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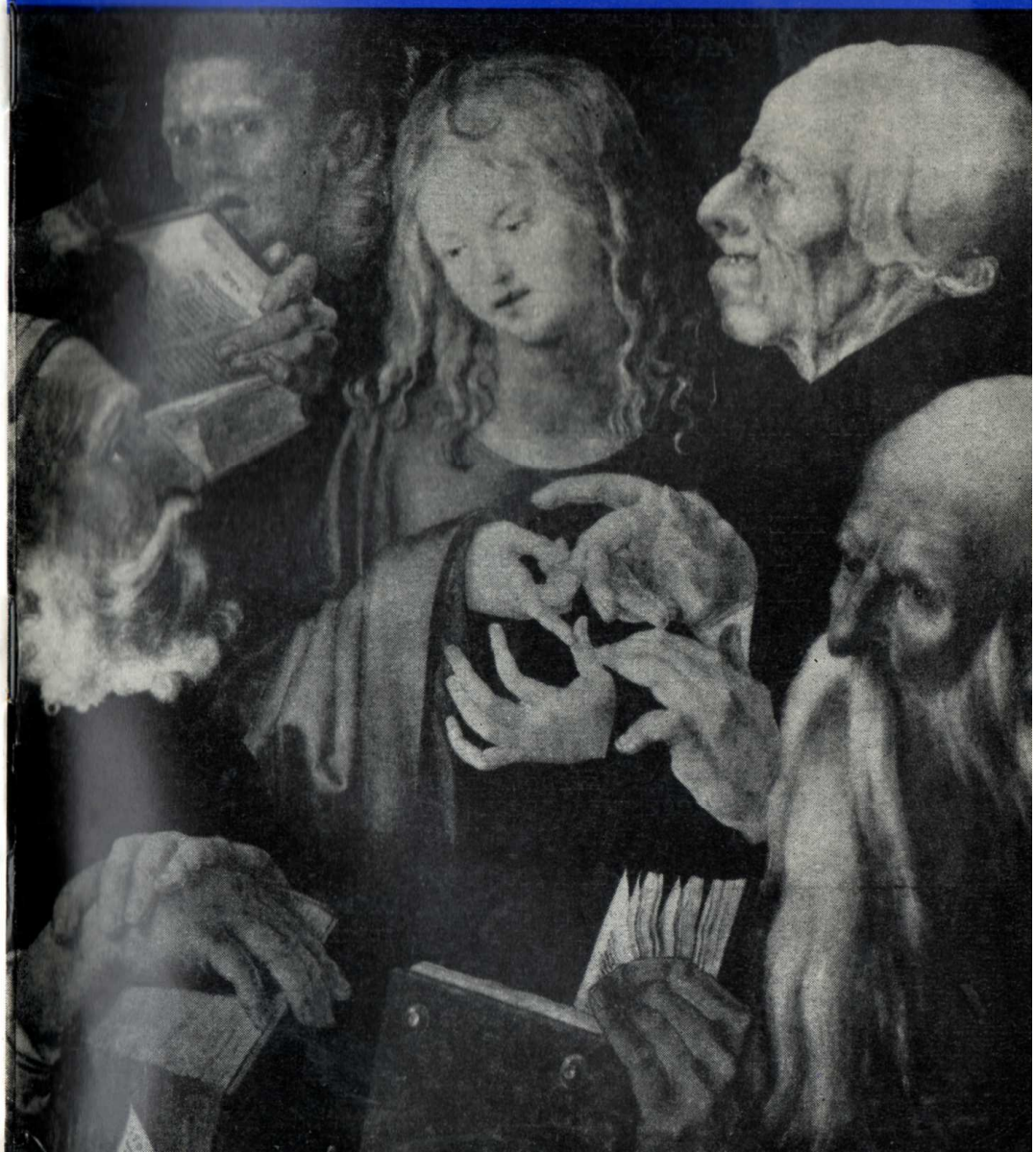
CHRIST ON DIVORCE

By Rev. Hubert J. Richards S.T.L., L.S.S.



