

Henri Caffarel, prophète pour notre temps
Colloque International – 8 & 9 Décembre 2017

INSPIRED BY JOSEPH AND MARY

Véronique et Thierry Caspar-Fille-Lambie

Foreword

When the first Teams were created before the War and in the period right after the War, they did not have a name, because they were seeking above all to find their form and to live. When Father Caffarel realised that they were being called “Caffarel Groups” or “C Teams,” he decided, in 1947, to copy Péguy’s gesture and gathered his children in his arms and placed them in the Virgin’s arms.

In 1954, in Lourdes, on the Feast of Pentecost, 850 Teams ratified Father Caffarel’s initiative by pronouncing the consecration of the Teams of Our Lady, a consecration that for each of them was both a prayer and a commitment:

Unreservedly and unconditionally, we give you our Movement and all the couples that make it up, as a homage of love and trust. It belongs to you. You have the complete disposition of it for the glory of your Son. All the couples in our Teams open themselves to you, Mary: remain with us. Teach us about your Son. Teach us to love him and to imitate him.

We are going to try and see what true devotion to Mary meant to Father Caffarel and how his meditation on Joseph and Mary, transcribed in a special issue of *L’Anneau d’Or*, and then reprinted in the book, *Prends chez toi Marie ton épouse (Take Mary as your Wife)*, sheds important light on the meaning of Christian marriage.

MARY

From Eve to Mary : saying ‘Yes’ to God ¹

“Two figures culminate: Eve and Mary. The former’s act diverted the course of history from its very beginnings. A ‘yes’ spoken to God by the latter determined humanity’s salvation,”² wrote Father Caffarel, who added that we had to move beyond the stereotype that contrasts Eve with Mary. “Adam and Eve, exiled from happiness, took with them this promise. It became their hope (...) when they were in distress.” And millennia would pass before this promise could be answered, because God was not in a hurry. He respected the laws of maturation. “Humanity was raised, under the impulse of that powerful ferment that is divine grace, towards more purity, towards more love, towards more holiness, towards Mary.”³

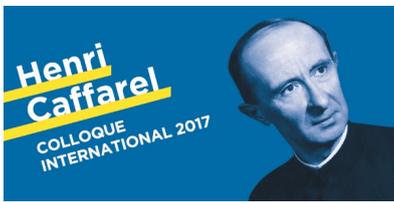
Mary said ‘yes’ to divine will, which Adam and Eve refused. Mary brought humanity with her. She converted humanity to God. Eve’s NO had expelled God, Mary’s YES called him and welcomed him. Mary was the new Eve. She was the true mother of the living and of all those who live with “*the life of God.*” We will see how her triple vocation of virgin, spouse and mother enabled the covenant of Love between God and humanity⁴

¹ *L’Anneau d’Or*, “D’Eve à Marie ou le destin de la femme” (From Eve to Mary or the Destiny of the Woman), n° 57-58, May-August 1954.

² *L’Anneau d’Or*, *ibid.*, p. 231.

³ *L’Anneau d’Or*, *ibid.*, p. 232.

⁴ *L’Anneau d’Or*, *ibid.*, p. 180.



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God's Eternal Plan

Joseph and Mary's marriage was inscribed in God's eternal thinking, because at the heart of this thinking was Jesus and inseparably the home in Nazareth, for the divine plan needed the help of a couple. God wanted his son to be made man by being born of a woman and not only by taking on the appearance of humanity.

God wanted Mary to be a virgin, mother and spouse.

Mary had to be a Virgin, so that God's all-powerful love and man's powerlessness to save himself be able to transpire⁵. This divine pedagogy had already been implemented in the Old Testament when God intervened when man was hounded by the impossible: think of, amongst others, Abraham and Sarah who conceived at the age of 100. Nothing is impossible for God. Mary's virginity, a sign of complete allegiance to God, is required so that the salvation of the world is obviously God's initiative.

Mary had to be a Mother, because God wanted his Son to receive his human nature from a woman's body with flesh 'in the likeness of sinful flesh' (Rm 8:3), certainly pure, but subject to tiredness, hunger, thirst, suffering and death. Since the Son of God was to be truly human, humanity would not be saved from outside, but, in Jesus, it would die on the cross and be resurrected at Easter.

