

# On Bearing And Forebearing In Married Life

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Loving as you love yourself

So also ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as also does Christ the Church". The unity of mind and heart which St Paul here preaches (Eph. 5:28) to Christian husbands and wives goes beyond the mutual giving and receiving for life of the rights of marriage. It goes beyond the indissolubility of the marriage bond even, and sweeps out to embrace an ideal of mercy and mutual forbearance with each other's human shortcomings which married people do not always bring home to themselves as sincerely as they should.

If the love of husband and wife is the love of "two in one flesh" then this intimate love must show itself in the frailties of human life as kindness and forbearance with each other in gentleness of spirit, for this is the graciousness of mercy which each one of us naturally concedes to himself, to his own flesh. When we stop to apply this teaching, the consequences are deeper and more practical than they appear at first glance. In our own defects and acts of meanness, none of us truly hates himself, however much he may be ashamed of himself. We are always willing to accept our own act of contrition with largeness of heart, and to take our purpose of amendment generously at its face value without cynicism. If there is one person who deserves another chance, and is going to get it when we are the criminal, it is our precious self, and, so long as this goodwill towards ourselves is joined with humility and sincerity, it is as it should be, and is the way God treats us with tireless patience in the sacrament of penance. The test for married people, and a test they can apply immediately, is whether they habitually behave in this way to each other in their life together, because if they do not, then they do not love each other with that gentleness of mercy which is part of Christian love, and part of the spiritual meaning of "two in one flesh".

'Bear' and Forebear'

I am told that in a less sophisticated age, and one more fond of art with a moral than the present, young couples would sometimes be presented with a pair of bears. These discreet animals stood at either end of the living-room mantelpiece wearing a tolerant smile, their arms over a plaque which bore their names, which were, naturally enough, "Bear" and "Forebear" respectively. When a very cross young wife was not on speaking terms with her husband, and was turning her eyes everywhere except across the table at his, they would eventually alight on that exasperating animal who was exhorting her to "bear" while her resentful husband would find himself glaring at the conciliatory "forebear". If those animals

survived the hazards of their mantelpiece mission, they must mostly have won the day, for the moment a man or woman begins to allow even the ghost of an inward smile at themselves, anger and sulky pride thins like a morning mist, and the devil and the powers of darkness are already in full retreat. In an age with a passion for scattering soulful dogs and winsome kittens all over the house, we might profitably use a few more bears. I

#### Love needs constant renewal

It is the small frictions of married life which are the usual beginnings of serious trouble; it is rarely that some big cause of unhappiness comes suddenly out of the blue. It is the continual mishandling of incidents in themselves trivial that begets disillusionment, and then dislike. Men and women flare up at each other, behave with arrogance and sullenness and show that because they are bound for life, they think they can take each other for granted. This is a bad mistake, and an affront to a love born of the Faith, for no human being can ever be taken for granted, and mutual love is a gift which must be ever replenished from its sources, and those sources are in the goodness and nobility of the soul.

A loss of fervour in prayer, and neglect of God, is often the cause of the cooling of love in married life. Men and women begin unconsciously to seek their complete fulfilment in each other, and in the material interests of their home. They begin to forget that nobody, married or unmarried, can find his perfect satisfaction in another human being. To satisfy the heart completely is God's privilege only, and that sense of peace and purpose in life comes only with self-sacrifice and prayer. When men and women begin to make false gods of each other, they begin at once to demand a level of perfection which it is not just or fair to expect continuously of imperfect human beings, and as they become more querulous and selfish, their demands become unkind and unreasonable in any event, and they weary and depress their partner with their nervy irritability and unpredictable changes of mood. This is a sickness of soul, and a symptom of spiritual failure, and its understanding does not need all the nonsense masquerading as psychology poured out concerning it in the public press.

#### Without God, love slowly dies

It brings us back to the principle that when we are too lazy and selfish to love God, we lose everything else as well, and when we seek Him generously, the well-springs of the heart rise too, and with the love of God, we find love, laughter, and gentleness for our neighbour also. This defect, the idolising of a human being in the place due to God, is very common to "in-laws" too. Marriages are made unhappy, or even undermined by the possessive jealousy of small-minded parents, and this is a fault from which grave sin is never far absent. It is written that "He who made man from the beginning, made them male and female, and for this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and cleave to his wife, and they shall be two in one flesh". The first loyalty of husband or wife is to each other, and possessive parents must not put asunder what God has joined together.

