

SIX

rather be right than happy?

Submission

Submit to one another

out of reverence for Christ.

—EPHESIANS 5:21

Submission

CASTLE OR MONASTERY?

“The LORD gives, and the LORD takes away; blessed be the Name of the LORD” (Job 1:21).

Marriage, like life itself, is both a giving and a taking away. What is given in marriage is fairly obvious: the love of another human being. What is taken away is perhaps not quite so apparent: the entire freedom to think and to act as an independent person. If people understood exactly how radical is the curtailment of independence in marriage, there could never be any thought of divorce. Divorce would be seen as a form of suicide. But then, if people understood the true depth of self-abnegation that marriage demands, there would perhaps be far fewer weddings. For marriage, too, would be seen as a form of suicide. It would be

seen not as a way of augmenting one's comfort and security in life, but rather as a way of losing one's life for the sake of Christ.

One of the commonest illusions about marriage is that it is meant to be a sanctuary, a place of familiarity and protectedness amidst the alien harshness of the world, a place in which the rigors of change and challenge and uncertainty are expected to be minimized, the shocks of life abated. Home is a place to put one's feet up, to rest, to be free from struggle, and to a large extent all of this is true. God wants us to enjoy security. Unfortunately, we have a way of equating security with complacency. "A man's home is his castle," goes the saying, and in practice this is taken to mean that a man is allowed and even encouraged to develop into any sort of despot or devil he likes within the cozy confines, the cordoned lawlessness, of his own family. After all, aren't his loved ones those who understand and accept him? And so marriage becomes a form of institutionalized complacency, a hothouse of mutually nourished neuroses. Love is even construed to be a sort of *carte blanche* approval for all kinds of selfishness and evil, a dispensation giving two people special license to sin against one another.

Yet holy matrimony, like other holy orders, was never intended as a comfort station for lazy people. On the contrary, it is a systematic program of deliberate and thoroughgoing self-sacrifice. A man's home is not his castle so much as his monastery, and if he happens to be treated like a king there, then it is only so that he might better be enabled to become a servant. For marriage is intended to be an environment in which he will be lovingly yet persistently confronted with the plainest and ugliest evidence of his sinfulness, and thus encouraged on a daily basis to repent and to change. Marriage is really a drastic course of action that, as much as any monastic commitment, dedicates the votary to a life of vigorous self-denial, to a disciplined path of renunciation and of retreat from the world. It is a radical step and is not intended for anyone who is not prepared, indeed eager, to surrender his own will and to be wholeheartedly submissive to the will of another. For there is no way to surrender the will except by surrendering it to another will. And there is no way to attack the root of selfishness except by disciplining and subduing that determined monster of self-aggrandizement known as the human will.

In marriage it so happens that the Lord has devised a particularly gentle (but no less disciplined

and effective) means for helping men and women to humble themselves, to surrender their errant wills. Even the closest of couples will inevitably find themselves engaged in a struggle of wills, for marriage is a wild, audacious attempt at an almost impossible degree of cooperation between two powerful centers of self-assertion. Marriage cannot help being a furnace of conflict, a crucible in which these two wills must be melted down and purified and made to conform. Most people do not realize that this is what they are signing up for when they get married, but this is what invariably faces them.

Marriage turns out to be through and through an act of acquiescence, a willing compliance, both with God and with one other person, in the difficult process of one's own subdual and mortification. It cannot succeed without, first of all, a profound acceptance of the conditions of struggle, the state of personal siege, in which it must be lived out, and secondly, without an ever-growing realization that one's own self cannot and must not emerge as the winner of this struggle. "He who is least among you," says Jesus, "he is the greatest" (Luke 9:48), and marriage at its best is a sort of contest in what might be called "one-downmanship," a backwards tug of war between two wills each equally determined not to win. That is really the only attitude

that works in marriage because that is the way the Lord designed it. He planned it especially as a way for men and women to enter wholeheartedly, with full consent and consequent peace and joy, into the inevitable process of their own diminishment, which is His worship and glorification. For "He must increase, but I must decrease," declared John the Baptist of Jesus (John 3:30), and that is the fate of all of us: We must all diminish for the glory of God.

PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE

From one point of view, the whole of life may be seen as a taking away, as one long and painful series of subtractions. We are forever being called upon to pull up stakes, to release our hold upon the things and places and people we have loved and even upon each precious second as it slips through our aging fingers. Our very bodies are like tents, says Paul (2 Corinthians 5:1), the most temporary of houses, and our whole existence under the sun bears the marks of exile and nomadism. If we are lucky enough to survive into old age, it will only be to find that even the most basic amenities of life will begin to be withdrawn from us one by one: legal freedoms; good health; friends; the comforts