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REV. HUBERT J. RICHARDS S.T.L., L.S.S.

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CHRIST ON DIVORCE

" WHY is your Church so strict about divorce ? If a marriage has turned out a failure, why not dissolve it ? Surely you will do more harm than good otherwise. People are human, and if they have made a mistake they ought to be given a second chance. What right have you to be stricter than Christ, who admitted that unfaithfulness could be a ground for divorce ? "

The objection may not be put in so many words, but it is implicit in the minds of many people, who are frankly puzzled and even shocked by the Catholic Church's attitude to divorce, and who cannot see in Christ's words, as St Matthew reports them[1], anything other than a permission, at least for the innocent party in a divorce to remarry.

In actual fact the meaning of the phrase *except it be for fornication* is not nearly as obvious as people think. That it should have given rise to a great variety of interpretations is sufficient indication that it is an ambiguous phrase. About the only thing that scholars agree on is that it cannot be taken to mean that Christ gave any sort of permission for divorce and remarriage : it simply will not fit the context or the rest of the New Testament teaching on marriage.

It will be useful to look into that general New Testament teaching before discussing the possible meaning of the words which St Matthew has put on Christ's lips. It forms the necessary background for the understanding of that enigmatic phrase.

[1] Mt. 19 : 9 " Whosoever shall put away his wife, *except it be for fornication*, and shall marry another, committeth adultery." (Douay version). The saying is repeated in a slightly different form in Mt. 5 : 32.

1. ST PAUL ON MARRIAGE

IT may seem odd to approach the teaching of Christ by way of the occasional letters written by St Paul to his converts twenty or thirty years later. It will seem less odd when it is is remembered that these letters introduce us into the life of communities who were practising the teaching of Christ long before it was ever written down in the Gospels. If we wish to know what Christ taught, we can have no safer guide than the practice of the first Christian churches.

To the Church at Corinth

About the year A.D. 55 St. Paul wrote his first letter to Corinth, a church which he had founded on his second missionary journey five years earlier. In common with the rest of the first generation of Christians, his converts there lived in the fixed hope that they would remain alive to see Christ's second coming, and they had written to ask whether, in view of this transportation into heaven, " where there will be no more marrying or being married " (Mt. 22 : 30), it might not be better to remain celibates, whether in fact it might not even be advisable to break up existing marriages. Paul wrote :

" In reply to the questions you asked me to answer :

(1) Yes, you are quite right in supposing that celibacy is a good thing. But that does not mean that marriage is something evil. In fact, in a background like that of Corinth, where there is such constant danger of immorality, it is better for a man to have a wife, and for a woman to have a husband.

(2) No, you are wrong in supposing that husband and wife should live as brother and sister. In fact, by the marriage contract the wife has given over to her husband the right to her body, as the husband has to his wife, and you have no business to deny this right to each other. You

may both agree to abstain from the use of marriage for some spiritual reason, but this should only be for a short period at a time. To refuse to come together again would leave both of you wide open to temptation. (What I have said here about the advisability of marriage is of course not to be taken as a command. As far as my own preferences in the matter go, I would personally advise anyone to follow the greater perfection of the celibate life I lead myself. But this demands a gift from God, and if God has not given you this gift, then celibacy is not for you. For you he has a different gift in store. So, I repeat, any unmarried person, widow or widower would do well to remain celibate as I do, but only if they can exercise self control. If they are constantly being overcome by the flames of passion, they should marry.)

(3) You are equally wrong in suggesting that existing marriages should be broken up, And here it is not merely a question of my own personal preferences : Christ himself has forbidden wives to leave their husbands, and husbands to divorce their wives. Consequently, if they have separated from each other, they must either remain single or else be reconciled" (1 Cor. 7 : 1–11).

St Paul Hard on Marriage ?

