



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 5 September 1979

The Unity and Indissolubility of Marriage For some time now preparations have been going on for the next ordinary assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which will take place in Rome in autumn of next year. The theme of the Synod, "The role of the Christian family," concentrates our attention on this community of human and Christian life, which has been fundamental from the beginning. The Lord Jesus used precisely this expression "from the beginning" in the talk about marriage, reported in the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Mark. We wish to raise the question what this word "beginning" means. We also wish to clarify why Christ referred to the "beginning" on that occasion and, therefore, we propose a more precise analysis of the relative text of Holy Scripture. During the talk with the Pharisees, who asked him the question about the indissolubility of marriage, Jesus Christ referred twice to the "beginning." The talk took place in the following way: "And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, 'Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?' He answered, 'Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.' They said to him, 'Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?' He said to them, 'For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so'" (*Mt* 19:3ff., cf. also *Mk* 10:2ff.). Christ did not accept the discussion at the level at which his interlocutors tried to introduce it. In a certain sense he did not approve of the dimension that they tried to give the problem. He avoided getting caught up in juridico-casuistical controversies. On the contrary, he referred twice to "the beginning." Acting in this way, he made a clear reference to the relative words in Genesis, which his interlocutors too knew by heart. From those words of the ancient revelation, Christ drew the conclusion and the talk ended. Therefore, "the beginning" means that which Genesis speaks about. Christ quoted Genesis 1:27 in summary form: "In the beginning the Creator made them male and female." The original passage reads textually as follows: "God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Subsequently, the Master referred to Genesis 2:24: "Therefore, a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh." Quoting these words almost in full, Christ gave them an even more explicit normative meaning (since it could be supported that in Genesis they express *de facto* statements:

"leaves...cleaves...they become one flesh"). The normative meaning is plausible since Christ did not confine himself only to the quotation itself, but added: "So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder." That "let not man put asunder" is decisive. In the light of these words of Christ, Genesis 2:24 sets forth the principle of the unity and indissolubility of marriage as the very content of the Word of God, expressed in the most ancient revelation. It could be maintained at this point that the problem is exhausted, that Jesus Christ's words confirm the eternal law formulated and set up by God from "the beginning" as the creation of man. It might also seem that the Master, confirming this original law of the Creator, did nothing but establish exclusively his own normative meaning, referring to the authority itself of the first Legislator. However, that significant expression "from the beginning," repeated twice, clearly induced his interlocutors to reflect on the way in which man was formed in the mystery of creation, precisely as "male and female," in order to understand correctly the normative sense of the words of Genesis. This is no less valid for the people of today than for those of that time. Therefore, in the present study, considering all this, we must put ourselves precisely in the position of Christ's interlocutors today. During the following Wednesday reflections at the general audiences, we will try, as Christ's interlocutors today, to dwell at greater length on St. Matthew's words (19:3ff.). To respond to the indication, inserted in them by Christ, we will try to penetrate toward that "beginning," to which he referred in such a significant way. Thus we will follow from a distance the great work which participants in the forthcoming Synod of Bishops are undertaking on this subject just now. Together with them, numerous groups of pastors and laymen are taking part in it, feeling especially responsible with regard to the role which Christ assigned to marriage and the Christian family, the role that he has always given, and still gives in our age, in the modern world. The cycle of reflections we are beginning today, with the intention of continuing it during the following Wednesday meetings, also has the purpose, among other things, of accompanying from afar the work of preparation for the Synod. However, it will not touch its subject directly, but will turn our attention to the deep roots from which this subject springs.