Mary had to be a Wife. In order to be a mother, she had to be an accomplished wife. Her maternal love was the overflowing on to the child of the love she had received from Joseph. It is the same thing for Joseph and his paternal love. The child was the fruit, witness, guest of this conjugal love. If Jesus had been deprived of a father he would not have been fully man.

The achievement of God's plan

- Mary's Virginity, consecrated to God

We know little about Mary's childhood, but one thing is sure and is confirmed by Scripture: Mary dedicated her virginity to God.

If Mary was predestined by God and preserved from sin, it was thanks to her journeying in prayer that she progressed in love, a Love of an absolute purity. She belongs to the "anawims," (the poor and lowly ones, Ps 37:11) a small group of unremarkable, powerless Jews, who were the poor, humble and hungry for God. It was thus that, in meditating the word of God and under the action of the Holy Spirit, she decided to dedicate her virginity to God, who preferred the interior sacrifice of a pure and loving heart to holocausts, while for the Israelites, the best way of serving God was through maternity. She gave up thus the fecundity and opportunity to bear the Messiah, with the aim of belonging even more to God.

With this gift or offering, Mary committed all of humanity. This consecrated virginity was "*a reserve of purity that the entire faithful benefitted from.*"⁶

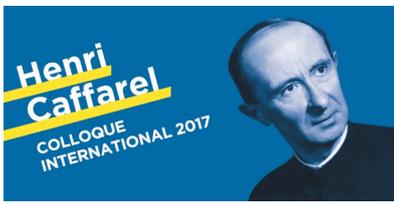
- Mary's Decision to Live out her Virginity in Marriage⁷

In Israel, there was no solution other than marriage to live out her virginity and dedication to God. God, who had chosen Mary amongst all women, had chosen for her amongst all men a husband whose grace had been formed over a long time. Joseph was young, of royal blood (of the house of David), although of modest condition, a carpenter, knowing the price of things and of time, able to meet all the villagers in his

⁵ Henri CAFFAREL, *Prends chez toi Marie ton épouse*, Parole et Silence, 2006, p. 123-124.

⁶ *L'Anneau d'Or*, « D'Eve à Marie ou le destin de la femme », n° 57-58, mai-août 1954, p. 234

⁷ Henri CAFFAREL, *op. cit.*, p. 20-24, 27-41.



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workshop; he too was part of the “anawims” and was a just, humble man dedicated to God with complete confidence in Him.

But Mary’s decision to become involved in married life was not just dictated by the customs of the times. It was God who awakened in each of them the love of the other. Therefore, they went from divine love to human love, unlike other human couples. Hence, they experienced the fullness of the radiance of a young love in a state of grace. When Joseph came to ask Mary’s hand in marriage, she confided in him that she was destined to the Lord. There followed moments of prayer and meditation and Joseph understood that if he married Mary, he too would remain a virgin and that he would safeguard Mary’s virginity. It was the highest proof of love that he could have had for Mary.

Their marriage was a true one, therefore, where they gave themselves to each other and in which they experienced the joy of now being together to love God, to pray to Him and to give themselves to Him. Even if they renounced carnal pleasure, they experienced the sweetness of the other’s physical presence, as well as the communion of gazes and hearts. The sensitive approach, as sweet as it was pure with them, is one of the paths that led them towards the one who revealed himself, gave himself, who called them by revealing them, by giving them, by calling them one to the other. They sensed that their union belonged to a plan, still mysterious, where their “conjugal being” was going to be as necessary as their “virginal being.” They loved each other with an agape love whose source was in God.

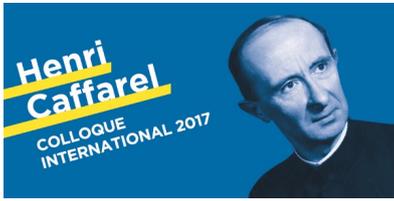
When the angel appeared to Mary, she was attending to her everyday duties in the simplicity of her daily life. Her heart was completely given up to God, but also to that beautiful young man to whom she was already engaged.