This page of St Paul has been paraphrased in order to suggest the answer to some of the objections which it has aroused. What sort of a view of marriage is this, people ask, which makes it a poor second-best to celibacy, a concession allowed to those who cannot exercise self control ? The objection is fair enough, if it is presumed that St Paul set out in this letter to present the full Christian doctrine on marriage. But he did not. He set out to answer the twisted questions of some very twisted people.

The Corinthians had moulded their newly found Christianity on the Greek model, with the Greek assumption that religion concerned the soul alone. Salvation was a matter of intellectual appreciation in which the body played no part, to which in fact the body could only be a hindrance. The mentality can be read between every line of the letter which St

Paul wrote to counteract it, from the first chapter's castigation of Corinth's intellectual cliques, to the last chapter's impassioned appeal to the Corinthians to understand that Christianity involves a bodily resurrection, not a merely spiritual one. It is this mentality that has coloured the chapter on marriage too, and allowance must be made for it if St Paul's thought is not to be misrepresented. It is in answer to the soulless asceticism of the Corinthians that he admits the superiority of Christian celibacy, only to express his doubts about whether they are spiritually mature enough to practise it. It is in answer to the suggestion that marriage is intrinsically evil that he insists on its sacred character (he is not afraid to call it, in v. 7, a *charisma* on the same title as the "spiritual gifts" that are to be outlined in ch. 12–14). It is on the command of Christ (who gave it this sacred character), and not on Paul's preference, that Christian marriage is to be regarded as unbreakable. As far as the teaching of Christ went, the first generation of Christians knew of no exception to the indissolubility of Christian marriage.

To the Churches in Asia

If we want a more balanced and a more complete picture of St Paul's teaching on marriage, we will go to the epistles he wrote later in life, when the heat of controversy was over, when the heresies which threatened to corrupt Christianity from within—Greek intellectualism on the one hand (cf. Thess. and Cor.) and Jewish legalism on the other (cf. Gal., Rom. and Phil.)—had been finally defeated, and when he could set forth his concept of Christianity *ex professo* instead of merely using it to illustrate a debating point.

From his prison in Rome, about the year 62, Paul wrote a letter to the Christian communities which he and his fellow missionaries had founded from Ephesus, the headquarters of his third journey eight or nine years earlier. The epistle is known to us as " Ephesians ", but with its lack of the usual personal greetings it was probably designed as an encyclical letter to all the churches in the Roman Province of Asia of which Ephesus was the capital. It is the calmest of all Paul's

writings. Not that he had no errors to deal with : between the lines of this epistle he is clearly referring to an incipient form of the Gnosticism which was to give so much trouble to the Christian writers of the second century. But Paul does not write with any of his former anxiety. He is content here to put forward, quite positively, a synthesis of the Christian mystery as it has matured in his mind, convinced that this will satisfy all the searchings of Asia for a philosophy of life. And the sum content of this mystery is Christ, a Christ who possesses from eternity all the fullness of the Godhead, a Christ in whose incarnation God has become present to us, a Christ who has already returned to the earth in the Church, which is his Body, filled at every moment with his fullness. In the Church, the Christian is "in Christ" (the phrase is repeated again and again) and has already entered heaven.

For St Paul, this sublime concept of Christianity is not simply the concern of the speculative theologian. It is the guiding principle which must govern the attitude of each Christian to such everyday matters as honesty, patience, humility and purity. It is the reality which must form the background to the everyday relationship between a slave and his master, between a child and its parents . . . and between a wife and her husband :

> " The wife should be subject to her husband as if to Christ, since he is her head, just as Christ is the head and saviour of his Body, the Church. Just as the Church is subject to Christ, so should the wife be subject in all things to her husband.
>
> The husband, for his part, should love his wife in the way that Christ loved the Church. It was for the Church that he gave himself up in order to bring it to God. . . . It is in this way that the husband should love his wife, as if she were his own body . . . which he takes such care to keep fed and free from harm. For this is precisely how Christ loves us, the limbs that make up his Body, the Church. Genesis spoke of a man leaving his father and mother in order to be united to his wife in one flesh. Those words contain a great mystery, a mystery which has now been revealed in the union between Christ and his Church" (Eph. 5 : 22–32).

