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Marriage: Commitment or Experiment?

by

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Skepticism About Binding Commitments?

There has been no period in history without its own particular crises. One of the greatest of the present day, it seems to me, as well as one of the most peculiar, is the growing rift between men and women. The relationship between the sexes is marked more and more by suspicion and tension, division and even antagonism. The idea that man and woman are somehow made for each other and made for union of a particular type called marriage - an idea that has come down the centuries - is under threat. Unions still occur or are attempted - in some marital or quasi-marital form - but they tend not to last.

People, at least in Western countries, have become deeply skeptical about a permanent husband-wife relationship. They are no longer convinced that it is worth making and can be stuck to. This loss of faith in marriage, with the fundamental pessimism it denotes about the possibilities of finding a happy and lasting love in life, implies a major crisis for humanity.

Catholics too, in ever larger numbers, are coming to think that marriage-open-to-divorce is better than marriage-bound-to-indissolubility: a situation that must give us pause. In theological terms, this could be seen as a temptation against faith, since indissolubility is a defined dogma (Denz., 1807). As such, it is no small temptation. Yet its possible occurrence should come as less of a surprise when we recall the reaction provoked by Jesus when he insisted that according to the original divine plan, the marriage bond is unbreakable: if things are so, his very Apostles felt, then it is better not to marry (Mt 19, 10). But of course they were wrong. Things are so: and it is still good - a great good - to marry.

Current misgivings about the value of indissolubility have no less serious anthropological implications, reflected in the idea that faithfulness to a lasting commitment, however freely undertaken, is not reasonably to be expected; it is something beyond human nature and people are not capable of it. As this idea spreads, it creates a mindset hostile to any type of permanent commitment: the priesthood and religious life included, as well as marriage.

The idea that "indissolubility is a bad thing" - for which there must be a way out

- has effects on both people and pastors. Those contemplating marriage approach it less seriously; and when they do marry, strive less to keep their marriage going later on as it becomes subject to stress. For their part, pastors and counselors may tend to prepare couples less in pre-marriage instruction for the difficulties they are going to meet, and may not be sufficiently positive and supportive with couples who are going through the actual experience of difficulty. We have a real problem on our hands when the "solution" being offered for difficult marital situations is not "try to make a go of it, pray, rely on grace", but more and more: "seek a way out, a 'good faith' solution, an annulment. . ." Things will continue to deteriorate unless we can achieve a re-evaluation of married indissolubility. This has to be a central point of pastoral reflection and responsibility, especially in the formation of priests and counselors.

Christian and Secular Anthropology

Vatican II sought to offer a renewed vision of marriage, of marital love and commitment. How is it that this renewed vision seems so infrequently to have been translated into practice? One reason, I feel, is that much post-conciliar reflection on marriage has not always grasped the Christian anthropology which is a key to conciliar thinking about human realities, especially as applied to the marital covenant. The result is that much recent understanding and presentation of marriage has been largely, though no doubt unconsciously, colored by the anthropology dominant in our secular world.

The "secular anthropology" I refer to is an individualistic view of man, which sees the key to human fulfillment in self: self-identification, self-assertion, self-concern . . . The current crisis about indissolubility - the tendency to look on it as an "anti-value" - finds much of its explanation in this individualism, present outside and inside the Church. Individualism fosters a fundamentally self-centered approach to marriage, seeking to get from it rather than being prepared to give in it: will this - this union, this liaison, this arrangement - make *me* happy?

Then marriage becomes at best a tentative agreement between two individuals, each inspired by self-interest, rather than a shared endeavor where a couple want to build together a home for each other and for their children.

Married Personalism

By the distinctive anthropology of Vatican II, I mean that Christian personalism which is so present in conciliar thinking, especially in *Gaudium et Spes*. Developed in great power by Pope John Paul II, it is fundamental to a deeper human understanding of Christian life and of marriage in particular.

The essence of true personalism is expressed in *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24: "man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself". We can only "realize" or fulfill our self, by giving our self. Here is a gospel program of life in direct contrast with the prescription for living so commonly offered by contemporary psychology: seek self, find self, identify self, care for self, hold on to self, don't let go of yourself.

Marriage represents the most concrete natural type of self-giving for which man and woman are made. As *Gaudium et Spes* also says: the "partnership of man and woman constitutes the first form of communion between persons" (no. 12). Major texts of the magisterium have continued to expound marriage in a personalist light¹. Strikingly enough, the revision of the Church's law has contributed notably to the personalist analysis of marriage. Two canons in the 1983 Code of Canon Law merit special attention.