The rearing of a family of their own is the great natural support of love between husband and wife, for this it is which gives marriage its deepest meaning and purpose, and in these days of unruly children and increasing juvenile crime, it is as well to stress that the upbringing of children requires discipline and moral leadership as well as affection. I think it is unfair to suggest that the increased social and welfare services of the modern state are responsible for this lack of character in the modern child by usurping the duties of the parents. It seems to me that the whole cause is in the homes and the personalities of modern parents. An increasing number of families in Britain are being emptied of religious convictions, moral purpose, or inspiring hope in life. This modern home is the legacy of two generations of contempt of religion and neglect of God. When fifty years ago, people ceased to go to Church, they did not at once decline in moral vigour, for they retained a hard core of belief in God, the commandments, life after death, and the judgement of God; this they lived in their life and thoughts and passed on to their children with conviction.

#### Faith and prayer at the heart of life

To-day the decline of Christian doctrine and morals has gone so far that an increasing number of parents are living empty, dissipated, and purposeless lives, and have neither leadership nor a constructive love to give their children. Yet a child naturally seeks and expects this loving leadership, and when it does not obtain it will show its frustration in that petulant contempt for its parents, and other authority, which we see all round us to-day. Where the social betterment of life goes together with a good sound catholic home and thank God, we can see many of them in any parish, the child of to-day is better in body and in soul than any generation which has gone before it. Only God, working through the minds and hearts of good parents, can give sturdy moral goodness to a child, and this vocation of grace and love the state can neither supply nor supplant. Society can build upon this foundation, but if it crumbles, as it has begun to crumble, then whatever their good intentions, statesmen will be pouring ideals and money into the sand.

When one sees with sadness such a number of married people who deny their vocation and refuse to have a family, one wonders whether they have ever thought of the grim retribution of emptiness and loneliness of life which awaits them in a barren old age. There is no age in life more revealing, or more terrible in its contrasts than the late years of a man's life, for in those years the true personality, and the moral worth of individuals stands out with a stark clarity that no other period of life allows. Some men and women have matured with the years in wisdom, age, and grace, before God and men; while the body has faded, they have an increased measure of sweetness of disposition, mellowness, wisdom, and balance of judgement. Such men in the years of their physical weakness are fit in mind or in soul for the highest offices of Church or State, and are found holding them with distinction. Others, on the contrary, are more selfish,

whining and disagreeable in their declining years, the onset of age seems to empty them out in body and soul alike.

What you sow, you will reap

The reason for this dramatic divergence of personalities in later years is not far to seek. When the zest, buoyancy and physical joy of youth evaporates, men and women are left with what they really are, with those gifts of personality which are not material, and of the body, but spiritual, and of the immortal soul. They are found with their hands full or empty, and there is none of the glitter of physical charm to camouflage the dross underneath. Men, who have matured in the virtues of the soul bear these gifts with them in dignity and power to the end of their days, while others, when the volatile spirit of the flesh has evaporated, are left with the dreary husk of worldliness and emptiness which is their real and unlovable self. In this contrast men and women begin to show forth even in this life the beginning of the judgement of God which St Paul preaches: "Be not deceived, God is not mocked. For what things a man shall sow, those also he shall reap. For he that sows in his flesh, of the flesh also shall reap corruption, but he that sows in the spirit, of the spirit shall reap life everlasting" (Gal 6.8).

The best wine saved to the last

It is here that the hardworking, often hard-pressed, husband and wife will find a rich reward that will be a pledge on earth of the blessing and reward of Christ which will crown the last day of their lives. They who have ripened through the years in understanding and selfless love will never forfeit the love and respect of their children, who even in adult years will seek them as their most valued counsellors. These parents will see their children's children rise up around them with joy, and love their greeting. They will know the best gift of life, the gift of love returned, when good and grateful children turn to them and call them blessed for all the years of love and labour gladly given, for there is a reverence in the simple words "mother" and "dad" in the later years of a parent's life which is almost sacred, and derives from the sanctity within Christian marriage and Christian parenthood.

In this serene happiness of their age good parents will also find their own love for each other more deep, because more spiritual and refined, than in the early years of life. As at the marriage feast of Cana, Christ turned water into wine, so over the years of life His grace mellows the water of romantic but immature love to the wine of a deeper and more spiritually perfect affection. And this He does that in every age those who do not know from whence the wine of Christian love has come, may exclaim with the steward in the gospel that "every man at first sets forth good wine, and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse, but Thou has kept the good wine until now" (John, 2.10).

"As the sun when it rises to the world

in the high places of God, so is the beauty of a good wife for the adornment of her house. As the lamp shining upon the holy candlestick, so is the beauty of the face in a ripe age.”

(Ecclesiasticus 26: 21-22)