The solemnity of the angel’s words overwhelmed her. She understood that the huge messianic hope was going to be accomplished through her. In order to commit more lucidly to God’s plan and to align her intelligence with the consent of her will, she asked, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” because she wanted to understand how, being a mother, she could maintain her virginity and what was to be the role of her fiancé whom she loved. Even if the angel did not enlighten her completely, in faith, she pronounced these words that God—and all of humanity—were waiting for, “*Behold the handmaid of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.*”

In adoration, she realised that this virginity and renunciation of maternity that she had gifted to God were returned to her a hundredfold. And her Son would be the Messiah... Joseph perceived the transformation that this understanding generated in her. Undoubtedly, Mary told him of the angel’s visit and Joseph praised the Lord for the gift of the Messiah, felt admiration for Mary, the Ark of flesh where the future Messiah was to lie. But he also had the sacred hindsight of someone who realised his unworthiness before such a mystery. What place could he have, what role could he play? Did their marriage have meaning if God alone took the lead? He suffered and considered not marrying Mary in order not to usurp the title of father, despite the fact that life with her was only joy and light in this project of living together for God.

The angel’s appearance in a dream enabled him to understand that their marriage did indeed belong to God’s plan. “*Take Mary as your wife.*” He would be the Messiah’s earthly father and it would be him who would tie Jesus to the line of David, and would gift him the prophetic name of Jesus, “*God saves.*”

In this second annunciation, divine power gave their marriage the missing dimension, the fecundity that simultaneously accomplished their gift to God and their mission amongst God’s people.



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MARY AND THE TEAMS OF OUR LADY

Father Caffarel's Initial Intention.⁸

He wished to give a spiritual guide to these couples who were seeking Christ, who wanted to imitate and serve him. And in this, there was no one better than the Virgin. Using Charles Péguy (French poet, 1873-1914) as inspiration, Father Caffarel wished that each couple give themselves up to the all-powerful tenderness of the Virgin and that each couple feel the same trust and security that children feel when their mother is there. Hearts will be kept in humility and fraternal love will reign, because this is always the case when a mother is in the midst of her children.

Thus, Father Caffarel wished for the Teams to be protected from intellectualism and a critical spirit, a protection that he felt to be one of the primary benefits of a Christian's closeness to the Virgin. Hearts will be kept in humility and fraternal love will reign, because the mother is amongst her children and the source of joy will never run dry, because the cause of our joy will be in our midst.

For Father Caffarel, devotion to Mary was not optional. For as soon as we see her face to face, we realise that we can no longer do without her, just like God could not do without her to accomplish his plan. He wanted his son to be born of Mary, of her flesh certainly, but above all of her love. Jesus and Mary represent the most perfect Union.

Father Caffarel was aware that some Catholics would deem this devotion a bit too sentimental and would not understand why so much importance was being given to the Virgin. But he was convinced that the experience of closeness to the Virgin could change a life, as and from the moment she became our Mother.

Mary's YES and Christian Spouses' YES

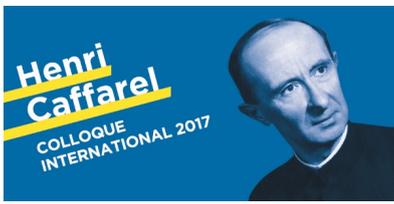
*"The Virgin Mary's whole life, committed by the YES of the Annunciation, was a continual ascension of Love."*⁹ In her, Christian couples learn to say "YES," for the first time, for their whole life. This YES is the soul of their whole life. It is in Mary that they learn, day after day, to repeat and to experience every day, the first day's YES.

Love is only true if it perseveres and grows. It becomes purer and more absolute. Its perfection is not in the elation of that YES of the first days, but in the fullness burdened by its fruits. At the eve of a life of fidelity, the YES of old age express the perfect consent between two beings to each other. This YES at the end of their days is more serious, it is a word from the heart that the noise of words frightens. *"Blessed are two friends who love each other enough to be quiet together in a country that knows how to be quiet."* (Péguy) The Virgin will teach the spouses to say YES, but she will first reveal to them that no one can say yes to the other person if they have not already said YES to God. It is a question of God's very own Love going through his heart to join another heart.

