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JOHN A. O'BRIEN, Ph.D., LL.D.

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WHOM shall I marry? This is the question that faces almost every young man and woman upon reaching adulthood. Upon their answer will hinge in large measure their future happiness. It is a momentous question and is worthy of their most serious thought and consideration. They are, however, not left without aid and guidance. For the Church offers them counsel tested in the fire of experience and confirmed by the wisdom of the ages.

Will youth hearken to the wise voice of Mother Church, so profoundly concerned for their welfare and happiness? Or will they turn a deaf ear to her counsel and cause pastors and parents in increasing measure to ask: Why do common sense and reason so often play such inconspicuous rôles in courtship in America? Why do so many young people view courtship in a spirit of levity and give such scant consideration to the factors essential for the stability of their union? Granting that the heart plays the chief rôle, must reason be entirely squelched? Cannot love receive guidance and help from practical common sense?

These are questions which arise in the minds of pastors, parents, and all of our citizens interested in preserving the sanctity of the home, as they read each day the story of blighted romances, broken homes and families torn asunder. There is scarcely a block

in our large cities that is without its fragments from the wreckage of a broken home. With the grim evidence of domestic tragedies on every side, is it not high time to call attention to the supreme importance of using reason and common sense in the selection of a partner for life?

Why are there so many separations and divorces? One of the chief causes is because the couple discovers after marriage that they are mismated. When the dreamland of their honeymoon has yielded to the realities of a work-a-day world, they begin to perceive what a blind man could have pointed out to them before, that they have little in common. They are uncongenial in temperament and disposition, they differ in moral character and in religious outlook, they vary in culture and in tastes. The delicate bonds which spring from congeniality in these fields and remain intact, even after mere sentiment has largely shot its bolt, are lacking. Association first loses its charm, then its interest. Boredom sets in and finally yields to chafing and aversion. The divorce court has new grist for its mills.

Things Which Count

Why do not young people perceive these facts before it is too late? Why do so many of them make no honest effort to explore beforehand those important qualities of mind and character without which any union rests only on the quicksands of capricious sentiment? A young man seeks to court a girl because of the texture and color of her skin, the radiance of her eyes, the contour of her face, and other superficial items. But character, disposition, intelligence, understanding, sympathy and unselfishness are the things which count in making for the happiness of the home and the permanence of the union.

While beauty and good looks are not to be disparaged, the qualities of mind, heart and soul above

mentioned are infinitely more valuable. The delicate coloring of the skin changes, the beauty of the complexion vanishes, but character remains. It grows in strength and beauty and unselfishness with the passing of the years. The man who seeks to build the citadel of his conjugal happiness upon such gossamer threads as complexion and appearance, with scant attention to moral character and disposition, often finds out later that he has neglected the important item of a solid foundation. True happiness is seldom found in a fool's paradise.

The Church urges young people to select their helpmates for life with due regard to the important requisites for a happy and enduring union. She warns them in advance that they will pay a heavy penalty for negligence, for impetuosity, for rashness in this matter. Before she admits candidates to the priesthood, she requires them to spend long years in training and discipline, meditating all the while on the seriousness of the step they contemplate. Yet Holy Orders imposes no obligation of greater duration than that imposed by matrimony. The consequences of both last until death. Why then should not candidates for matrimony bestow at least a small measure of the care and consideration demanded of those who aspire to the sacred ministry?

A Momentous Decision

The simple truth is that all the voices of earth and sky and heaven thunder in the ear of the young person contemplating marriage to make sure of the presence of those qualities of mind and heart and soul which alone can guarantee lasting happiness for his union. While the heart may flutter with the wings of love, he should keep his feet on the solid ground of reality, listen to the voice of reason, and look carefully whither he is about to leap. In every domain of human life, the use of reason yields a rich premium.

its neglect a heavy penalty. In no field, however, is the premium richer or the penalty heavier than in the choice of a partner for all the years of one's life.

Prudence suggests that before making so momentous a choice the advice of parents and of other sensible persons of experience should be sought. Before making an investment of consequence, a prudent person will secure the counsel of other parties, better informed and more experienced than himself. While such counsel is by no means infallible, it at least greatly lessens the hazards involved. When a person is about to invest his whole life with its hopes of enduring happiness, why should he not at least consult wise and judicious counsellors about the momentous choice he is contemplating?