Canon 1057 says, "Matrimonial consent is an act of the will by which a man and a woman, through an irrevocable covenant, mutually give and accept each other in order to establish a marriage". The very object of conjugal consent is thus presented in terms of mutual self-donation - in most striking contrast with the "ius in corpus" phrase with which the 1917 Code expressed the same object². The man gives self as man and husband, the woman as woman and wife; and each receives the other as spouse. One wonders if the scope and power - the beauty and the demands - of this new formula have been fully appreciated, especially in the fields of seminary training, marriage counselling, and Tribunal work on marriage cases.

Married personalism particularly characterizes another remarkable canon, c. 1055, above all when it speaks of the *ends* of marriage. "The matrimonial covenant . . . is by its nature ordered to the good of the spouses and to the procreation and education of offspring"³. To my mind there is something extraordinarily significant in this modern magisterial choice of the term "good of the spouses" to express one of the ends of marriage. It should be stressed that it is not presented as a personalist end, *in contrast with* the institutional end - which would be procreation. The good of the spouses is equally an institutional end, just as much as procreation. This is evident from the dual account given by Genesis of the creation of man and woman. The first account - "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them . . . and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply'" (Gen. 1, 27-28) - is clearly procreational. While the second - "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone: I will make him a helper fit for him'" (Gen 2, 18) - is clearly personalist. Therefore, while the two ends can be distinguished, they should not be over-contrasted, for both are institutional ends⁴. More than any possible hierarchy between them, it is their inseparability which needs to be understood and stressed. Since time does not permit going into the personalist value of procreation⁵, let us briefly examine the idea of the 'good of the spouses', concretely too in the light of indissolubility.

Indissolubility and the 'Good of the Spouses'

God could have created the human race in a unisex - sexless - pattern, and provided for its continuation otherwise than by sex. Genesis seems to make it clear that creation would have been less good if he had done so; "it is not good for man -or woman - to be alone". So sexuality appears in the Bible as part of a plan for personal fulfillment, a factor meant to contribute to the perfecting of the human being. The basic anthropological point is that the human person is not self-sufficient, but needs others, with a special need for an "other", a partner, a spouse.

Each human person, in the awareness of his or her contingency, wishes to be loved: to be in some way unique for someone. Each one, if he or she does not find anyone to love him or her, is haunted by the temptation to feel worthless. Further, it is not enough to *be* loved; it is necessary to *love*. A person who is loved can be unhappy, if he or she is unable to love. Everyone is loved (at least by God); not everyone learns to love. To learn to love is as great a human need as to know oneself loved; only so can a person be saved from self-pity or self-isolation, or from both.

To learn to love demands coming out of self: through firm dedication - in good times and bad - to another, to others. What a person has to learn is not passing love, but *committed* love. We all stand in need of a commitment to love. Such is the priesthood, or a life dedicated directly to God. And such is marriage, the dedication to which God calls the majority. To bind people to the process of learning to love was God's original design for marriage, confirmed by Our Lord (Mt. 19, 8ss). The married commitment is by nature something demanding. This is brought out by the words with which the spouses express their mutual acceptance of one another, through "irrevocable personal consent"⁶. "for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health . . . all the days of my life"⁷.

While this commitment is indeed demanding, it is also deeply natural and attractive. Real love means it, when it says, "I'll love you for always". Among other things, this could suggest that in the education given to our young people, clearer stress should be placed on the fact that human beings, in distinction to animals, are created not just with a sexual instinct, but with a *conjugal* instinct⁸.

Sexual Instinct: Conjugal Instinct

The sexual instinct is natural, developing by itself and quick to make itself present. More than development, it needs control; it is often more intense toward one person, but not normally limited to one. The conjugal instinct is also natural, though slower to make itself present; it needs to be developed; it scarcely needs to be controlled; it is generally limited to one person.

The conjugal instinct draws man and woman to total commitment to one person, to a permanent association or covenant of love, and to be faithful to that freely assumed commitment. The widespread frustration in the area of sex which people sense today, is a frustration of conjugality rather than of mere sexuality. As the conjugal instinct is understood, developed and matured, it tends strongly to facilitate sexual control, by inducing sexual respect. It is normal for a young couple in love to have an *ideal* of marriage before them: each sees the other as possible life-companion, and mother or father of one's future children; someone therefore who can be absolutely unique in one's life. These are primary truths of conjugal sexuality which our modern world seems to be losing sight of; hence the gradual loss of mutual esteem between the sexes. While this applies reciprocally in the sexual relationship, it has a particular application in how a man relates to a woman. If nothing so much as motherhood or potential motherhood makes a man respect a woman, this is because it raises her above the category of an object to be possessed and establishes her in that of a subject to be revered.

Marital Love and Marital Defects.

