

**RAPHAEL, CARDINAL MERRY DEL VAL**, Secretary of State to Pope St Pius X from 1903 to 1914, was born in the Spanish Embassy in London in 1865, the son of a distinguished Spanish diplomat. His father's family was partly Irish, his mother's part Spanish, part English. Brought up and educated in England, Merry del Val remained devoted to the cause of the conversion of England throughout his life – writing the prayer for this end which Pope Leo XIII included in his encyclical of 1895 to the English people, *Amantissima Voluntatis*.

When Merry del Val had gone to Rome in 1885 to complete his studies for the priesthood his potential was immediately recognized by Pope Leo XIII, who insisted that he be enrolled in the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy (for the formation of priests to serve in the papal diplomatic corps or the Secretariat of State). Merry del Val spoke and wrote faultless Latin, English, Spanish, French and Italian, while his studies at the Gregorian University and the Accademia were to give him qualifications in theology, philosophy and canon law. He was ordained priest in 1888.

Cardinal Merry del Val also led a penitential, hidden life, and was a great director of souls, spending hours in the confessional, preaching retreats, receiving over forty converts into the Church in the period 1894–1904, and working tirelessly in the Sacred Heart Association he had founded for destitute boys in 1889, to protect and nurture souls.

This collection of his spiritual writings focuses on his labours as a shepherd of souls; this is what he asked to have inscribed on his tomb in the crypt of St Peter's – 'souls, souls, give me souls, take all else away'. The letters of direction he wrote to his penitents, converts and spiritual children demonstrate that he was a simple, practical, direct and effective shepherd and guardian of souls. These writings form a comprehensive guide to the spiritual life suitable to lay Catholics who are taking the call to personal holiness very seriously.

The cause for the beatification of the Servant of God Raphael, Cardinal Merry del Val is ongoing.

**Harriet Murphy** taught modern languages at London, Dublin, Cork and Warwick universities, publishing on Goethe and Elias Canetti, before she began research at the Secret Vatican Archives. A member of the Society of St Pius X, the Society of St Catherine of Siena, and the Latin Mass Society, she contributes to *Christian Order* and *Mater Dei*, specializing in the intersection between literature, theology and politics.

Front cover:

Cardinal Merry del Val, portrait by Laki Salustiano from the Pontifical Spanish College, Rome, courtesy of Mgr Tomás-Amable Díez Giland. Postulator of the Cause of Beatification.

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SPIRITUAL WRITINGS

Raphael Merry del Val

GRACEWING

# THE SPIRITUAL WRITINGS OF RAPHAEL CARDINAL MERRY DEL VAL



Edited by Harriet Murphy

How ironic, then, that whilst the police resort to certain measures to keep alcoholism and cocaine consumption under control, and apply the measure with strict severity, no-one seems to worry about the damage done to souls, the poison that has penetrated the soul, especially the souls of the young, bearing in mind that they are permitted to devour avidly all sorts of films, watch all sorts of plays, and to flaunt themselves shamelessly wearing shocking fashions, going to immodest dances.

We even have the topic of prostitution with all that that spells in terms of ruin. We must consider the civic duties of women too, the responsibilities and the dangers. All these issues are grave indeed. Whilst you will do your best to tackle them today, it is obvious that they will require further study before you can arrive at conclusions and make suggestions as to what practical measures can be adopted so that remedies will be effective.

I close expressing the hope and desire that the discussions you will be holding over the next few days will really bear fruit. That they most certainly will do, since you will all take it upon yourselves to control your purely personal desires and opinions, so that attention is brought firmly to bear on the topic in all its gravity and clarity. Retain your serenity as you debate and talk; bear the common good in mind, and never lose sight of it; think of the greatness of your cause, and how universally you are represented here, facing universal challenges.

Through the intercession of the Virgin Mother Mary, blessed amongst all women, may God guide you and bestow upon you all the joy of being able to see the fruits of your labours and sacrifices for such a great cause, which is as much our Lady's own cause, as it is the cause of Holy Mother Church.

**Speech to the Sixth Congress of the  
International League of Catholic Women**  
(October, Holy Year 1925)

My dear Ladies,

Holy Year has brought you all to the Eternal City where you will be exchanging ideas with one another and sharing your knowledge that you have acquired by dint of your labours in the last period. You will be able to discuss the fruits of your research, clarify what it is you are aiming for in the future, coordinate as best you can all the means you have at your disposal which will make your work in common more effective and efficacious. Above all, you are well placed to revive your faith, placed as you are so close to the blessed tombs of all the Apostles and Martyrs. Likewise you can implore the Vicar of Christ for light and guidance in all your plans, submitting to him, for his approval, all that you consider necessary and useful in the way of your apostolate.

Welcome, dear Ladies, to this homeland for the soul; remember you are being protected by the great Shepherd of souls, the Roman pontiff; remember that the loyalty you have to him and to your own immortal souls is not irreconcilable with the love you have for your own countries. On the contrary. Here you will also feel closer to your Heavenly Home, to the promised land, which is the only worthwhile goal, the only worthwhile aspiration of all souls. Both right reason and the Faith tell us that all our affections must be ordered to this highest of goals if those selfsame affections are to retain their true nobility and their true efficacy.