The tendency of young people to confide in no one about their engagement, and to keep the whole affair a secret until after the marriage, closes the door to many helpful influences which would at least lessen the danger of an obviously unwise choice. No decision which a person is ever called upon to make involves consequences of a more far-reaching character than that entailed in the selection of a helpmate for life. Does it not follow, therefore, that here above all other places, a young person should exhaust all prudence and all the common sense he possesses to see that he does not make a fatal error?

No Substitute for Common Sense

Older persons will recall the words of a ditty, popular a generation ago, but voicing the question in the minds of many in this day as well:

“Will some one kindly tell me,
Will some one let me know,
How I picked a lemon in the garden of love
Where I thought only peaches grow?”

If the person asking this question afterwards had only consulted sensible friends beforehand, he would have found an abundant answer to the query he asks now—all too late. Life knows of no adequate substitute for prudence and practical common sense.

Some of my readers may feel inclined at this point to say: "Yes, what you say is true. Young people should use prudence and reason in choosing a life partner. But are you not insisting at needless length upon so obvious a truism?" The fact is, however, that this truth, so readily admitted in theory, is frequently ignored in practice. Thousands upon thousands of marriages occur each year and end shortly in the divorce courts. Why? Simply because young people insist upon throwing reason overboard, and refuse to consider the factors indispensable for a stable union and enduring happiness.

Why do so many lament afterwards: "If I had only stopped to think! If I had listened to my reason instead of hearkening only to the flutterings of my heart, I would have perceived how blind and how foolish I was! Oh, if I were only free to make the choice over again, I would not be such a fool."

What pastor has not heard the above refrain with too tragic a frequency? Indeed, it is not too much to say that if young people used prudence and common sense, consulted wise and judicious friends, explored the item of congeniality in matters other than sentiment, made sure of the character, disposition, reliability, religious outlook of the person involved, the vast majority of unfortunate marriages ending in disaster would have been avoided.

It is one thing to know a truth. It is a different thing to practice it. It is narrated that in his old age St. John preached with great frequency the simple truth, "My little children, love one another." When some of his hearers complained of the tiresome monotony of its continued repetition, the beloved disciple

replied in effect: "Little else matters. For if you observe this precept, you will observe the others as well." If St. John were less charitable he could probably have replied: "I will continue to preach this truth until you *begin* to practice it." The Church never wearies of pointing out to her children the supreme importance of exercising the greatest care in the selection of a partner for life.

Danger of Haste

One of the dangers which the Church warns against is that of excessive haste. Her law requiring the proclamation of the banns on three Sundays preceding the wedding serves as a brake against too precipitate action. Judges who preside at divorce courts have repeatedly voiced the conviction that a large percentage of the cases appearing before them are traceable to excessive haste. A young man takes a sudden fancy to a girl. It is probably kindled by her complexion, her contour, or the radiance of her eyes. Infatuation, but not love, comes at first sight. A whirlwind courtship ends in a sudden elopement. They awake from the honeymoon to discover they are as different from one another as day is from night. The divorce court will not be idle long.

As a result of their observations, jurists have frequently sounded the tocsin against precipitate speed in rushing into marriage. They have urged the enactment of laws requiring individuals to register their intention to wed, and then to wait for a certain length of time before the marriage could occur. The idea is that in the required interval the ardor of many mismatched couples would cool down, and allow them to see each other with the eyes of reason, and not merely through the rose-colored lens of inflamed emotions. The garish light of day reveals a multitude of imperfections, glaring and strident, but glossed over by the magic of the moonlight, calling forth dreams of high

romance. In the effort to stem the flood of such ill-considered unions, some States have already enacted laws along the lines above suggested.

In a class in sociology at Columbia University the late Professor F. H. Giddings was recently pointing out the urgent need for some such brake upon the too precipitate speed of couples willing to act in haste, only to repent at leisure. Whereupon a Catholic student explained the Church's law in regard to the proclamation of the bans. The explanation evoked from Professor Giddings the following interesting observation: "Aside entirely from its religious implications, I want to commend highly the social utility of such a law. As a professor of sociology, I am convinced that if such a law were enacted in every State in the Union, it would enable a vast number of mismated couples to discover their uncongeniality before they rushed headlong into the marital contract only to clutter up the docket of the divorce court later on." This law of the Church is therefore a safeguard for marriage, not only in its sacramental character, but also as an institution that plays a vital rôle in the welfare of human society.