Marriage a Metaphor

The text again needs to be opened out to reveal the depth of its meaning. The use of the marriage metaphor to describe the union between Christ and the Church is not new. The Old Testament had frequently referred to the Covenant between God and his People in these terms (Deut. 4:24, Isa. 1:21–26, 50:1, 54:6–7, Jer. 2:2, 3:1–12, Ez. 16 and 23, Os. 1–2, Ps. 44, Cant. *passim*, etc.), and Christ in his teaching had already appropriated the metaphor to himself (Mt. 9:15, 22:1–14, 25:1–13). What is new is the light that St Paul has thrown on it by turning it back to front. It is not God's union with man that is something like human marriage. It is human marriage that is the metaphor, an imperfect copy of that other union which is the true reality. And that union between God and man, first echoed in the union between Adam and Eve, and echoed down the ages by the union into one flesh of every human marriage, has received its final seal in the incarnation, where God has become one flesh with mankind. The marriage of which Genesis spoke, itself already an image of God's marriage with man, was, in St Paul's mind, a mystical foreshadowing of a more sublime reality still, the marriage between Christ and his Church. And this in its turn becomes the model for Christian marriage, in which two Christians present a replica of that action of Christ and make real again his presence upon the earth. It is, in the last analysis, this sacramental nature of Christian marriage which makes it absolutely indissoluble. It can no more be broken than can the new and eternal covenant into which Christ has entered with his Church.

The Other Epistles

There are not many other references to marriage in the rest of the New Testament epistles. What references there are all reflect this same conviction that Christian marriage is something more than a merely human contract, because Christ's coming has raised the world on to a superhuman level, and marriage with it. Writing to his converts in

Salonika, St Paul is anxious to point the contrast between the pagan attitude to marriage and that which must inspire the Christian who is a member of Christ's Body and a temple of Christ's Spirit (1 Thess. 4 : 4–8). In his epistle to the disciple who is to take over his work in Ephesus, he returns to the Greek heresy against which he had to battle in Corinth ten years earlier, which would maintain that the body is irredeemably evil and the marriage act hopelessly sinful. He insists that everything that God created is good (1 Tim. 4 : 1–11), and that in fact it is in the very relationship of marriage that the wife is to win her salvation (2 : 15). The epistle to the Hebrews similarly stresses the sacred character of marriage (Heb. 13 : 4).

Perhaps the closest parallel to the sublime ideal outlined in Eph. 5 is to be found in the encyclical letter written by St Peter only a year or two later. With the ease and confidence which marks the first Christian exegesis of the Old Testament, St Peter finds the model of the Christian wife in Sara, who addressed Abraham as her " Lord " (Gen. 18 : 12, Septuagint), as every wife is to see the figure of Christ the Lord in her husband. It is because Christian marriage has this sacramental character that St Peter can point to it as the means by which husband and wife inherit eternal life (1 Pet. 3 : 1–7).

These quotations from the writings of the Apostles are sufficient to give some indication of the light in which Christian marriage was seen by the first generation of Christians. If they do not at first seem to have much relevance to the subject under discussion, the teaching of Christ on divorce, they form its essential background and express something of the spirit in which we must approach the words of Christ as the Gospels have recorded them.

2. CHRIST ON MARRIAGE

What God Has Joined Together

The Gospels mention only one occasion on which Christ made any pronouncement on marriage. It is to be found in all the three Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Luke is content to report the operative sentence which contains Christ's teaching on the matter, and has included it (16:18) haphazardly in the middle of the long collection he has made of Christ's sayings (Lk. 9:51—19:27). Matthew has also included the sentence (5:32) in the middle of his more compact collection of Christ's sayings, known to us as the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5–7). Mark has been more careful to report the circumstances which gave rise to the saying (Mk. 10:1–12), and these are reproduced, with slight variation, in a later chapter of St Matthew's Gospel.

