working this out the superior must be the one responsible in the delicate work of blending. She must be knowledgeable of both these elements: helping, comforting, soothing, and listening to each side patiently and with understanding.¹⁰ She has to be the bulwark of wisdom and the supreme arbiter of this feminine epoch.

Once the nun arrives at this new evaluation of femininity, she must make it hers and use it fearlessly for Christ by proudly displaying this new beauty in animate kerygmatic discourse in every encounter, at all events,

⁹ Suenens. *op. cit.*, p. 31. Cf. also Sr. M. Wilma, S.C.L. "Sisters and Change, *Review for Religious*, v. 23, 1964, pp. 185-196.

¹⁰ Cf. Thomas Dubay, S.M. "Understanding in a Superior," *Review for Religious*, v. 22, 1963, pp. 381-396.

and in performing any task. In so doing she will have met the Christ love-challenge head on and answered its every demand to the letter. This means, therefore, that she is able to do anything as long as it does not interfere with her femininity, her sanctity, or her love for Christ. So, whether the nun is an accountant, cook, teacher, nurse, or whatever, she will always be first of all a woman of sanctity, in all the glory of her God-given femininity, a woman possessed with the love of Christ, the one, the only Bridegroom of her feminine heart. Only in this manner, will she effectively perform her secondary roles as accountant, cook, teacher, nurse, and the like, for thereby she renders these to be effective roles of salvation and meaningful to God and man.¹¹ This is what Christ wishes; for in this fashion alone, man will see femininity as it should be seen, that is, not as an irritating threat to his sacrosanct world, but rather as a complementary, a completing force, a force working together with him for the unity of one world and one Church headed toward a common goal, Beatitude. Then, he, like Adam, can say: "She now is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman for from man she has been taken" (Gen. 2:23).

What we have attempted to do is to look at the feminine heart in relation to its love-challenge in marriage to divinity. We have also attempted to show the response on the part of this feminine heart to the same challenge today. We realize that this is far from a complete investigation. However, it is offered with the sincere hope that others, especially the nun herself, will fill in our lacunae.

In conclusion a word of thanks to these brave women is in order, for because of their efforts we shall all profit: Christ's love for her will grow, her love for Him will deepen, the Church will feel a vigorous surge of new blood in her veins of salvation, mankind's weariness will know a respite. So take courage, Christ-bride, for we are confident that soon you will unveil a new and sparkling feminine heart for Christ and all the world to see. Then with your head held high you can shout from the roof tops: "I beg you tell me have you seen Christ, My Beloved, I am His bride," and "by the grace of God, I am what I am, and His grace in me has not been fruitless" (1 Cor. 15:10).

¹¹ Cf. For a complete development of the notion of the salvific function and place of the religious in the Church, see: J. M. R. Tillard's, O.P.: "Religious Life in the Mystery of the Church," *Review for Religious*, v. 22, 1963, pp. 613-33.— "Religious Life, Sacrament of God's Presence," *Review for Religious*, v. 23, 1964, pp. 6-14.— "Religious Life, Eschatological Sign," *Review for Religious*, v. 23, 1964, pp. 197-206.