Excessive Length

While the Church warns against courtships of undue brevity, she likewise counsels against those of excessive length. No hard and fast rule can be laid down determining the exact length of courtship. In general it should be of sufficient duration to allow young people to know the character and disposition of each other quite well. This can usually be done in a period ranging from six months to a year. Being a period of stress and strain in many respects, courtship should not be unduly protracted. Persons who keep company for many years are without the sustaining influence of the sacrament, and are exposed to much danger. A courtship too long drawn out wears away

the glamour and leads many a promising romance to the rocks.

The function of courtship is to enable young people to know one another sufficiently well to embark together on life's voyage. But where no such end is anticipated, courtship has little or no meaning. Courtship may be compared to a porch, over which people walk to reach the door of the home. What would one think of people who entered upon the porch and proceeded to remain there indefinitely, just as though they were unaware that it was not intended as the terminal, but merely as the entrance to the home proper? Similar is the state of those who, having entered upon courtship, forget that it is not the end but merely the means to the end, merely the vestibule leading to the great sacrament.

The following incident is related of the famous American humorist, Bill Nye. As a young man he called one Sunday afternoon upon his lady friend to take her for a buggy ride. He waited in the parlor for what seemed to him a young eternity—probably a matter of an hour. At last the young lady appeared, groomed with meticulous nicety. She had just opened the door, preparatory to descending to the waiting surrey, when her eyes fell upon the lean and patient horse. "What!" she exclaimed indignantly, "do you expect me to ride behind such a skinny nag?" "But, my dear," replied Bill Nye, "when I first arrived here this afternoon that was a fat horse."

Is It Fair?

Young men at times draw out courtship to such unending length that the lady would be justified in paralleling the reflection of the American humorist, by saying: "When you first began to keep company with me, I was a young girl. Now I am almost a middle-aged woman." The simple fact is that a griev-

ous injustice can be done to the girl by monopolizing her attention for several years, depriving her of many other opportunities, and then when her youthful charm has waned, walking out. It is neither chivalrous nor honorable. Neither is it fair nor just. When courtship is being protracted to unseemly length, the father of the girl should inquire of the young man what his intentions are—and incidentally what is the reason for the long delay.

In America we carry to extremes the idea that marriage is an affair that concerns only the two individuals involved. If parents are genuinely interested in the happiness of their daughter, why should they not manifest that solicitude in the honest and effective manner just mentioned? In the countries of Europe the parents take a much more active part in assisting their children in the forming of suitable unions. They view the matter with less sentiment, perhaps, but with much more practical common sense. The time has come in America, with its divorce rate mounting higher than any country in the civilized world except Japan, when parents and pastors must take an increasing interest in assisting young people in the successful solution of the most crucial problem life presents to them—the choice of a helpmate for life.

In common with all mankind, young people are engaged in the endless quest for happiness. But happiness is not a private or a solitary affair. Suppose that we say to an individual: "Here is a thousand dollars. Go and buy happiness for yourself alone. You must not seek it, however, in the friendship and love of other people." We would be assigning to him an end, but would be forbidding him the only effective means of achieving it. Why? Because happiness is a social affair. It is found in the esteem and friendship and love of others. Like the moon which shines by reflected light, happiness is found in the reflection of the sympathy, trust and affection of others.

Wealth, knowledge and fame are no adequate substitutes for the latter, and hence cannot bring true happiness.

The Light of Love

Among the worst miseries of life is that of unrelieved loneliness. To go to one's dwelling at evening, only to find it empty of any person interested in your struggles, rejoicing in your achievements, softening the sting of defeat with the balm of sympathy and understanding, is to live in a darkened chamber whither the sunshine of human comradeship and love scarcely penetrates. As other forms of life, when deprived of the sun's rays, wither and die, so human life, robbed of the sunshine of love and sympathy, loses its zest, its enthusiasm and its vigor. Love is the radiance which brightens the world of human life with the sunshine of happiness. Francis William Bourdillon expressed a profound truth when he wrote in lines of simple beauty:

“The night has a thousand eyes,
And the day but one;
Yet the light of the bright world dies
With the dying sun.

“The mind has a thousand eyes,
And the heart but one;
Yet the light of a whole life dies
When love is done.”