This YES said to another person will renew the assent to God. Giving oneself to one's spouse means giving oneself to God and, at the same time, transmitting to the person one loves, the graces that one has received from God for them. Love comes from God, it goes to God and can only be perfectly experienced in God. We cannot love each other away from God and it is impossible for the spouses to elude the divine presence. This presence represents the spouses' joy, who know that they have it for always. When the divine presence intimidates them, the close and tender presence of Mary reassures them.

⁸ *Lettre Mensuelle des Équipes Notre-Dame* (Monthly Letter of the Teams of Our Lady), May 1949.

⁹ *L'Anneau d'Or*, « Le mystère de l'amour » (The Mystery of Love), n° 2-3-4, 1945, p. 141-144.



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The Christian Couple's YES

After the spouses' YES, Father Caffarel speaks of the couple's YES. It is important to recall this notion of couple, the heart of which "*emerges from the two hearts that have given themselves to each other.*" This couple's heart must agree to God and give itself to him; this is the couple's YES.

By saying YES to God, the couple calls upon this YES of God's that will become source of life for the couple. Because the couple said YES, life is in it and will make the earth fruitful. This mystery is very close to the Annunciation's. The Virgin gave birth to the Head, the couple gives birth to the members.

And Father Caffarel also reminded us that parents do not only convey natural life. But it is together, and very humbly, that they come and request the divine life that their human paternity cannot give.

THE COUPLE FORMED BY MARY AND JOSEPH

Before seeing how the couple formed by Mary and Joseph can be an example for Christian couples, let us see how this marriage was viewed in the Church.

A Perfect Marriage of Love

During the early, first centuries, theological reflection scarcely considered Mary and Joseph's marriage, but rather concentrated on Mary's virginity, before and afterwards, and that was challenged by some. It was only centuries later that they came back to the couple from Nazareth, when the question of the indissolubility of marriage emerged in an acute manner. The contractual thesis opposed the carnal thesis. Consent was the basis of marriage some said, in opposition to those who considered that "consummation" was. The former wanted to make Mary and Joseph's marriage the example of a true marriage, while the latter held on to a traditional and unquestionable teaching: marriage is the union of Christ and the Church. Progressively, a group of other theologians dug deeper and established that the union of souls in charity was also a symbol of the union of Christ and his Church, and that the carnal union was merely an unnecessary expression of this essential reality of the consent and union of spirits. Thus, reference to Mary and Joseph's marriage brought them to seek the true notion of Christian marriage in order to, finally, recognise it as one of the seven sacraments.

An Example for Christian Couples¹⁰

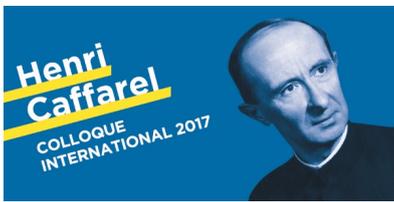
The marriage of two baptised people is the union of two new beings, endowed with a new heart, living a new life and identified with Christ. It is one of the sacraments of the new Covenant. The Christian individual has Christ as a model and Saint Paul gives the model of Christ's love for his Church to the union of a man and a woman.¹¹ The couple formed by Mary and Joseph is a bridging-model for our couples and God gives us his grace so that we can try to get closer to it.

In this model, the love of God, a life of prayer, mutual tenderness, fidelity, devotion to their child, openness to the unfortunate... are present; all these things that we can experience (albeit imperfectly) in our couples.

But paradoxically, what is the most enlightening for a Christian couple in the couple formed by Mary and Joseph is what makes their marriage an exceptional union: this virginity to which they both committed, the fact of having as their child the Son of God and Jesus' presence in their home. Let us see how each of these points can enlighten us.

¹⁰ Henri CAFFAREL, *op. cit.*, p. 153-156.

¹¹ Ephesians 5:21-23.



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- **Virginity and love¹²**

Their Virginity as Abstention from Carnal Pleasure

“If the essence of marriage resides, not in the physical giving, but in the will for mutual belonging, in the union of people as spirits, it is at this level that man and woman will find the fullness to which their love aspires.”¹³ It is therefore vital to set up a dialogue, exchange, a union at this level first. If the flesh has the upper hand, the marriage will be vulnerable and unstable. However, physical pleasure is important to sustain and deepen the union of hearts, and to give life to children. Sexuality therefore does not play the leading role in the implementation of the conjugal community. Sexual life contains the risk of stalemate.

