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## Holy Matrimony (I): Marriage As Creation

"Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines, for our vines have tender grapes." This admonition to "take (catch) the foxes" comes from the Song of Solomon. The garden of delights, which is the lovers' communion, must be purged of sins and troubles, "the little foxes," if the pleasures of the garden are to abide. Love must not suffer spoiling through the small things. This is especially true of marriage.

Marriage is a garden that needs constant tending. Unforeseen elements often appear from within, like unwanted weeds draining away the life of the soil. Everyone who has begun the journey of marriage knows how this is so. Only a short time is needed to discover that the very thing that used to disturb you about your father is now revealed as your own habit toward your wife. Or those exact things that you criticized in your mother have sprung forth from you in relation to your husband. The weeds of peculiar temperament and bad habit seem to appear as if from nowhere in the ground of your personality. This is one way that the sins of the parents are visited upon the children.

And sometimes from without, various beasts drift through, nibbling blossoms and even devouring whole plants. An unexpected illness, a terrible accident, the sudden loss of employment, these all barge into and trouble a marriage. And the precious things we take for granted can be lost overnight, if we do not keep the garden with care against such beasts. That is why with respect to all the unexpected things that can happen, as well as to all the inherent purposes of marriage, the Vow of the Prayer Book service of Holy Matrimony begins with the resolution of the will. "Wilt thou..."

As a result of these disturbing pressures from within and from without, we tend to look away from the garden, and allow it to become the food of devouring predators. And then when we turn back to grasp what once was there, for the sake of which we forsook all others with courage and with joy to pursue the beloved, we find our garden in perilous trouble.

Perils from within and from without begin rather small, with a grape stolen here and there, but if the problem is left unmanaged, what was small soon becomes intolerably large, and the damage is the only thing that grows.

Much more often than we would like to admit, and even within the life

of the Christian Church, marriages break down because of the little foxes that spoil the vines. From beginning to end the problems of the "little foxes" are the problems of the soul.

Jesus teaches us to attend to the small things. With the matters of the soul, how we treat the seemingly insignificant reflects how we shall treat the essentially great. If we are faithful with the earthly gifts, then we shall be faithful with the more important things of the Spirit. This is true of the whole of life but especially so of Holy Matrimony.

Marriage is a gift of creation. And the way that we live in marriage mirrors our entire outlook on reality. If we use the gift of marriage, - the fruits of the garden - for their inherent purposes, namely the procreation of life, the cultivation of virtue, and the enjoyment of sensual pleasure, we take hold of the delights for which the labors of marriage are made and intended. But if married life becomes merely the opportunity for the little foxes, then the glorious design of the garden breaks down. There is no greater problem in our present culture, secular or religious, than the decline of marriage.

There are many kinds of "little foxes," but three in particular, greed, ambition, and lust can grow up to a menacing stature.

Greed threatens the very foundation of marriage, namely the procreation of life. This is so both for the healthy married couple themselves, and for their family. Greed can preoccupy time, energy, and heart.

The marriage vow defends the union of husband and wife against a standard of greed when the promise is made "for better for worse, for richer for poorer." Financial success is not the primary substance and goal of marriage. Rather the substance of Holy Matrimony is the commitment of love, a noble and sanctified union of wills, which lives and grows through the vicissitudes and changes of this mortal life. Children are a necessary part of the growth of this union; they are causes of selflessness and unanticipated joy. And there is no such thing as selflessness and joy apart from time and energy, and heart. Contentment of spirit cannot be found in money, or the presumptions of its power, but in an integrity of affection that will not yield to the deceptive illusion of avarice.

Ambition is similar to greed but has this difference. Instead of seeking money as the favored object, ambition seeks worldly praise and earthly honors outside marriage.

Ambition assaults the virtues of marriage. Humility and the intention to honor and cherish the other are the true beginning of a real marriage. What matters is the esteem and care of the beloved. The opinions of the world attempt to seduce the proper place of honor from the bond of matrimony, and to replace it with titles and offices and fame. Every spouse intuitively immediately when the job usurps the honor of the beloved. Addiction to ambition is just as real as addiction to money and equally adulterous in effect.

Lust is sensual blasphemy against marriage. Lust mimics the bond of union and supposes the appetite, or the fantasy of romanticist excitement, to be the ultimate fulfillment of the soul.

Lust threatens the very union of marriage itself, the will "to have and to hold from this day forward." In one form this is simply appetite, the indiscriminate titillation of the flesh beyond the spouse for whom such pleasure is reserved. In another more illusory form lust is the seeming exhilaration that one finds in the notion that to leave all behind and to pursue another is the final and only chance at human happiness. The cruel irony here, of course, is that this utter abandonment of a spouse for the romanticist ideal, the ideal of leaving all and cleaving to the one, was the definition and intention for the original marriage. On the other hand, love never fails to see and to possess the unique and eternal quality of beauty in the beloved.

There are many little foxes that plaque the garden of marriage, but those of greed, ambition, and lust often grow large and wreak total destruction. Marriage is a gift of creation, which in its particular expression in all marriages suffers temptation and in some way falls. Next we should look at how Holy Matrimony is also a way of redemption.

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