> " Some Pharisees came up to him and put him to the proof by asking him, Is it right for a man to divorce his wife for any reason whatsoever ? He answered them, Have you not read that the Creator made them, from the beginning, male and female, and said to them ' For this reason shall a man leave his father and mother in order to be united to his wife, so that the two become one flesh ' ? A man and his wife are no longer two but one, and no one has the right to separate what God has thus joined together. Why then did Moses, they asked, make provision for separation by means of a certificate of divorce ? It was, he replied, because of your moral immaturity that Moses allowed divorce ; but that was not God's original plan. And so I repeat that original plan to you : Whoever divorces his wife (' *except it be for fornication* ') and marries another woman, commits adultery ; and whoever marries a woman who has been divorced by her husband, also commits adultery." (Mt. 19:3–9).

It will be useful to look a little more closely at the context here provided by Matthew. It will give us some indication of

the way in which Christ's final words are to be understood. With Mark and Luke, the phrase in italics may be omitted for the time being. Whatever its meaning might be, it will appear more clearly in the full light of this context.

Jewish Background

Christ's ruling on divorce was not given out of the blue. It was given in answer to one of the many ' trick questions ' by which his adversaries hoped to catch him out in argument. St Matthew gives several examples of these questions—on the poll-tax, on the general resurrection, on the greatest commandment, on the Messiah—in this section of his Gospel. On each of these occasions Christ had carved clean through the controversy, and had forced his questioners to re-examine their own principles. The question of the Roman tax was based on the assumption that he must either pronounce for it (and antagonise the crowd) or against it (and arouse trouble with the authorities). Christ did neither. He simply declared the supreme principle that the obedience owed to God does not prejudice the obedience owed to Caesar. The question of the resurrection of the dead was based on the assumption that the limitations of this life would be carried over into the next. Christ took away the whole foundation of the objection by pointing to the spiritual nature of the life of heaven. The question on the Law hoped to embroil him in the fruitless dispute about the relative importance of the 623 commandments which the Scribes had discovered in the Old Testament. Christ disposed of the whole argument by returning to the one fundamental—the commandment of love. And on the ancestry of the Messiah, it was he himself who asked the awkward question, and forced his critics to think again about the relationship between the first David and the second (Mt. 22:15–45).

On the occasion that here concerns us, the trick question was asked in the hope that it would force Christ to declare for one side or the other of a dispute famous in his day, and so split his following. The dispute revolved around the precise

meaning of the phrase in Jewish law which specified the grounds for which a divorce might be granted. The Code of Deuteronomy had allowed a husband to dismiss his wife, by the formality of giving her a certificate of divorce, if he discovered in her " the shamefulness of a thing ", that is to say, something shameful or indecent (Deut. 24 : 1). For many, these words could refer only to the ultimate indecency of adultery, which consequently alone gave a man the right to divorce his wife. This strict interpretation was upheld, in the time of Christ, by the great rabbi Shammai. But the phrase was obscure enough to allow of a very liberal interpretation too, and indeed the rabbi Hillel had gone on record as ruling that a spoilt dinner or a wife's fading good looks constituted sufficient " shamefulness of a thing " to allow the husband to demand a divorce. The phrase continued to provide a subject of bitter argument and disagreement, and its overtones are clear in the question which is put to Christ in Mt. 19 : " Is it right for a man to divorce his wife for *any* reason whatsoever ? " In effect he is being asked : " Are your sympathies with the stricter view of Shammai, or do you side with Hillel who holds that divorce may be granted even for the *slightest* reason ? "

Christ's Ruling

The question hoped to force Christ into one of the two camps. He does neither. He bypasses the whole dispute in order to return to the fundamental unity and indissolubility of marriage as it was created by God. The marriage tie, as instituted by God, is stronger even than the natural bond between parent and child, because it has made " one flesh " of the two partners, who can no more be divided again into two than can a living body. The same text of Genesis, of which St Paul is later to make such effective use, is appealed to as witness of this God-designed unity. Christ refuses to declare for either Hillel or Shammai. Both are wrong. No man, neither Shammai nor Hillel, has the right to separate again two beings whom God has made so indissolubly one.