Your task is both delicate and grave. I know that the responsibilities which it entails are not lost on any of you. Modern society imposes a myriad number of competing demands on us, many of them insinuating, transitory and contradictory. It is very difficult to reconcile all these demands and to create a harmonious whole out of them, and it is particularly difficult to harmonize them with the immutable principles of the Catholic Faith, since in many cases they are implicated in error; still more they are the

expression of a perplexing quest for excitement, diversion and light entertainment; there is the unapologetic quest for pleasure as an end in itself; there is resentment of the given duties of state and of the obligations which all Christians have to honour. There are many who seem to be devoted to purely temporal desires. They long for earthly fulfillment, for material riches and are so given over to these false friends that they forget that life is, by definition, a temporary affair. But how can they justify abandoning God, our sovereign good, true source of the only true happiness there is? And yet deference to divine law is the *sine qua non*.

We expect you to be receptive to evidence of human progress but at the same time we ask for discernment. You must never be as the 'blind leading the blind', accepting all that is new in a spirit of passivity, as if you were not expected to be vigilant about the proximate danger of error, vice, sin and the like. Remember that what is often billed as 'reform' and 'progress' is no more than a pretext to introduce yet more retrograde, reprehensible and deleterious signs of neo-paganism.

You have no rights to abandon the citadel to the enemy, as it were, to haggle and bargain over truth, to envelop it in a seductive veil of error. Still less are you entitled to extinguish the light shining out of the lighthouse of Faith.

I am sure it is very wearying to have to work against the rising tide of all those fashionable trends and opinions which so bewitch souls, and so undermine the very basis of all Christian morality; I know, only too well, how difficult it is to dissect the propaganda of false, capricious doctrines which the masses fall for in utter, abject gullibility. We know how the appeal depends on stimulating the senses, on exciting the appetites, on undermining the necessity of restraint, of self-control, of self-government. We have been made in God's image, and given in nature and grace a certain capacity to protect ourselves from all the audacity of deregulated passions and vice. Shame and prudence can protect us from their aberrations, which is why you must highlight, before it is too late, the dangers posed by cooperating with these extraordinarily ferocious attacks. The seduction tactics are so insinuating now that virtually nothing is

spared: childhood and innocence is at risk, so is the noble ideal of female education, so is the dignity of woman, of the family and of society. But resistance to evil and sin is now more important than ever before. The success of our antagonist is, as ever, only of limited duration, which is why you can fight on, embracing the ideal of heroism, of martyrdom and self-sacrifice for this great cause, of raising the standard of Christ amidst the ruins of Christian civilization.

You have taken a particular theme this year, 'the dangers which threaten the family and, as a result, society as a whole'. As the Cardinal-Protector of this venerable League I welcome the seriousness of your work, which is especially relevant to the challenges of today. For, if you acquire a greater vigilance in the course of studying how the enemy works, your work will have served a great and noble purpose. After all, it historically falls to woman to defend and protect the family. This is her sublime calling, indeed it is her mission. If woman fails in this her mission at home, society as a whole disintegrates. By undermining the unity, authority and morality of family life, society inevitably loses its vitality, and literally all its moral, physical and spiritual sources.

Even in terms of natural law alone the most intelligent men in the pagan era could see that this was true. They had not the light of revealed truth to guide them, but they too condemned the excesses which destroyed the basic unit in society. Only later was Christianity able to dispel their errors and envelop in supernatural truth what they had attempted to establish in purely natural terms, the human facts about the human condition.

I think one single example will illustrate this point well. Tacitus waxed lyrical about the domestic life of Agricola. What was it that so impressed him about Agricola's marriage? It was the fact that man and wife lived in harmony with one another, always seeking to find ways of making sacrifices for the beloved. *Invicem se anteponendo*. A marriage in which there is no subjection of wife to husband, and of children to the parents, is a marriage which leaves much to be desired, for if there is no visible hierarchy in a family, how will children know how to recognize the visible hierarchy in the

Church? If children are brought up to respect authority in the home, they will be able to discern the difference between duties, obligations and rights, and keep all in a healthy balance. *Invicem se anteponeudo.*

When the concord between man and wife is animated by the divine breeze of supernatural grace and the law of charity, all tyranny and severity dissolves, all bitterness evaporates, all insubordination disappears. The spirit of revolt finds no home in such marriages. Rather, there is peace, the peace of Christ and the reign of Christ. *Pax Christi in regno Christi.*

When our Lord Jesus Christ raised marriage to the dignity of a sacrament under the New Covenant, he did nothing to change its natural character, the unity and indissolubility were written into marriage already at the level of nature. He made more luminous the necessity of the Faith to sustaining marriage and family life, which is why those who marry have to submit to the moral and natural law on the day they make their marriage vows, asking for the grace to perfect their union by grace, knowing exactly what their rights, duties and responsibilities are before God, each other and in society. The Apostle Paul is the mouth-piece when he reminds the married, in his characteristically energetic way, of the duties of spouses, parents, children and servants. In no uncertain terms he insists that these duties are nothing without a grasp of the fact that all authority is, in point of fact, divine in origin. He teaches us that we are duty bound to submit to the objective moral and natural law, giving to each what is his due, in a spirit of charity and love of one's neighbour, which offers us the best and most efficacious way of practising all the virtues. The family breaks down if there is no single point of reference in God any more. That rejection paves the way for competition, for a plurality of points of view about what duties and responsibilities actually are, it destroys the hierarchical structure of family life. Without the authority which God alone gives us to live, we then see this breakdown writ large in society as a whole: there is anarchy, which, in the manner of a sheet of lightning strikes and destroys without any warning, inflicting untold damage. Without the authority from God at work in family life children are at sea: instead of controlling their passions there is unbridled licence. Once this disease

sets in, the prospects for educating disciplined and restrained citizens are weakened immeasurably.

