

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

What's Threatening Marriage?

I think that most people would claim to support the ideal of marriage, and this still appears to be the case outside America, certain Scandinavian countries, and (of all places) *Belgium*, where the failure-rate for marriages is now 50%. So in those countries the jury is hovering in the balance. We in Britain still find 66% of marriages tolerable-to-wonderful. So what has brought about the great increase in marital breakdown - it is still a growing phenomenon - and can we reverse the trend?

Are people getting slipshod?

Some think we're dealing with a wholesale loss of moral values. In my opinion we aren't. I don't think people are treating marriage as a trivial reality; if anything, they're only *too* idealistic about it. Young people are remarkable today for their starry eyes, their hope that the world can be very wonderful, and indeed their willingness to give. But their belief in love has to contend with formidable alternatives. The simplicity and plainness that used to characterize early married life seems to have receded in favour of something much more dramatic.

Money

Economics come into the picture very powerfully. Think of the couple of 1950, marrying, perhaps finding a council-house, setting up their home. Not a lot of hire-purchase, and a certain austerity in the appointments, not a little anxiety, and a readiness to enjoy together the gradual process of building a home. That was the atmosphere into which I was born, and I remember with affection the strange way in which my parents conspired in advance about spending money, and then appeared with a surprising record-player or new curtains. "We hadn't got much, but we were happy" is a phrase that comes to mind. How those houses would contrast with the level of comfort *necessary* in 1997! And how clearly the commercial world has infiltrated the soul of our society!

Contentment

Was that earlier contentment something despicable, the imposition of a meaner, less bountiful world? Or is the snowstorm of desires and requirements that afflict us today the real

imposition - devastating the human heart with treadmill programmes of acquisition, without whose satisfaction life cannot reasonably proceed? It seems to me that the development of our commercial value - spending- and earning-power, and the rest - has been at the expense of our contentment. People have been sold the idea that *effective ambition* is the great human quality, the only thing which will deserve, or deliver, reward. I think this is not only untrue, but evil as well. We still have that precious longing for happiness, but we can't easily distinguish it from greed, which destroys all hope of joy.

How Can We Help?

To work, as I do, among the survivors of collapsed marriages, is a sad way to spend your days. Picking your way through the ruins of so much hope is devastating. Could not the rediscovery of joy in each other - which is what we want to happen - be in proportion to our refusal of the trap of materialism? It isn't central heating that makes a warm home, but the fact that people are happy to have each other. That's a *spiritual* quality, irreplaceable by anything else. I think the exhausted faces and frozen hearts which characterize the last days of this century are signs of spiritual disease. They cry out for spiritual medicine. Come Holy Spirit, kindle in us the fire of your love!

Philip