Not long ago a young man, receiving instruction in the Catholic faith, said to the writer: “Father, when the clock in our bank registered four o'clock, I was always at my wit's end to devise ways of passing the two hours till dinner time. After I married and God blessed us with a little babe, I could scarcely wait for the clock to reach four, so anxious was I to get home

to be with my wife and child. The Church's emphasis upon the finding of happiness at the fireside of the home is well placed. I had sought happiness before," he continued, "in the forms of entertainment which engage the attention of single men, but now after I have tasted the great joys of conjugal love and fatherhood, I can truthfully say that I am just beginning to live. Until a man has partaken of these two great experiences, he doesn't know the meaning or purpose of human life." In these words every pastor of souls will perceive the refrain whispered in his ear times without number by young men and women who have hearkened to that divine voice calling them to life's great adventure.

A Divine Plan

Love, courtship and marriage are so often treated in a spirit of levity, and are made the butt of so many jokes, that it is worth while to point out that they are part of a divine plan. This is made clear to us by the scene that is disclosed at the very dawn of human existence. After Almighty God had created the universe and all living things thereon, He placed man, the crowning glory of His creative power, in the Garden of Paradise, and gave to him dominion over all living creatures.

Sovereign of Paradise that he was, richer than any mortal man in material wealth and in the chaste beauty of nature's virgin landscape, there still remained, in spite of all, a void and an emptiness that rested like a sombre pall upon his lonely heart. Then out of the heavens the voice of Almighty God is heard: "It is not good for man to be alone: let us make him a help like unto himself."¹

When Adam gazed upon the fact of Eve, his eyes beheld a new beauty and a loveliness which nothing in

¹ Gen. 11, 18.

all the vast pageantry of nature could duplicate or rival. The emptiness in his heart vanishes. In its place he feels a new and a strange emotion never felt before. The prosaic coloring of the flowers is suddenly transformed into a gorgeous pageant of poetic beauty; the meaningless chirping of the birds is transmuted into a symphony of moving melody. Life takes on a new meaning, a fresh significance. He sees now for the first time the beauty and the poetry and the romance of human existence.

Moved by a divine impulse, he plights his deathless troth to Eve. There under the white canopied stole of the virginal sky, in the morning of life, in the presence of the priesthood of nature, Adam seals his vow with the first kiss of love. With prophetic vision into the unwritten future, he proclaims the law for all his progeny: "Wherefore a man shall leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall be two in one flesh." It is the great mystery of human love which makes two hearts beat as one. It is a sacred flame. For it is kindled by a spark from the eternal and uncreated love of God.

A Safeguard

"It is not good for man to be alone." How often the words of Almighty God, uttered at the dawn of the race's history, come back to the priest, as he sits for long hours in the tribunal of confession, listening to the sins of men and women journeying alone over life's highway. How vividly he comes to realize the meaning of that divine admonition. No one can realize more clearly than the priest of God, to whom are unbosomed the secrets of hearts, the dangers, pitfalls, and tragedies that beset the path of the lonely traveler.

God created a helpmate like unto himself to be a companion for man, a promoter of his happiness and a protector of his virtue. The sacrament of matrimony, is therefore, a great source of mutual consola-

tion, as it is a great safeguard for the virtue of both men and women. That is why the confessor will often have occasion to point to the sacrament of matrimony as an invaluable spiritual prophylactic and an important aid in the attainment of one's eternal salvation.

Aside entirely, however, from its spiritual succor, matrimony is among the most potent influences in the development of the human personality to its manifold perfections and in the promotion of human happiness. As the bud on the rose bush reaches its full epiphany only by opening its petals, shedding its perfumed fragrance on the passing zephyrs, and dying to itself in the full blown blush of its mature beauty, so human character is spiritualized and rendered beautiful and unselfish by losing itself in ministering to others.

Two Diverse Natures

Fashioned by the Almighty hand as the complement to man's incomplete nature, woman has been endowed by God with that divine forgetfulness of self that finds its happiness in ministering to the happiness of man. She increases the joy of victory and softens the sting of defeat. She is his inspiration in success and his comfortress in the dark hours of adversity. From the time that Eve came to dispel the void and loneliness in the heart of Adam, to the time that Mary stood weeping at the foot of the Cross, when the Apostles themselves had fled, down to the present hour when womanhood embodies in richer measure the virtues of chastity and unselfishness, woman has been the crowning glory of God's creative power.

