

Tender, forgiving and patient, the love of God (as depicted by the Prophets) ... was strong and sublime. However it was no more than a foreshadowing of that burning love which would one day flow from the Heart of the Redeemer promised to mankind. This love would be the model for our loving and *the foundation of the New Covenant.*

Pius XII. May 15th, 1956. Haurietis Aquas. n. 17.

**From contract to covenant
A Spirituality of the Heart**

E. J. Cuskelly, M.S.C.

I begin this chapter with some thoughts on the rather improbable topic of marriage and annulment of marriage. Specifically I want to point out an interesting recent development in the outlook of some marriage tribunals. They speak far less than formerly of the marriage CONTRACT and far more of the marriage COVENANT. By their change of terminology they wish to emphasize a special quality of the consent required to make a valid Christian marriage. They also wish to indicate that the marriage can be annulled if the parties did not make, or were incapable of making, a real personal covenant — and this because of the lack of the kind of consent required.

There is some interesting discussion among moralists about how the lack of love might bring it about that the consent to marriage is invalid, because, they say, in its deep reality the consent needed is an act of the free will whereby two persons give themselves mutually, radically, totally.

Real love means a readiness to give; it is an altruistic, unselfish love which opens out in giving and is ready to keep on doing so. There is, on the other hand, a self-centred love which is incapable of giving, or does not want to give. It wants to enjoy the other person, but is capable of no more than that. When both parties to a marriage get a lot of enjoyment out of each other, what is

no more than infatuation and a self-centred love can appear as sufficient for marriage. But it is not.

A covenant is more than a contract because it is informed and pervaded by a real, self-giving love. ~~Some people who go through the form of marriage are not capable of entering a covenant. Others, though capable, are too selfish to do so.~~ Such people may live a contract for a while; they may even live it for many years, but they never move onward into living a covenant. On the other hand, there are some who did really enter into a marriage covenant. But selfishness can intrude; one or other of the partners can recede into a 'contract-mentality'. Then, when love has died out of the marriage, the contract may be very hard to keep, and it may be impossible to restore the lost love.

At every Eucharist we recall « the blood of the new and eternal Covenant ». The Church is a covenant people, or at least is called to be.

Where is the Church today? This is a question frequently asked especially of one who has seen something of the Church in many countries. I suppose that each man will have his own reply to this question. I would suggest that the Church today stands between contract and covenant; she stands in need of learning to live anew that New Covenant foretold by the Prophets and brought about in Christ.

The People of God has always been called to be a covenant people; always called, but rarely responding with sufficient generosity. The covenant may be forever new, but humanity grows old repeatedly and needs to discover again the God who renews its youth. In the wonder at the marvels that God worked to bring them out of Egypt, in the freshness of Yahweh's call to them, the people said, enthusiastically and gladly: « Yes indeed, we will be your people, and you will be our God » All too well we know how this wonderful opening chapter was succeeded by very human stories of selfishness and sin

and forgetfulness of covenant lived in love. They forgot their God and what they had promised so eagerly. But God does not forget; and again we all know the promises he made through the prophets.

« Behold the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Juda, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people » (Jer. 31, 31ff).

« A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances ... and you shall be my people and I will be your God » :Ezech. 36, 26ff).

The New Covenant is realized in Christ. In him the words of Psalm 39 find their perfect expression: « My God I delight in your law — in the depths of my heart ». (cf. Ep. Heb. c. 10). In the depths of his human heart, a son of man rises above all contracts to live in love a delight in God's law, a perfect covenant-love. From that same heart, pierced on the Cross symbolized by the flowing water, he gives us his Spirit that we, too, might delight in being God's people and letting him be our God.

This delight characterized the early christians who, in the wonder of their first Easter faith, sealed a new covenant with the Lord. It has been lived with the same fresh response in every time and in every land in which the Good News is perceived as light to our darkness, as hope for our apathy and as the wonder of the gift of love. But

the freshness fades with time; the weight of the years brings weariness. There are many interesting things in this world of ours which occupy our minds and divide our hearts. And even for us, the new covenant can grow old; it can pass from covenant to contract. When we no longer delight in God's law, we can wonder if the contract is worth keeping. Carrying out duties, observing laws, keeping commandments, but without the Spirit and with a heart of stone — this is not living a covenant.

Where is the Church today? Behold the days have come when people are weary of rules and observances, when some do what they have to out of a sense of duty, when others appear in church for baptism, wedding and burial. There are men like Lefebvre and his followers who say: let's get back to clear contracts with rules that bind us and that we observe carefully. But No, I can not see that this is the call of the Lord. Let us go forward to living and preaching a covenant, with a heart renewed.