Your task, dear ladies, is so great that it is impossible to imagine it will ever end. There is no such thing as instant relief to problems such as these. The remedies will require patience and self-sacrifice in inverse proportion to the speed with which the antagonist is able to destroy what you wish to construct and reconstruct. You will have to console yourselves with the thought that you are planting seeds which will only bear fruit at some unspecified moment in the future. Others may, indeed, be the lucky beneficiaries of your labours. But you will be able to take some credit for having saved the truth and the means of salvation. God will reward you throughout eternity with the crown of glory. But even in this world you may live to see and hear those who are perspicacious enough to know to give credit where credit is due. They will acknowledge your labours. Guided by the immortal teachings of the one, true Church, you will be sending out a courageous signal to those who have suffered anguish in the face of all these outrageous attacks on sacred life. Where others have failed, you will flourish by showing them the right royal road to happiness in this life and the next.

Your last congress in Rome was remarkable on account of the excellent spirit you brought to bear on your work. You all worked harmoniously towards the same goal. You were sincere in your devotion to Holy Mother Church and submitted to Her teachings without any mental reservation. You were free to talk to one another openly about what perplexed you; your discussions were open enough to permit private opinion where it was not in opposition to the teachings of the Church. At the same time you were united by that determination to ensure the common good. For these reasons I have no doubt that your work will flourish once more.

At this juncture I would like to congratulate your president, Mrs. Steenberghe, for all her work. She has worked ceaselessly for the great cause. She, together with her collaborators, has done all within her power to promote the international links between all the various leagues. She has watched over all the various initiatives, to protect them and

guide them towards the common goal, thus ensuring unity throughout the apostolate.

I implore the blessing of the Blessed Virgin Mary upon all your works and labours, she the Mother of God, the Mediatrix of all Graces and the Co-Redemptrix. I beg of her to intercede with God, the Father, that our efforts bear fruit, and I rejoice in being able to cooperate in some small way, devoted as I am to the results which I know you wish to bring forth.

**Posthumous Speech Prepared for the  
International League of Catholic Women,  
read out after the Cardinal's Death (May 1930)**

It was four years ago that we had such memorable celebrations for the Jubilee Holy Year. You came to Rome on that auspicious occasion for the sixth conference of the international league of Catholic women. Those of you who took part will not have forgotten those beautiful and consoling gatherings or who were privileged to be amongst the audience. Your return to Rome for this the seventh conference brings back to life that same outpouring of joy since we have only just celebrated here in Rome the golden jubilee of the Sovereign Pontiff's priestly ordination. Our devotion to the august person of the pope is very special.

He too takes a very special paternal interest in your work and everything which affects the life of the League of Catholic Women, the range of your interests and concerns, the difficulties you have to cope with, your progress, and your success. I am sure all of this is very specially real to you today given that we are with him in such spirit over his priestly jubilee. I hope you will not consider it impertinent of me to speak to him on your behalf, offering him your filial devotion, love and gratitude as you embark upon your course.

You propose to take as your central concern the question of family morality whilst you are here in Rome, in particular to find the most efficacious remedies to counteract the deleteri-

ous effects of the world on same. Never before has the family been the object of such an insinuating campaign. It is the target of a plan. The idea is simple. Without being aware of being manipulated, the family is to be assimilated to the neopaganism and sensuality of our day. This will ensure a given effect, calculated indifference in matters concerning religion. The evidence is everywhere before our eyes.

The plot hinges on family morality symbolically genuflecting to the new gods. Attacking the primordial stability of marriage, and its sacred and inviolable character as decreed by God is the requirement. Marriage is being transformed into a transient alliance at the mercy of transient human passions. It goes without saying that he who presumes to question God's laws or who overturns them with impunity runs the risk of provoking His just wrath. We will all be swept away by the effects of these acts of destruction. Marriage must remain indissoluble since it is the express desire according to the Divine Law that this be so, our Lord Jesus Christ having raised marriage to the dignity of a sacrament. Civil law is already treating the New Covenant with contempt. It comes as no surprise, then, to find that more and more people treat marriage with contempt and derision. Some of these people even claim to be Christian.

Look what is happening all around us, even as people feign to be unaware. It is impossible to be so. What motivates human action? The influence of nothing more than sheer, blind caprice, propelled by unregulated affection. This is everywhere in evidence. People contract alliances on the strength of nothing more than pure sentiment or on the strength of an aesthetic impulse, perhaps even to find an economic solution to their plight. These alliances are contracted in a rush, in defiance of other considerations. What, for instance, have they made of the fact that marriage is one of the seven sacraments? That the Church only bestows Her blessing on those who wish to marry with apprehension, given what is at stake? Have they given any serious thought to what their serious obligations and responsibilities are in this state of life, which is sacred?