Out of the union of these diverse natures, man with his aggressive strength, woman with her tender sympathy, is born in the sacrament of matrimony the Christian home. It is the cornerstone of human society, a sanctuary of conjugal fidelity, before whose tabernacle there burns the vigil light of a deathless

love. How carefully the Church rears about that sanctuary its loftiest fortifications and guards it against the invasion of a profane intruder. How the happiest and the holiest of our memories cluster about the fire-side of the home.

A Million Dollars?

If some wealthy philanthropist were to promise to bestow upon a young man, upon reaching maturity, the gift of a million dollars, how delighted he would be! Yet Providence stands ready to confer upon every young man on reaching maturity an even greater gift. The reader may feel inclined to say: "Surely, that is an exaggeration, a figure of speech." Let us see. When Joseph Grogan had been working for three years after graduation from college, in spite of his boon companions, his parties and dances, he began to feel the shallowness and emptiness of it all.

It was an echo of that primeval hunger that gnawed at the bosom of his first father, Adam, alone in the Garden of Eden, and that still reverberates in the breasts of all his progeny. He felt the need of an incentive to urge him on to greater success, some one to inspire him toward a loftier ideal. One day he revealed his discontent to the priest in confession. His confessor pointed to the sacrament of matrimony as the agency divinely established to fill that void in the hearts of men. He saw the sacrament now in a new light.

In this serious quest, he passed over the social butterflies, with their painted faces, tempting dress and languishing eyes. "They're all right," Joe said, "to while away an idle hour with, but they're giddy and empty." They begin to pall after a while because they do not stir the deeper spiritual elements in man's nature. They kindle no noble thoughts nor holy resolves to fire the soul of man to higher things. For it is the subtle after-echo that tells the true value of com-

panionship. For a helpmate through life he wanted not mere gossamer, capricious as the changing winds. He wanted something more substantial to weather, not merely the gentle zephyrs of spring, but the storms of life's winter as well.

At last Joe found her, a lovely Catholic girl, unselfish in disposition, with a moral character that caused him to think only noble thoughts and breathe holy resolves. When the priest joined them in the deathless union of the sacrament at a nuptial Mass, Joe and Mary tasted the sweetest happiness that God grants to man in this vale of tears. Then God blessed their union with that most wonderful of all His gifts, a little angel in human flesh. Joe understood now the romance and the mystery of life. That little babe bound those hearts still more closely together in a blessed trinity of love. Mary was not only his wife now, but the mother of his child as well. He loved her with a love as strong as life itself. In that sanctuary of the home, a tabernacle of holy love, Joe came as near to that celestial paradise as earth can ever go.

God's Perfect Gift

Then out of a clear sky, the sombre pall of a critical illness falls upon Mary. For days she hovers between life and death. Dazed, Joe watches at her bedside, night and day, praying with a fervor never known before. A tear steals into his eye as with broken voice he prays: "Spare her, O God, and do anything Thou wilt with me instead." Go to Joe as he stands there and ask him what he would take to part with the gift God had given to him upon receiving the sacrament of matrimony.

Would Joe part with her for a thousand dollars, aye, for the Presidency of the United States? Not for all the gold in Solomon's mines, not for the Presidency of the United States, not for the glitter of kingly thrones, would Joe part with her, who was all that

life meant to him. All these things were but as dross without the love which gave to life its meaning. God hearkened to his prayer, and in granting it, He gave Joe the most precious thing in human life.

That is the gift which Almighty God stands ready to bestow upon every young man who proves himself worthy of the great sacrament of matrimony — the love of a good and virtuous girl. For the flame of love that burns in the bosom of sweethearts is kindled by no human hand, but by a spark from the love that is eternal and divine. That is the gift which transformed the ennui of Eden into a garden of happiness for Adam, and which still transmutes for all his progeny the toil of life into a labor of love. It is God's perfect gift to man. When will young men come to learn that happiness is to be found not amid the crash of a jazz orchestra but at the fireside of the home?

The sophistication of the twentieth century has not rendered superfluous or out-of-date the warning of the Most High, uttered at the dawn of human history: "It is not good for man to be alone." That warning is of perennial timeliness to every generation of men, for it is based upon the unchanging hunger and the ceaseless questing of the human heart for love and happiness.

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