We are called to chastity, which is not continence, but is a control of the flesh and an integration and undertaking of sexual dynamism. When the latter is seized by the spirit and filled with charity, it contributes to the spiritual development of the person. Let us educate our bodies so that they become ever more a more perfect means of knowledge, expression, communion through gazes, words, smiles, an outstretched hand...

Their Virginity as the Will to Belong to God

Only God is the absolute of love that every man thirsts for. God was everything for Mary and for Joseph from their youth onwards. The reason behind each of their acts was to please to God. What availability of their hearts remained for their marriage? None, if by “availability” we mean the capacity of giving oneself when one wants to whom one wants. But total, if this “availability” means the capacity to do what God wants!

Loving the other person is not then loving “alongside” God, but firstly loving God. We will then love the other person for the love of God, in God and will not love him therefore less, but better because we will avail of the strength of the love of God. We receive the other person from the Lord’s hands and we do not jealously close our arms around this gift, but transform it immediately in to an offering.

It is not often that at 20 years old, couples, having committed to each other, understand that they have to give themselves up totally to God. The love of charity continuing to grow, one day will come when they will be able to hear this surprising call to give themselves to God without sharing. This second call can be experienced within conjugal life. This *“Come, follow me”* is addressed to us too, without us having to leave husband, wife or children! This virginity, unreserved gift to Christ, does not distance us from those with whom we live, on the contrary. *“You never frustrate those you love when you give yourself to God.”¹⁴*

If, just like Mary and Joseph, we love each other with charity, the poison of “envy” will be gradually eliminated and admiration and compassion, strength and gentleness, generosity and humility, expectation and patience will grow. Joseph and Mary invite us to the integration and deep conversion of the carnal dynamism that will then express this love of charity lovingly, tenderly, sincerely and chastely.

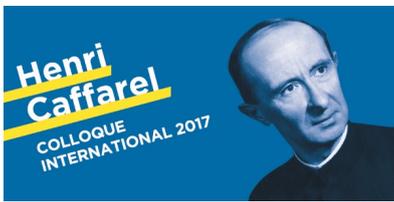
- **A Spiritual Fecundity**

We are called to something quite different than merely increasing the human species. Because a new fecundity corresponds with our marriage-sacrament. We beget sons of man through their birth, but give birth to beings whom Christ wants as his brothers. God, if we entrust them to him, will beget our children to His life through baptism, and he delegates their education to us. Our mission is to raise God’s children and the example of the Nazareth couple shows us that, the more our union is open to love and to God’s grace, the more God will work through us to make the life of his Son blossom in our children.

¹² Henri CAFFAREL, *op. cit.*, p. 157-163.

¹³ Henri CAFFAREL, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

¹⁴ Henri CAFFAREL, *op. cit.*, p. 162.



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There was nothing possessive in Mary and Joseph's love for Jesus, because they knew he was the Son of Another. Similarly, in a Christian couple, our love cannot be possessive because our child is the Son of Another since their baptism and we need to ensure the blossoming and fulfilment of the new man in them. We are in God's service with the child and ought to help this child realise their personal vocation, even if God's ways appear baffling to us.

God allows parents, who present poor and humble hearts to him, ones that accept and welcome his gifts and impulses, to participate in his love as a Father: through their love for their child, it is His love that is passed on to the child, through their authority His authority, through their devotion, His Providence.

Like every Christian couple, couples who cannot have children must know that their destiny is to grow and increase the Body of Christ. Through prayer and the Eucharist, they can understand how God wishes to see them cooperate in the growth of the mystical Body. From this poverty and trust in God could be born a miracle child or an invitation to adopt children, or in any case a certain spiritual fecundity.

Let us help the Kingdom of God grow in our couples, just as it grew in the Holy Family during the 30 years of Jesus' hidden life.

A Christian Mystery¹⁵

The life of the Holy Family could have appeared to be very ordinary to their contemporaries and yet a great mystery was taking place there: God was living there! For Mary and Joseph, they needed the eyes of faith to see the presence the thrice holy God in their little child playing before them...