And what happens to unions contracted for such frivolous

reasons? Even though they protest their desire for eternal love and stability and unity, everything about the way they live is superficial. What dominates is unbridled egoism, instead of that reciprocal spirit of self-sacrifice which makes marriage sacred. Blind passion caused the union to be born; it then sees to it that it is profaned. And when, the day after the wedding when everyone was convinced that this marriage looked so promising, the couple has to face the reality of sacrifice and duty which is characteristic of life together as man and wife, they are immediately frightened away, and seek ways of escaping all that God has created and sanctified for their own good. And thus we have the terrible prospect of ship-wreck in the home. The devastation of the family. The infallible logic of auto-destruction under the influence of passion and sin.

And what are we to make of the increasing number of mixed marriages? The Church has only ever permitted these to avoid a worse evil. In fact the Church has always deplored such marriages, and She deplores them with great bitterness, either in the case of those Catholics who are married to the heterodox or of those who are married to the unbaptized, who are not even Christian. Whilst no one can deny that occasionally such marriages are the efficient cause of the conversion of the non-Catholic party, with the grace of a family united by the Faith, in most cases this does not happen. Rather these cases are exceptional. In the majority of cases the faith of the Catholic party suffers. The Church watches with great sadness as She sees the harmful effects of these compromises and asks Herself what soul who really possesses the Faith would ever even countenance such a dangerous step? What seems to be more likely is that Catholics whose faith is already weak are drawn to non-Catholics, marry them, and the fruits of their lack of understanding, devotion or commitment thereafter become manifest. What is mixed marriage? It symbolizes lack of unity where it matters most, namely in the heart and at the heart of the home. Two souls live together who have wholly different conceptions of life and eternity; they are, therefore, not united in the Faith, but rather separated from one another by the Faith. People do everything in their power to cast a veil over these realities. But it is impossible to hide truth. It can

be felt by those who have compassion in silence, when man's heart is at rest, registering what is impossible to deny. But this silence has another meaning. It is often the case that, for the sake of a false peace and in deference to the false virtue of human respect, that Catholics avoid their duties and do not speak out, professing the Faith in public as is their duty, denouncing error, defending revealed truth. Such couples have an unspoken pact. They avoid issues that are controversial, which is tantamount to a profession of neutrality on matters religious, and is the sin of religious indifferentism in practice. This comes at a price. It is difficult, painful and upsetting to be implicated in it, there is a sense of doing something wrong, there is shame at not resisting when one should. As they get older, the children are aware of these tensions. They are unsure. They do not know whom to follow. They get caught up in a downward spiral of nothing more than personal opinion. They are encouraged to discuss the problems they have witnessed in their own parents' marriages and make themselves judges of what is right or wrong, when, in fact, they have no authority so to do, and still less any real understanding of what is at stake. Families which are constructed around these problems prove unable to protect themselves against the infiltration of error, skepticism and rationalism. In practice, even when it comes to making a decision on how to educate the children, what threatens to undermine the Faith is nothing more than the fear of displeasing the other party, instead of being categorical and firm on points of doctrine. In the same way there is the same prevarication in respect of the sensual life. Instead of calling for restraint, all possible encouragement is given to the feverish pursuit of pleasure. In this kind of an atmosphere nothing is fixed and stable. Truth coexists with error. Truth becomes intimidated by error. She backs down, she is quiet. She is even wholly silent.

Because of precisely these tensions the bishops in Germany came to the assistance of the faithful in 1922 and 1923. They were painfully aware that so many souls were being lost through mixed marriages, not just the parents, but the children of such unions too; they were not unaware of the rise in the number of divorces; they could see that the risk of divorce in

a mixed marriage was five times greater than in a marriage between two Catholics; that the children of such marriages fall naturally into Protestantism in general, in spite of the promises their parents make. By the third generation, the Catholic Faith has disappeared altogether. This is bitter indeed, and it is all the more appropriate for you to focus on these facts. It is our duty to do everything in our power to oppose these trends and these demands.

In considering all the various reasons for the decline of family life, you will, of course, be looking for practical solutions to help restore family life according to the model for family life, the Holy Family. Your concern is with a universal restoration, amongst the working classes, the farming communities, the intellectual milieux. Nothing could be more noble. Remember that, even if you do not have immediate success, you will at least be planting seeds which will bear fruit in the future. You will have helped to spread the benefits of the reign of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

I would like in this connection to draw your attention to two extremes, which you must avoid. The first is to cast something of a vague veil over the real causes of the trends in our societies on which we have already commented. It is our duty to know our adversary, to know his plans and to follow his plot. We must not allow ourselves to be merely displeased, aesthetically as it were, with some of the symptoms of decline. You must be specific. It is only by applying doctrine to the problems that we will be able to rise to the challenge of this specific mission and apostolate. If we are unaware or if we misread the real issues, then we are guilty of prejudicing the work which could do so much to save the souls of the next generation. We could, after all, be instrumental in shaping the opinion of the general public on what is going on, and that would be most useful. It is our duty to prevent any paralysis, and to inform the world of how God's laws are being subverted in our contemporary world. How can we rise to this task if we are not armed with facts and figures, as it were? How can we expect to have any effect if we are merely satisfied with a complaint, with a pose of moral repugnance, and little else? This is not real witness. This is mere human sadness and powerlessness.