If any doubt should remain that Christ has not merely sided with the stricter view of Shammai, but has forbidden divorce in any circumstances, that doubt disappears when even Shammai's followers have to appeal against Christ's interpretation of Genesis by quoting Deuteronomy. Christ does not reply : " Of course, in certain restricted cases that interpretation of Genesis does not apply." He merely repeats it and points out that the prescription of Deuteronomy, far from being a divine command, was a temporary concession to the immature moral stage of Israel. His own ruling is that from now marriage is to return to its original and absolute indissolubility. In short, his reply is entirely in keeping with his reply to the other trick questions. He refuses the alternative presented to him : " Does this provide sufficient grounds for divorce or not ? " The whole foundation of the question is wrong. Nothing provides sufficient grounds for divorce. It is the reply we should have expected once we had read the rest of the New Testament teaching on divorce, for the one depends on the other. Neither Paul nor Peter nor any of the early Christian communities knew of any grounds for divorce. The reason was that Christ had absolutely forbidden it.

3. " EXCEPT IT BE FOR FORNICATION "

What It Cannot Mean

There is not a scholar who questions the fact that Christ's words, as reported in Mk. 10, Lk. 16 and Mt. 5 and 19, forbid divorce and remarriage. The whole context of Mt. 19 makes it so clear that there can be no possible doubt on the matter. If scholars continue to disagree, it is not on that fundamental fact. They may argue about the meaning of the phrase *except it be for fornication*, but none of them imagines that by it Christ made any exception to his prohibition of divorce. It would make nonsense of the whole scene. Even the Apostles

who close the scene bear witness, by their shocked attitude, that Christ's ruling is uncompromisingly stricter than Shammai's : " If that is your decision about the relationship between a man and his wife " they say, " better not marry at all ! " (Mt. 19 : 10).

This, it must be repeated, is so clear that those scholars who still think that the words *except it be for fornication* are really meant to provide an exception to Christ's ruling, conclude that they cannot be Christ's own words (they are such a blatant contradiction of all that he has said), but must have been interpolated by some Christian community which found itself unable to live up to the high standard set by Christ. This of course is the easy way out. The study of Scripture would be considerably simplified if we could dismiss any difficult phrase as a later interpolation. Is there no other possible meaning of the phrase ?

What It Could Mean

Scholars of all times have returned again and again to struggle with this phrase. On the one hand it does seem at first sight to qualify in some way Christ's general prohibition on divorce. On the other hand the context makes it clear that Christ considered a divorced person still bound by the marriage bond : to attempt marriage with another would be " adultery ". If there is to be any solution to the dilemma, some alternative translation must be found for one or other of the three words which appear in our text as " divorce ", " except " and " fornication ".

Some scholars (by far the majority) have suggested that it is the word " divorce " which has been mistranslated. Since Christ explicitly forbids remarriage, the word might be better translated as " separation ". In this case his ruling could be paraphrased : *If anyone separates from his wife (and that is allowed for " fornication ") then he may not marry again.* Christ would be making a real exception, not indeed to his prohibition of remarriage, but to his prohibition of " divorce " (i.e. separation). It is a possible solution.

Others have queried the word " except ", especially in view of the forceful word used in the Greek original of Mt. 5 : 32, and suggested that it might be better translated " leaving aside ", so that Christ would be saying : *If any one divorces his wife (and I am not considering the question of " fornication ", which makes no difference one way or the other) he may not marry again.* Christ would be bypassing the whole dispute about what constitutes sufficient grounds for divorce, as irrelevant. It is a possible solution.