In our homes, we experience this same mystery since Christ said, *"When two or three are united in my Name, I am there in their midst."* (Mt 18:20) What does our faith say about this?

Where the Son is, the Father also is. As in the Nazareth home, the dialogue of eternal love between the Son and the Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, is experienced in our Christian homes. The Son came into our world to "filialise" the universe, to introduce all beings into his dual attitude of openness to the effusion of the Father's love and of joyful and bouncing gratitude to Him.

Just as he did in the Nazareth home, he wants to bind himself to each of us, but also to each of our couples, then to all of our families since they are small mystical bodies. In doing this he unites our families. In Nazareth, Jesus was physically present. In our families, we receive His Spirit through prayer, asceticism and attending the sacraments. In our home, the "ecclesiola," "little church," will fructify the grace they distribute. Gazes, hearts, the life of all will be orientated towards the Father, just as they were in Mary and Joseph's home.

- A Divine Pedagogy¹⁶

The Nazareth home, where the steadfast elements of God's pedagogy were revealed, is thereby a model for us.

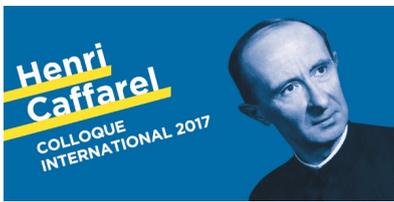
-God wants his children, during their earthly stay, to be submissive to the laws of society. Like Joseph and Mary, we are called to work in the service of our brothers and to be a means to reach God. Like them, we are called to be loyal towards the laws of society and the religious laws.

-God calls us to be free in relation to the world:

"Leave" Nazareth for Bethlehem, "leave" Bethlehem for Egypt. We are invited not to become too settled materially nor spiritually. Let us not be captivated by any goods, master, or worldly power...

¹⁵ Henri CAFFAREL, *op. cit.*, p. 168-171.

¹⁶ Henri CAFFAREL, *op. cit.*, p. 171-175.



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-Through material and moral ordeals, Joseph and Mary experienced the heartbreak of the soul that trusts but ignores the meaning of what is happening to it and is rattled by it. They can help us in such circumstances to see the intervention of God-the educator's love.

-We will be protected by God as they were, because God only allows evil to attack his children if this evil is the occasion for them to grow in love. Even when events seem incomprehensible or painful, we believe that *"all things work together for good to those who love God,"* (Rm 8:28) If evil risks corrupting us or setting us against the mission we have to accomplish, God shields us, just like when the Lord warned Joseph to leave for Egypt because the hour had not yet come for his Son to spill his blood.

-As Mary and Joseph's story shows, God fulfils those who prefer him above all other things. God only asks to give to us a hundredfold if we do not get bogged down in pleasure and if we do not prefer the joys of the earth to the happiness of God.

Mary and Joseph's couple was an island of happiness and that pleased God.

Conclusion

We wanted to share with you quite simply what we received, more than 20 years ago, in a Team of Our Lady when we studied Father Caffarel's book, *"Prends chez toi Marie ton épouse."* On the outside cover, there was a Byzantine-style icon showing Mary and Joseph tenderly embracing. As Father Caffarel said in the note to the reader, *"They are young and beautiful. Their gesture of mutual tenderness—what momentum, what modesty, what sensitivity—transcribes their love that is simultaneously conjugal and virginal, founded on God's call."* This was a revelation for us, because this couple had never been presented to us as an example. Joseph, an old man, did not particularly make us want to identify with the couple he formed with Mary. As much as we were used to taking refuge in Mary's arms and to praying to Joseph sometimes in the month of March, the idea of praying as a couple to Mary and Joseph just was something that we had never thought of. Upon reflection, we realised that we had not really understood God's true plan. His son was to be born of a woman, but was to be entrusted to the love of a couple, entirely turned towards God. This is what we wanted to share with you by ending with an excerpt from what Pope Paul VI said to the Teams of Our Lady on May 4th, 1970. *"The Saviour began the work of salvation with this virginal and holy union where his all-powerful desire to purify and sanctify the family, that sanctuary of love and that cradle of life, is revealed."*