The other extreme is, of course, to imply that what is happening is, in some sense, necessary and not sinful or evil *per se*. This would be to fall into the sin of human respect, the failure to speak the truth openly for the sake of upsetting the majority, and majority opinion. You are not to be intimidated by those who will inevitably try and cast you as old-fashioned, and out of touch. You are not to believe that the majority is leading the people to a triumphant victory, since that is obviously not the case. But that is how they see themselves. What we must protect is the deposit of the Faith, which comes to us from God. At times we will necessarily have to rest, whilst the tempest whips up feelings. But that is not to be confused with weakness in the fight itself. Your task of resistance requires more energy and courage than open warfare. But you must never allow mere expediency to suppress principles; you must separate error from truth. We must not betray our duty, which is to uphold Catholic doctrine, to resist the temptation to surrender, to protect true morality from its substitutes.

Here you must insist that pagan morality – which permits free reign to the passions – be fought in the name of the Christian tradition of self-control, of resistance to the perverse leanings of our fallen nature, doing everything in our power to reject the views of the reformers, who implied that nature could not be perfected, thus permitting all manner of sad perversity. We can never tolerate in silence the rehabilitation of evil. We can never permit by way of the false, pseudo-morality of modern science to believe that the shameless mockery of all things Christian is an unavoidable reality. We should always remember that civilizations go into irreversible decline once restraint is abandoned; that is the lesson of history. Nations collapse. Intellectual aberrations hold sway. Degrading corruption of public standards is everywhere in evidence. These are the inevitable consequences of abandoning God. The stinging criticism that we are retrograde is a badge of honour in this war, not a reason to succumb to the enemy. We, as members of the Church Militant, have a duty to fight for Christ, to spread the true gospel, to be his true disciples. Knowing this, we expect to have to confront the enemy, and to be mocked by the world. But whatever we do,

if we wear the badge of our Divine Saviour, there is nothing we will not survive. It is a question of courage. We need not fear the anti-Christian and non-Christian forces. We remain silent when they seek to condemn us unjustly. At the same time we should be vigilant. There are many who are only hostile towards us because they do not understand what the Church teaches. They have no personal animosity towards us. These adversaries have no training in doctrine. They have simply been led astray, without having really considered what it is they claim to believe. They have been taken in by fashion, by novelty. Had they known the Wisdom of Holy Mother Church they would not have succumbed; had they realized that Holy Mother Church brings so much secular knowledge to bear in Her judgements, based on all Her awareness of the reality of human nature, they would not have rushed into the enemy camp. These are souls whom you must seek after. They will listen to you. They are able to be persuaded by the use of reason. They are not lost. All that is required is patience on your part. Teach them that the Magisterium of the Church is a living, teaching organ, which interprets the gospel for each new generation, indefectible, able to guide us through the maze of temptations which every new generation throws up. The Church does not have sterile, arid, abstract doctrines which bear no relation to reality; neither does She propose a philosophical system to be admired as an object. On the contrary. She has a living heart and soul, and a practical code which can guide each one of us individually, and society as a whole.

I am certain you will avoid the two extremes. Bring to bear that enlightened zeal for which you are justly known . . . Dear Ladies, under the auspices of the Blessed Virgin Mary, our Heavenly Mother, may I ask you to begin your task. I implore the divine benediction for your proceedings with the whole of my heart.

### **Speech to Another Union for Women** (*composed after March 1929*)

Now that you have concluded your congress it is appropriate for me to respond to the request put to me by your president and members and talk to you very specifically about the liturgy of the sacrament of marriage. As we are limited by time constraints I propose not to tax your patience any further, nor make any more demands on your tiredness after the last few days, so I shall be as concise as possible. All I can do is provide you with a brief sketch.

God in His omnipotence is always prompted to act in accordance with His supreme Will. All He has to do is will, and works body forth immediately. Man, by contrast, is a weak and feeble creature by nature and is not able to produce anything, given his nothingness. He is obliged to take recourse to a whole range of different energies, many of which do not come naturally to him, and to use all sorts of different instruments as means to achieve his ends. From this it follows that God's majestic simplicity stands out as a shining light, making all his magnificent works external signs of His infinite grandeur. By contrast, man relies on seeing his works take external form before him, being discernible to the human eye, making a direct appeal to man's senses, as proof that his efforts have resulted in acts and forms. As man is both body and soul, his spiritual life and the gifts of grace constantly demand real expression in space and time, otherwise he would begin to languish and the effects of grace would be lost. Thus it is that in the supernatural order, and specially in relation to the sublime sacraments which make up our holy religion, we find that unique combination, that ineffable grandeur, of divine action embodied in forms of great simplicity. The Church uses such forms as ways of explaining, illustrating and giving external embellishment to truth, for the profit of man, for whose benefit the sacraments were instituted in the first place.

The first sacrament, one essential to salvation, is baptism, and it clothes us in Christ, making us part of the royal priesthood, making us living members of the Mystical Body of



Christ. Divinely instituted, it is the visible sign of the regeneration of our immortal souls and it entails the mere sprinkling of a few drops of water on the forehead and the words we use to invoke the thrice adorable Holy Trinity.

Hidden beneath the veils, using nothing more than the most humble and vulnerable substances of a little bread and wine, God is able to operate the most marvelous miracle of His omnipotence, so that, night and day in our midst He is able to visit each one of us and to give each one of us both nourishment and support throughout our earthly life. And yet the ineffable sublimity of this mystery is contained in nothing more than a few very simple words, yet words which have a divine efficacy, words which our Lord said on the eve of his death, in the peace and quiet of the cenacle, with no additional adornment, in the presence of only the twelve apostles, giving us the greatest of all the sacraments, and the sacrifice of the New Law.

