CONCLUSION

FROM CONSORTIUM OMNIS VITAE TO SACRAMENTUM MAGNUM

The Christian principles of submission to God and of communion in the Body of Christ determined the standards of behaviour in marriage as in every other walk of life. Thus St Paul, writing to the Colossians, applied these general principles to three analogous social institutions: marriage, parenthood and slavery (Col. 3:18–4:1). The New Testament also contained specifically matrimonial teachings. Jesus' treatment of divorce in the synoptic gospels and the treatment of marriage in the fifth chapter of Ephesians set marriage apart as a specially holy condition and as a form of Christian vocation. The intrinsic potency of nuptial symbolism undoubtedly corroborated these ideas.

The Latin Fathers associated the holiness of marriage with its symbolic relation to the union between Christ and the Church. This seemed to them to be one implication of St Paul's statement about the “great sacrament” (Eph. 5:32). In their view, marriage possessed a referential holiness: that is to say, it was sacred inasmuch as it symbolized or represented the mystical marriage between the Church and Christ. Theologians did not define the relation between the two unions during the patristic and early medieval periods, and there was no consensus or consistency regarding what the word sacramentum in Ephesians 5:32 denoted. Nevertheless, they believed in the “sacramentality” of marriage, and they tried to find ways of articulating it.

The word “sacramentality” may invite misunderstanding here, although not in any person who has read the foregoing pages. Theologians in our period did not say that marriage was one of the seven sacraments (that was a high Medieval innovation), but they did use the word sacramentum to express the specially holy nature of marriage. This was especially true of Augustine. First, marriage was a “sacrament” inasmuch as it was a “sacred sign.” Second, St Paul had shown how marriage was related to Christ's union with the Church when he spoke of the “great sacrament.” Third, it seemed to Augustine, for various
reasons, that the word sacramentum provided the best way to speak about the distinctive holiness of marriage.

As well as affirming the “sacramentality” of marriage, the Fathers wrote about its remedial aspect. The prevailing attitude of churchmen to sexual desire and pleasure was negative, often extremely so. The Fathers usually rejected marriage for themselves. Nevertheless, they could not condemn it. The only way to handle it safely was to bring it into the Church. One could not leave it outside the Church and treat it as a secular matter like other forms of societas or other family relationships. For these reasons, any adequate Christian theory of marriage had to deal with the problem of lust. St Paul’s discourse on marriage in 1 Corinthians 7 showed how one could do this. Marriage was a remedy for sexual desire, a way of avoiding its dangers. As Augustine argued, the evil of lust did not make marriage evil; on the contrary, the good of marriage made the evil of lust relatively harmless and pardonable. Celibacy was not the only acceptable way of life for the Christian, but for those who had the strength to undertake it, it was a higher calling. One should prefer celibacy to marriage, albeit not as one prefers something good to something bad, but as something (much) better to something good. In this way, marriage became part of Christian historiography. The Fathers could explain what it had been before the Fall, what it had become after the Fall, how the function of marriage and one’s obligations regarding marriage had changed with the advent of Christ, and how there would be no marriage in the world to come.

In all these respects, Augustine was the West’s great theorist of marriage.

How might one best affirm that marriage is “sacramental” in the broad sense outlined above? How might one set it apart from other social relationships and treat it as a religious vocation? The Latin Fathers did this chiefly by insisting on the indissolubility of marriage, and thus upon the prohibition of divorce and remarriage. God permitted divorce, in their view, only on the ground of adultery, and even in that case a divorcée could not remarry as long as the other spouse survived. Marriage was a compact, but unlike other compacts, its terms were absolute and not negotiable. Its permanence was not susceptible to any kind of exemption or exception. From this point of view, any compromise or concession regarding the prohibition of divorce and remarriage seemed to be a failure to accept the demands of the Gospel. To reason that the rules