

THE FAMILY, BEFORE AND AFTER CHRIST

In the light of the sublime moral dignity which Christ conferred upon the family it is but meet and just that parents should love and cherish their offspring. Our Lord, when He came upon earth, brought that charity, which many waters cannot quench nor floods drown (Cant. VIII, 7), which impelled fathers and mothers and children to have love one for another. Hence, rightly may the people of the Christian era esteem and be proud of their ancestry since the family has been blessed with a benediction of the Child Jesus, loved by the Virgin Mother and modeled by the "just man" Joseph.

Surely, these precepts of filial and parental love were intended for all mankind from the beginning of time. But sadly scanning the history of the pagan world these commandments seem to have been forgotten almost completely.

We certainly do not doubt the material progress of the Roman world at the birth of Christ, nor do we attempt to deny absolutely the presence of any serious or elevating thought in the pagan empire. On the contrary, we marvel at the extraordinary rank and splendor which marked Rome's advance in architecture. In spite of the unique and rapid strides made in discoveries and inventions of our own day, we cannot compare with the old world. In the field of literary achievement, her superiority, at least in form, is well worthy of imitation. Beautiful in style and fascinating in eloquence she swayed the world just as she pleased. However, granting that there were noble thoughts, generous sentiments and kind deeds in pagan antiquity, the salient and dominant character of pagan Rome was monstrous immorality. We find only fragments of truth; no complete, systematic and harmonious doctrine promoting real happiness; no sound guidance leading man to his final end—union with God. All was given up to a transitory happiness, which is no real happiness at all; for true delight comes only from the possession of truth and the practice of virtue. The whole world was given up to unrestrained passions, cruel brutality and a selfishness which pitilessly sacrificed everything to its desires. Everywhere, except among the Jewish people, uncertainty and intellectual chaos prevailed in regard to the most fundamental truths. Persia worshiped the sun, Delos adored its Apollo, Egypt had its great

Diana, and Rome, even when she reached the zenith of her glory, erected to false gods the famous Pantheon temple. Paganism did not recoil from deifying the vices themselves; every passion had its altar. St. Paul sums up, perhaps most adequately, the sentiments during pagan times: "And as they liked not to have God in their knowledge, God delivered them up to a reprobate sense. Being filled with all iniquity, malice, fornication, avarice, wickedness, full of envy, murder, contention, deceit, malignity, whisperers, Detractors, hateful to God, contumelious, proud haughty, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents. Foolish, dissolute, without affection, without fidelity, without mercy." (Rom. I, 28-31).

As to the family, in which we are particularly concerned, it became degraded and corrupted. Instead of mutual respect and affection, there reigned nothing but infamous, brutal selfishness. While monogamy was the dominating form of the family before Christ, to some extent it was limited among many people who practiced polygamy. However, this practice was more common among the Egyptians, Jews and the Medes than among the people of India, Greece and Rome. It was more prevalent among the uncivilized races, but usually restricted to a small minority of the population.

The head of the family was not the husband and father, as is the case in the Christian era, but he was a master and a despot. As husband of his wife and father of his child he exercised absolute power over life and death. He had the right to sell his daughter to any man desiring her in marriage. In a word, the weaker members of the family, i. e., the wife and child, because they were weak, were at the mercy of the selfish, brutal father.

Women was not the honored consort of her husband. Neither was she considered his equal in nature and destiny. The head of the family looked upon her as his slave, his personal property and common chattel. If she was not the co-laborer of the common slaves in domestic matters, she was the plaything to be summoned and dismissed at the caprice of her husband. In China, India, Egypt, Persia and Greece woman was considered an abject and wicked being, having no soul; and was thus exposed to the most humiliating and degrading conditions.

The child of the family found no more mercy than the wife or mother. Infanticide was most frequent. As in many parts of

China today, there was a custom in pagan Rome to lay the new born infant at the feet of its father. If he took the child in his arms, it was permitted to live and to be reared for the father's material benefit. But if he left it lie on the ground, the child was cast into the common sewer, or more frequently was left on the wayside to starve. Seneca, speaking on this subject, says that nothing is more reasonable than to remove useless things from one's household. Quintillian, the renowned Roman rhetorician, also declares that to kill a man is often hideous, but to kill one's own child is often an excellent action.