But it is the third word, " fornication ", that perhaps provides the most satisfying solution to the problem. The solutions based on the other two words unconsciously make this word equivalent to " adultery ", without allowing for the fact that when the text speaks of the adultery of the divorced husband or wife, it uses an entirely different word. It would seem that " fornication " refers to something else. Can we discover its exact meaning by looking to see how it is used elsewhere in the New Testament ?

The Word " Fornication "

The Greek word *porneia* that is used in Mt. 5 and 19 is in fact both more general and more specific in meaning than the English word " fornication ". In itself it means simply " impurity " (the English word " pornography " which is taken from it has a similarly wide meaning). and the context must decide what precise impurity is being referred to. Such a context is provided, for instance, by St Paul in his first letter to Corinth, where he condemns the illicit union between a Christian and his dead father's wife. This he calls *porneia* (1 Cor. 5 : 1). The Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 uses the word in exactly the same sense when it directs Christians of Gentile origin to respect the susceptibilities of their brethren of Jewish origin by complying, where necessary, with Jewish custom in the matter of *porneia.* The Council had made it clear that, in principle, the Christian is no longer bound by the ritual laws of the Old Testament (Acts 15 : 7–19). But charity demanded that where converts from Judaism were in a

majority and continued to live according to these ancestral laws, the Gentile Christians among them should make a communal life possible by respecting their social taboos in the matter of " idolothytes " (food which had been offered in pagan sacrifices), " porneia " (marriage within forbidden degrees), " blood " and " things strangled " (non-kosher meat) (Acts 15 : 20). Exactly the same four concessions had for centuries been demanded of any stranger who wished to make his home in Israel (Lev. 17: 8—18: 26).

These two examples make it possible, if not likely, that *porneia*, as well as bearing the generic meaning of impurity, had in certain circumstances the technical meaning of marriage within the degrees of kinship forbidden by Jewish law. Among the Gentiles there was no restriction on the matter, and marriage between near relatives was not unusual. But it was the Jewish custom which was eventually taken over by the Church, where a marriage of this kind was regarded as being one in name only, and in reality as illicit a union as plain fornication. The use of the same word *porneia* in the context of a dispute about marriage makes it at least possible (more and more scholars to-day think that it is certain) that the text of Mt. 5 : 32 and 19 : 9 refers to such illicit unions, and excepts from the general law of indissolubility those " marriages " which were already null and void through forbidden degrees of kinship. The text could then be paraphrased : *If any one divorces his wife, he may not marry again, except when his marriage was not a real one at all, but had only the appearance of one.*

Is It Likely ?

It will be asked whether it is likely that Christ would have gone out of his way to mention anything as obvious as this. If the union between two people is only an apparent marriage and not a real one at all, then anyone of the meanest intelligence could conclude that it does not fall under Christ's ruling on marriage, without explicit mention of the fact having to be made. It would be rather as if Christ said : " Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy (unless they are not really merciful, but only appear to be) ". On the other hand, if the word *porneia* was meant to refer only to the case of marriages which were invalid because of the technical law on kinship (and this admittedly would be less obvious), then one could still ask whether it is likely that Christ would bother to insert a parenthesis referring to something so remote. After all, it was not as if the case would crop up in every other marriage or so. As well expect him to say : " If anyone divorces his wife he may not marry again (except where his marriage to the woman has been a case of mistaken identity)." It is too rare a thing to mention in a general ruling about the indissolubility of marriage. Is it even likely that the word *porneia* was understood by the first Christians to refer to these forbidden degrees of kinship, when they found it necessary to legislate for the matter themselves in the Council of Jerusalem ? Perhaps this fact provides the clue to the final solution of the problem. It is indeed unlikely that Christ should have legislated for such an obscure case. But it is not unlikely that St Matthew should have inserted a reference to it into Christ's words.