As Vatican II made clear, the days have come (they came some years ago) when religious are asked to pass from contract to covenant, or to make it manifest that they were living a delight in the law of a living God. According to the Council, they were not to keep obsolete structures, they were not to observe rules which had lost all meaning except that they were written in terms of the old contracts. And what happened when we were told this? Some saw this as a time for revision of contracts and possible renewal. They rescinded theirs and are now no longer with us. (It was only when I was doing some reading about the annulment of marriages that I realized why Rome, before granting dispensations, does a lot of enquiring into the life and character of the priest in his seminary days. She is really trying to see if, at profession or ordination, he entered into a contract or really made a covenant with the Lord, in a consent which was motivated by a self-less love, open and ready to give).

It would be consoling to think that all of us who have

stayed have done so because we have been always living a personal covenant with the Lord who has called us. But here, too, we have cases which are parallel to marriages that are not a total success. At profession or ordination, religious or priest echo the prayer of David: « Joyfully have I offered all these things ». In the freshness of the offering, there is joy in the giving. The joy will remain only if in our hearts the love which inspired our gift remains alive. Therefore we need to continue with a further phrase from the prayer of David (Chronicles, 29). « Domine Deus Israel, conserva hanc voluntatem » — keep us constant in the gladness of our giving. Otherwise, although we may persevere in our profession, the covenant we once made has deteriorated into a contract. We sweat it out, and we take what consolations we can.

Fortunately for us, there is an important difference between marriages that have deteriorated and personal covenants with the Lord that have lost their freshness. Yahweh's love will last forever, his faithfulness till the end of time. If we wish, the Lord can give us a new heart and put his Spirit within us. Let us listen again to Ezechiel: « Shake off the sins you have committed against me and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why are you so anxious to die, House of Israel? I take no pleasure in the death of anyone — It is the Lord God who speaks » (Ez. 18,31, f).

The days have come when the Church has need of religious and priests who live their own personal covenant with God in Christ, and can help others to be a covenant people. This applies to our reflections on the ministry — are we going to get people to make and observe contracts, or are we going to get them to keep covenants?

I believe that we are specially blest in our days if we have learned to look carefully to the Heart of Christ. A 'spirituality of the heart' is admirably suited to help us (and to help us assist others) through this transition time which all the Church is living. It is centred on the new

Duty - to - Devotion

heart and the Spirit which the prophets saw as the source of life and the new covenant. When he laid down his life for his friends, when his side was pierced, Christ gave us his Spirit. This Spirit puts love into our hearts and gives us the will to serve. All of these things, and more enter into what, elsewhere, I have called « a spirituality of the heart ». This terminology suggests several elements: It suggests that our « religion of the heart » has become interiorized and habitual. Furthermore it indicates that:

- a. We have to go down to the depths of our own soul in a realization of our profound personal needs of life, of love and of meaning.
- b. We must find, through faith and reflection, the answer to our own questioning in the Heart of Christ, i.e. in the depths of his personality, where man's yearning and God's graciousness meet in redemptive incarnation.
- c. Then, fashioned by these forces, our own heart will be an understanding heart, open to, feeling for, and giving to our brothers and sisters in Christ.
- d. We will not be *dis-heartened*, or dis-couraged in the face of difficulties. We follow Christ who « loved with a human heart » as Vatican II reminds us; he shared our humanness that we might know that over us all is the everlasting love of the Father. In God's good time the omnipotent love of God will have its way. It is *this* love in which we have learned to believe.

Footnote: The matter contained in this chapter has appeared in two books written for private Circulation: *A New Heart and a New Spirit* and *Jules Chevalier*.

HEART AND SPIRIT

Here and now the Spirit of the Lord has been given to us as a foretaste of the eventual victory of life and of perfect harmony and love. This is *the Spirit that was first poured out by the Father into the Heart of the Word made flesh*, the Spirit which in that Heart communicated its first light and fire, the Spirit which made Jesus say 'Abba' from the depth of His being and which made him reach out to man as the brother of all. It is this Spirit which the glorified Jesus communicates to his own from the time of the first Pentecost.

The presence of the Spirit in our hearts is the link between our present existence and the easter lifting-up of Jesus in the past. This Spirit makes us look back to what happened on the Cross and see, in faith, the stream that began to flow from His side at the beginning of our salvation. But the same Spirit also helps us to look ahead and builds a bridge between our present life and our future glory. He makes us look forward to that City where the river flows 'rising from the throne of God and from the Lamb'. Finally, the presence of the Spirit makes us look up to the Lord who is with the Father and who from his inmost being communicates life to us from day to day. *The Holy Spirit is the gift of his Heart to our hearts*. Man's heart is his dwelling place thanks to the incarnation of the Son. It is there that he brings about the closest union between us and Him 'who is, who was and who is to come' (Apoc. 1, 4; 1, 8; 4, 8 and 11, 17). It is the Spirit given to us now who already inaugurates our promised future because of something that happened in the past ...

J. Lescrauwaet MSC.
in TRIPTYCH FOR A SPIRITUALITY
OF THE HEART.