

A holy mystery

'We must rediscover the mystery of the priesthood.' The comment came from a wise, elderly priest. His concern was nothing to do with reinstating clerical privileges of the past. His concern was that in some quarters of the church we have so over-reacted to clericalist tendencies that we have reduced the priest to a middle-management employee and lost a healthy sense of awe for the sacramental presence of the priest.

He then added rather pointedly that we must also discover the mystery of marriage. 'At least we once had a sense of awe for the priesthood,' was his comment. 'We've never had that sense of awe for marriage.'

A sobering statement. Can this be true? Is it true that, despite all church rhetoric to the contrary, we do not readily acknowledge the sacred mystery enveloping our married couples? There are warning signs: Like the fact that we usually refer to married people as 'lay people' (i.e. non-clergy) rather than by the name of their unique sacrament. (That's like referring to priests as 'singles' rather than naming their unique sacrament.) Yes, we talk a lot about 'family' in the church, but we're usually talking about parenting rather than the spousal relationship. When we encourage married people to pray we have in mind individual prayer (inspired by the church's rich monastic tradition) rather than a marital spirituality

that specifically addresses the husband-wife union including their life of sexual intimacy. And how many saintly married couples have been beatified or canonized precisely because of their spousal relationship? Until very recently, not one.

That awe for marriage. My mind went to the story of Cathy, a married woman with a heightened sense of the sanctity of marriage. Cathy was driving along one Saturday afternoon and caught sight of a bride and groom exiting the front doors of a church amidst the cheers of family and friends. Instinctively she caught her breath and made the sign of the cross, so struck was she by the beauty of the scene: God's love incarnate in the union of this man and this woman.

We might think of this as exaggerated piety. We might conjure up a picture of this woman based on stereotypes. (Believe me, if you met Cathy she would explode any stereotypes!) But the point is this: Cathy's response captures a reverence which we can accept or at least entertain the thought of with regard to every other sacrament. Why not marriage?

What prevents us from showing reverence for married couples? For one thing, marriage is something very commonplace; therefore we think of it as so ordinary. Also, it has traditionally been seen as a 'woman's thing', and therefore has escaped the attention of the male hierarchy. (There are notable exceptions such as Pope John Paul II's

practice of constantly drawing attention to the husband-wife relationship.)

Marriage is also incredibly scary. It addresses human beings at their most intimate core. It's about sex for goodness sake! Perhaps that's why the institutional church shies away from addressing it in practical ways. Perhaps that's why so many married people would prefer to discuss the renewal of the church in terms of how priests have to change rather than having to address the deep relational challenges in their own marital lives. Perhaps that's why the topic can strike painful chords in people who are not married, or who were married once and whose dreams have died.

Marriage is a mystery of beauty. It is extraordinary. Sacred. Spine-tinglingly precious. An awesome challenge. Our awe must be directed not at some abstract notion of marriage, but towards every married couple who, however faultingly, strives to live this calling with integrity and passion. •