We notice the same combination of simplicity with efficacy in the case of the sacrament of holy marriage, which St Paul teaches us is held in great esteem because it is part of the mystery of Christ in the Church. When our Lord instituted the sacrament of holy marriage he recalled the creation of man, but he did not determine the precise nature of the form of the rite and did not even prescribe a new form. Once again we encounter the striking simplicity we have already noted, one which leaves us in no doubt of the nature and the essential terms of the contract, which is here elevated by him to the dignity of a sacrament and which will henceforth form the immutable and indispensable base of Christian society. Woman has been raised up from her fallen state and from her shame and given a new place in creation in the sanctuary of marriage, where she holds a place of honour with prerogatives that the divine plan has reserved specially for her from the very beginning and before the catastrophe of the original fall of Man.

Our Divine Master has bequeathed to the Church these incomparable treasures, like precious stones that one feels one should encase in order better to protect their beauty, and He has given to the Church the duty of surrounding all the great sacraments with all the appropriate solemnity, with prayers,

with ceremonies of the kind which make quite clear to the faithful, in a visible manner, the very nature, the necessity, the efficacy and the holiness of all these institutions. In a word, he has given us the liturgy. We have the inspired language of the Church, a language which is eternal, one which is not always used just in very precise definitions of dogma, but which nonetheless contains doctrinal teachings from the Magisterium, and expressive of matters pertaining to the soul, to the extent that we all hold to the maxim *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. In point of fact the public prayer of the Church gives eloquent testimony of Her faith. As the matrimonial contract has become, for Christians, a sacrament, it will come as no surprise that it falls to the Church to regulate the necessary conditions for its validity and legitimacy as a pact, without prejudice to the legitimate and just part played by the civil authority in also laying down conditions of its own in terms of its understanding of marriage as a social contract. At the same time, we do not forget that municipal authorities or civil formalities are not capable of constituting the essence of marriage to true Catholics, and purely civil unions, no matter how solemn or legal their external forms, are illegitimate, null and without authority in the eyes of God. The limits of legitimate authority – religious and civil – have been inscribed in the recent Concordat signed between the Church and State.

It goes without saying that what is axiomatic in the marriage ceremony is that the contracting parties, who must be capable of marrying, give their consent freely, formally and deliberately, with no mental reservation in respect of the doctrines of the Faith relating to the sacrament. As marriage has been ordered to procreation, that means not intending to subvert the given ends and purposes of marriage. Consent at this level is an obligation, given the fact that marriage as a sacrament is worthy of being honoured in the way determined by the Church. If consent is not given in these terms, the marriage has not taken place, it is defective and non-existent in point of fact. Such defective consent is grounds for what the Church calls an annulment. For these reasons where annulments are granted the Church cannot be said to be annulling a true

marriage, nor is she authorizing divorce. The contracting parties are themselves the ministers of the sacrament, which they administer to one another in front of a priest who is duly authorized to be their witness. They also do so in the presence of two other witnesses. These components are required by the Church who thereby bestows a public blessing on the promises exchanged by the couple.

These promises are framed by the liturgy of the marriage ceremony. The liturgy varies in the West and from the East; there are indeed legitimate cultural variations which have been formally approved by the Holy See but they all, nonetheless, testify to the high symbolism and significance of the solemn act of marriage.

What I will do now is simply restrict my comments to the Roman Rite and to the most well-known traditions here in the West. Unless there is a grave and manifest reason against following tradition, custom has it that the couple make their solemn vows in church, before the altar, indicating that their union is supposed to recall and repeat the union of Christ with His Church; that union is holy and its purpose is not just the propagation of the human race but to bring forth children for Holy Mother Church, co-heirs with the saints and children of God. By this we mean that parents should be raising up children to the supernatural life, to benefit from the Church and to participate in Her sacramental life in the love of God and Christ, not just give them natural life. For these reasons it is particularly regrettable that there are competing customs which undermine the proper clarity we need, if we are to understand marriage as a sacrament. That is to say the custom of not marrying in church, of marrying in a grand drawing-room, hired for the occasion, with all the trimmings of a society gathering, where the altar may not be distinguishable from any other table, since it is covered in flowers, rather resembling a display cabinet. Another profoundly regrettable custom is that of marrying late in the afternoon, with no Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and without Holy Communion. Do not hesitate to use your influence to bring to an end all these abuses which are so at variance with the true, Catholic spirit. Do what you can to enable those around you to better under-

stand the importance of the nuptial Mass and the efficacy of the solemn blessing the Church bestows at the moment the couple agree to their mutual obligations and the very grave responsibility they have as they enter a new state of life, an account of which they must give to God at the Judgement.