Such was the general state of degeneration and immorality in which family life was plunged before the birth of Jesus Christ. We must admit, however, that a few philosophers and profound thinkers gave utterance to true and virtuous conceptions of God, but most grossly erred when speaking of the origin, nature and destiny of the human soul. Even at the best, these few solitary truths never reached the masses. Hence, this immoral, despotic and brutalizing yoke of man, prior to Christ's coming on earth, was the natural consequence of an egotistic philosophy filled with pride and self-conceit.

With the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ came the Christian gospel proclaiming to the world tidings of true peace to men of good will. With it came the proclamation of a universal reign through charity. Charity, that "divinely infused supernatural virtue by which we love God above all things for His own sake, and our neighbor for God's sake," regenerated the whole world. It healed the wounds which were inflicted upon the human race by the sins of our first parents. It led men from error to truth. It renewed that inheritance to the kingdom of God, lost by lawlessness of every kind. St. Augustine says that if the coming of Christ had for its sole purpose nothing but the uplifting of conditions in our mortal life, it was astounding. Christ, through charity, restored the marriage tie to its original state making it sacred, durable and monogamous, by raising it to the dignity of a sacrament and thereby to a supernatural level. Since for the average man and woman their material, moral and spiritual welfare are satisfied in that social organism—the marriage state, there is required a mutual love; not the love that is sensual, nor that sentimental love which our novelists call romantic, but a love that comes from the mind and heart and seeks the others

prosperity. It was with this charity, exemplified in the Holy Family at Nazareth, that Christ reformed the home. Thus, the great family of the human race today is the grown-up family of Bethlehem's cave, blessed through Jesus, mothered by Mary and lovingly fostered by Joseph.

It is almost impossible to speak here of the husband or father without at the same time making mention of the wife, because she is the companion of her husband, "flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone." The man, although still the head of the family, is not the despot of pagan times. Woman is no longer the slave or chattel of her husband. There is in him who rules and in her who submits a heaven-born love which makes their respective duties bearable. St. Paul tells us: "The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church. . . . Therefore, as the Church is subject to Christ, so also let the wives be to their husbands in all things" (Eph. V, 23-24). But in his very next words, St. Paul exhorts husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church. So we see that although the husband is the chief in matters pertaining to domestic government, there is imposed also upon him an obligation of love and fidelity.

In consequence of these precepts and ideals the Christian family has shown an immeasurable superiority over the non-Christian family. It has created a greater loyalty between husband and wife and a greater filial reverence in their children. But undoubtedly its greatest achievement is the replacing of woman to her original moral honor and dignity. It was the Church that presented to the homage of mankind a woman, Virgin and Mother, to whom the Saviour Himself paid the deepest respect; a woman of mild, affable, unassuming, and modest character, yet broad and unflinching; approachable yet dignified; and with the calm reserve of a noble soul, after whom the great mass of womankind should be modeled.

In like manner the child of the Christian era is no longer considered the "useless thing of the household." It is the adopted son of God and the temple of the Holy Ghost. The Child Jesus, when He deigned to come into the world, did not flinch from taking on the weakness and miseries of infancy. Our Lord during His public life was ever solicitous towards children—"Suffer the little ones to come unto Me, for such is the kingdom of heaven." Christ, speaking to His disciples, reminded them that

unless they be converted and become as little children, they shall not be admitted unto the glory of God. And again, if children were not to be loved and to be considered as weaklings and therefore "useless," Christ would never have hurled the terrible curse against those who scandalize them.

Such is the general amelioration of society and especially of the family, wrought by the coming of the Redeemer. True, Christ's meritorious effects of redeeming the world from paganism are to be efficacious for all eternity. But if a decay in sound Christian principles and a constant growth of materialistic views eat into the modern mind, they will venture to change and disturb those salutary effects which were achieved by the birth of Jesus. And, as a consequence, is Christian civilization to relapse into barbarous paganism? Or will we say that the coming of Our Lord and the example of that Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph are, for the future generation, to be in vain?

—Bro. Leo Lewis, O. P.