In Matthew Alone

It is significant that when St Mark, St Luke and St Paul refer to Christ's teaching on the indissolubility of marriage, they make no mention of any exception to the rule. The phrase *except it be for fornication* is to be found in St Matthew alone. Now St Matthew, far more than the other Synoptics, has a habit of adding his own explanation to the words of Christ. Where St Luke reports Christ as saying " Blessed are the poor " (Lk. 6 : 20), Matthew reads " Blessed are the poor *in spirit* " (Mt. 5 : 3) in order to ensure that the words are understood of the spirit of poverty, and not of merely material destitution, in which there is no particular virtue. The very next verse of Luke " Blessed are those who hunger and thirst " has similarly become in Matthew " those who hunger and thirst *for justice*" (Mt. 5 : 6), to emphasise again the

spiritual nature of these qualifications for entry into the Kingdom.

These examples are well known, but many others could be quoted : St Peter's "Thou art the Christ" (Mark and Luke) becomes in Mt. 16 : 16 " Thou art the Christ, the Son of God ", to express the full meaning behind this profession of faith ; in 9 : 13, 11 : 14, 12 : 7, 12 : 40, 13 : 14, 21 : 2, 24 : 30, Matthew has put the words of the Old Testament prophets Osee, Malachi, Jonas, Isaias, Zacharias and Daniel into the mouth of Christ (they are missing from the parallel places in Mark and Luke) in order to emphasise the element of fulfilment that is to be seen in these examples of Christ's teaching ; the questions asked by Christ in Mk. 5:9, 5:30, 6:38, 7:12, 8:23, 9:16, 9:33, 11:21, 14:14 have all been omitted by Matthew lest they should seem to imply ignorance on the part of Christ ; and so on. Nor should it worry us to discover that Matthew has added his own commentary to Christ's teaching in this way. His purpose, as that of the other Evangelists, is not to provide us with a tape-recording of Christ's words, but to tell us their meaning. And it is only those who do not believe in the inspiration of the Gospels who will find in this any cause for anxiety, lest perhaps the Evangelists have falsified or misrepresented Christ's intentions.

If then Matthew frequently inserts his own explanation into the words of Christ, and if he alone has included the phrase about *porneia* in Christ's teaching on divorce, it is highly probable that we should understand it as his commentary rather than as part of the actual teaching of Christ, who, as we have seen, would have had no reason to make any reference to it. It is Matthew who has to teach Christ's legislation on marriage to Christians who have already experienced the controversy which led to the Council of Jerusalem and are living by its decree (Acts 15, A.D. 50 to 60). And it is Matthew who has to make it clear to them that Christ's words forbidding divorce are not to be taken to mean that the kinship marriage mentioned in that decree is indissoluble. It is not. It is *porneia*, and does not come under Christ's words about divorce.

Conclusion

This solution to the long disputed phrase seems to be the most satisfactory of those that are offered. If we have taken a long time in reaching it, it is only because we are so far removed from the circumstances in which Christ's words were uttered and St Matthew's Gospel was written. In itself the solution is simple. In view of the legislation made at Jerusalem about the time he was writing, St Matthew has added a clause to Christ's teaching on divorce in order to tell his readers that marriages contracted contrary to the Jerusalem decree are not included in Christ's prohibition. His original readers would have understood the reference without any difficulty. The parenthesis is indeed a short one, but the use of the word *porneia* would have recalled the Jerusalem decree to their minds immediately, and shown them the purpose of the clause. A modern author would obtain the same effect by relegating the clause to a footnote and adding a cross reference to Acts 15:20.

The solution remains only one among several. This means that it is not certain. Let us repeat for the last time that it does *not* mean that Christ's teaching on divorce is uncertain. However the phrase *except it be for fornication* is translated, Christ's words on the indissolubility of marriage are not in any way affected. They remain absolute, as is made clear by St Mark, St Luke and St Paul, and as is emphasised by the whole context of Christ's ruling on the matter. If the Church continues to denounce divorce and to declare that Christian marriage is of its nature unbreakable, it is not out of a puritanical severity or a lack of sympathy with the difficulties of married life. It is out of sheer loyalty to the teaching of her founder, Jesus Christ.