With such admirable wisdom and clairvoyance and with Her maternal kindness, Holy Mother Church has never in fact opposed preserving certain rites and customs from Antiquity, as long as they were not in themselves reprehensible, nor incompatible with the Faith and Christian morality. Such customs have been adopted, it is true, but only once they have been transformed and sanctified by the Church, according to Her own prayers and customs. It is important to understand this, since the Church has been misunderstood on this point. Instead of seeing this process properly, as the way in which the Church bestows Her authority as a Church, we sometimes hear of the strange view that the Church has effectively simply co-opted pagan rites, adapting them to Her own customs, on which basis they allege that the liturgy owes its origin and character to pagan antiquity. According to this theory, what we know to be the august ceremony of the sacrament of marriage is no more than a repetition of profane customs with their purely pagan symbolism. Analogically, if we look at the obelisk at the center of the Piazza San Pietro, which is in fact a Christian monument because it is dominated by the glorious cross on which Christ died, symbolizing our redemption from sin, we would not be entitled to see in the obelisk anything more than a syncretic application of some arcane, Egyptian practice.

The victory of Christianity was celebrated by the erection of altars which were themselves built on the debris left behind by pagan temples, replacing the degrading and idolatrous sacrifices offered up there to the pagan deities. In doing so the Church was thus able to purify, cleanse and sanctify the very places which had been dedicated to false gods. That does not mean in any real sense that the Church went in search of the Faith amongst the pagans, nor that Her rites derived from pagan rites, since these were abrogated forever once Christianity triumphed. Neither does the persistence of some of the

forms imply that pagan traditions have infiltrated their way into our new forms, but rather the reverse. Where they have survived they have already been transformed and made new by the Faith. Christians who are engaged to be married are thus required under pain of sin to celebrate their marriages in the Church and before the Church, a public body, and formerly, to make this point absolutely visible, those marriages were actually conducted in the open, in front of the façade of the church. Nowadays, young people are rather asked to enter the church and approach the sanctuary and to kneel down in front of the altar on the first step. This is their particular privilege as ministers of the sacrament and makes visible the holiness of the vows they are about to make.

The young woman is usually dressed in white and wears a crown of flowers on her head. According to tradition, the white dress symbolizes the modesty appropriate to a virginal soul and the innocence acquired in baptism when the soul was regenerated spiritually. She was robed thus in white at the beginning of her life when God's representative exhorted the new-born to keep free from stain of sin all through life that garment of grace, so that one day a new soul would be admitted to the Kingdom of Heaven. *Quam immaculatam perferas ante tribunal Domini Nostri Jesus Christi ut habeas vitam aeternam.* When a young woman wears a wreath of flowers in her hair – a custom which is widespread and entirely legitimate – our liturgists attach a certain significance to it, since it is indicative of another call, another exhortation, to a Christian woman to reign supreme in the home, with her husband, and to vanquish, with his assistance, all the assaults on her virtue and all the obstacles which she is likely to encounter on her way through life. Once at the altar rail the priest asks the couple to answer certain questions, separately, in order to obtain their formal and irrevocable consent to adhere to the sacrament and bond and vow of marriage. Once this consent has been vocalized the priest then invites them to join their hands and he then uses the prescribed formula: 'I pronounce you man and wife, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost'. From this point on, the marriage is valid.

This custom of joining the hands as an outward sign or

formal ratification of the pact, the convention or the contract and consequently of the agreement to live marriage according to the Church, is a long-standing one. It can be traced back to the depths of Antiquity and finds its rightful place in the liturgy of marriage. It also features in the Old Testament, in the Book of Tobias where we read of Raguel in the presence of the Angel of the Lord taking the right hand of his daughter and putting it into the right hand of Tobias, saying: 'The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob be with you, may he join you together, and fulfil his blessing in you' (Chapter 7, verse 15). It is because of this august tradition, no doubt, that we have the social convention, whereby a suitor asks for the hand of his bride from her father. The Roman Ritual then prescribes the blessing of the marriage ring, the ring symbolizing the vow of fidelity, '*annulus fidei*', as Pope Nicholas I calls it. A great doctor of the Church, St Isidore of Seville, wrote that the husband gives the ring to his wife as a token of fidelity on his part, or better still, as a symbol of the union of their two hearts. Note here that there is only one nuptial ring properly speaking in our rite and reference is only made to one ring to be blessed. The husband takes it from the priest and passes it over the wife's finger. In doing this he is the first to make his vows and reiterates his promise, which the wife accepts according to her understanding, as both have reciprocal feelings. The man takes the initiative henceforth as the head of the family and the wife receives the ring as a symbol of this indissoluble union.

The promise of fidelity is by definition mutual, as without reciprocity it would not make any sense; it is equally obligatory by definition and is binding upon both in exactly the same way, all symbolized by the one ring. Christian morality is no different for a man than for a woman and the obligation to remain faithful to one's vows does not admit of variations. Where couples both exchange rings there may doubtlessly be some good reasons for the variation, but the liturgy itself only refers to the one ring. We are thus at liberty to draw the conclusion that the most minute details are rich in significance, as are the prayers and the ceremonial itself, all of which make up the celebration of the sacrament of marriage. At every step the intention

of Holy Mother Church is to make literally clear that what is characteristic of the sacrament is its indissolubility as a marriage contract. What is at the apex of the marriage ceremony, thereafter, is the celebration of the nuptial Mass, which thereby underlines the solemnity of the vows. According to the wisdom of the Church the couple should desire to receive the sacraments at all times, and especially on this occasion, so it goes without saying that they will communicate on this day.

How beautiful the nuptial Mass is, so rich in signification, symbolism, so eloquent in its explication of doctrine, so rich in efficacy in its prayers and blessings and solemnity! The Introit of the Mass, for instance, tells us: 'The God of Israel join you together, and he be with you, who took pity on two only children; and now, Lord, make them bless thee more fully', an admirable and most sublime prayer. God must underpin each union; He alone is the prime mover; observing His laws is the duty of all married couples; it is only in His Divine Love that human love is able to embrace the demands of an inviolate Faith, giving us a rock-solid foundation.

After the Introit, follows the celebrated epistle of St Paul to the Ephesians which contains the law of married life. The Apostle provides us with a memorable list of the precise duties of wives and husbands, throwing resplendent light on the way marriage reflects the union of Christ with His Church. A society which shuns the authority of the Church necessarily leads to anarchy, so that the family is necessarily supposed to be the antidote, and the perfect example of humane government. And since society is nothing more than a further application of the laws of family and married life, it goes without saying that any anarchy in the family home necessarily engenders anarchy in society. Thus St Paul elaborates on the proper hierarchy of family life. The husband is the head of the family and must exercise his legitimate authority in such a way as to preserve and enhance mutual love, eschewing all lapses into tyranny, ensuring that his wife is always protected as the companion which she is; by his constant devotion to duty a husband governs and serves this royal family where a wife would never be able to go about her own duties with docility and confidence, if she herself did not humble herself before her superior, before her husband, whose

duty is to protect her own prerogatives in the home which themselves guarantee tranquil domestic life.

In the Gospel of the nuptial Mass again we reflect on our Lord's ministry and how he instituted the sacrament of marriage. The Church repeats his words, and has done so again and again throughout the centuries, indeed will never stop reiterating Christ's warning to those who would have the temerity to legalize or justify divorce, and shroud such shameful talk in a series of specious arguments. What did he say? 'What God has joined, let no man rend asunder'.

The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is thereafter offered up, in the customary fashion, and the sacred mysteries continue with the exception of one small change which happens after the *Oraison Dominicale*. The momentary interruption of the Mass is extraordinary in itself. We more typically come across such a pause in the rite of ordination of priests, when bishops are consecrated, when the holy oils are blessed, and when kings are crowned or when virgins are blessed. So this characteristic alone demonstrates the extent to which the Church holds marriage in such high esteem, and its sacred character. Our Lord is still on the altar under the Eucharistic veils, and thus in the presence of the Creator of Heaven and Earth, of our Divine Saviour, of the Judge of the Living and the Dead, the celebrant turns to the newlyweds and intones the sublime words in a loud voice, as a prayer offered up to God, one of an incomparable nobility. These last prayers, which are both ancient and sublime, are offered up principally for the wife, who is expected to imitate the saints, to be grave about her duty to remain modest, to protect her purity, to be knowledgeable about the doctrines of the Faith, to show her worthiness, in other words, as a wife, mother and protector of the peace in the home. All of this is nothing less than a canticle of praises and of vows, all of which throw into abundant relief the greatness of maternity in the Christian tradition, invoking upon the wife all of the abundance of divine blessings for her role in creation. A few minutes later the young couple approaches the communion rails and when they receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ they seal their union. This heavenly food will always be their strength in all the

trials of married life as they walk hand in hand along the way to the gates of eternity. *O Sacramentum pietatis! O signum unitatis! O miraculum veritatis!*

Oh, if only all the young women whose hearts were set on marriage took their preparations for this new state of life seriously! Instead of which, what do we see? An excessive preoccupation, sometimes to the exclusion of all else, with externals, with the trimmings of what is no more than a society party, worrying about appearances, outfits, flowers, music, the honeymoon and the wedding present. What should they be doing? Meditating on the marriage as a sacrament, on the gravity of their new obligations as wives and mothers. What would happen if they stopped to consider seriously all these matters, and to reflect on centuries of wisdom about marriage, which the liturgy of the nuptial Mass contains? If souls took these matters seriously, think how many marriages could be saved, think how many off-hand unions could be avoided, think how many divorces would be hindered, think how many marriages would flourish, instead of disintegrating under the presence of worldly pressures and concerns, thereby inflicting so much damage on individuals and society, indeed, causing the destruction of Christian society as we know it.

I shall conclude this brief sketch of the nuptial Mass and its meaning by expressing my sincere wish that young people be better instructed in matters relating to marriage, so that, whilst we are surrounded by so many signs of decay, of the collapse of Christian morality, Christian marriage might yet flourish and regain its preeminent position in society in conformity with the doctrines taught by our Lord, Jesus Christ, His Church and our glorious Tradition.\*

\*This section is a new translation from the Italian by Harriet Murphy.

## Conferences

### Conferences to Novices

28 March 1921

The novices apply themselves to prayer and the study of the Constitutions. Afterwards they will go and spread the light of Christ because our Lord said to them in a special way 'You are the light of the world . . .' We are not the light merely for ourselves. We must reflect (like mirrors) the light of Him who is the true light, and in order to do that the mirrors must be pure and clear. The novices are applying themselves to this task by learning about our Lord so that they will be able to reflect Him in their lives . . .

17 January 1922

Have you ever noticed the words written around the cupola of St Peter's? 'Peter, do you love me more than these?' Well, you ought to apply these words to yourselves. You have been specially privileged by our Lord and therefore ought to love Him more than the others and to give him proof of this love by fulfilling His will. He reveals His will in the Rule, and in the smallest happenings of the day . . .