It is easy to love good people. The program of Christianity is that we also learn to love "bad" people, i.e. people with defects. Within our present context, its particular program is that whoever freely enters the marital covenant of love and life with another - no doubt because he or she sees unique goodness in that person - should be prepared to remain faithful to the covenant, even if later on objective or subjective considerations make the other seem to have lost any exceptional goodness and to be characterized rather by a series of maddening defects.

The discovery of mutual defects in marriage is inevitable, but not incompatible with the fulfillment of the good of the spouses. On the contrary, one can say that the experience of mutual defects is essential if married life itself is to achieve the true divine idea of the *bonum coniugum*. As effortless romance fades, the stage is set for each of the spouses to get down to the business of *learning to love* the other *as he or she really is*. It is then that they grow as persons. Here lies the seriousness and beauty of the challenge contained in marriage: it remains a critical point to be stressed in education and counselling.

Romance is almost sure to die; love however does not have to die with it. Love is meant to mature, and can do so if that readiness for sacrifice implied in the original self-giving of marital consent is alive or can be activated. The idea that true love is prepared for sacrifice strikes a chord which perhaps our preaching needs to touch on more. As Pope John Paul II says: "It is natural for the human heart to accept demands, even difficult ones, in the name of love for an ideal, and above all in the name of love for a person"⁹.

Human nature is a mixture and conflict of good and bad tendencies. Are we appealing sufficiently to the good tendencies? Or do we yield at times to the temptation to think that the bad are more powerful? We need to strengthen our faith not only in God, but also in the goodness of his creation, recalling what St. Thomas Aquinas teaches, "*bonum est potentius quam malum*"¹⁰: good is more powerful than evil, and its appeal strikes deeper into our nature, for goodness rooted in truth remains the most fundamental need of the human person. We have lately been once more reminded of this in *Veritatis Splendor*. It is from our natural quest or thirst for the good that Pope John Paul II there builds up his presentation of the splendor and attraction of the truth¹¹.

Contrary tendencies can be natural. In the face of danger it is natural to feel tempted to be a coward and run away. But it is also natural to want to be brave and face the danger. A mother or father may have a natural tendency toward selfishness; yet they have a no less natural tendency to care for their children: a maternal or paternal instinct. Similarly, while it is natural for strains to develop between husband and wife, it is also natural for them to want to preserve their love from the threat of these strains. What we have called the conjugal instinct calls them to be faithful, whereas a person senses something soft, mean and selfish, in a refusal to face up to the challenge of fidelity.

As against this, there would seem to be little that is natural, and nothing that is inevitable, in the phenomenon that two people who at one moment thought each other absolutely unique, should end up five or ten years later unable to stand one

another. "My love for him or her has died" . . . If such were to happen, it would have been a gradual death, and one that could often have been prevented by good counsel from relatives, friends, pastors.

"Trial" Commitments

It is not good for man to be alone; or to "half" give himself. Hence derives the radically unsatisfying and frustrating nature of "quasi-marital" ties: i.e. where there is no binding commitment. I refer here not to simple promiscuity, but to couples who want some sort of semi-conjugal relationship, where there will be a certain sense of belonging to each other; but not definitively, always with a way out.

Such a relationship is something so much less than marriage, that a couple experimenting with it are not likely ever to marry; or if they do, it is not likely to last. Their approach is too flawed. Each one remains fundamentally his or her own project; there is no *shared* enterprise. "I" rather than "we" remains the reference point and center for each. The other is never regarded as more than a "trial" partner.

They don't *give* themselves; each one only lends to the other, only gives in part. Their subsequent lives can seldom shake off the feeling: "I have never found anyone worth giving myself to; or I have never been capable of giving myself"; or perhaps simply: "I have never been accepted; nobody ever thought me worth accepting unconditionally"¹².

People who do not love, cannot find love; people who do not give themselves, cannot find themselves. The way of quasicommitment is a way of self-frustration.

Now let us try to draw practical conclusions from these points. We could first consider preparation for marriage; and then, care during marriage.

Pastoral Preparation for Marriage

We have to try to ensure that education given to young people, at least in Catholic institutions, is inspired by a truly Christian anthropology, which restores the sense of the naturalness and attractiveness of the call to marriage, with special insistence on the goodness of the commitment to an unbreakable bond of love. Two aspects of this education could be distinguished.

a) *Love-education*, which really means education in giving. If frustration is inevitable and fulfillment not possible without giving self, then three main problems face the life of each one: (i) to find something - some ideal, some person - worth giving self to; (ii) to be able to give self (for this, one must first possess self); (iii) to be able to stick to the gift (because fulfillment is not a momentary but a life-long process).

Corresponding to these problems, perhaps three rules could be put to our young people. First, don't be afraid to give *of* yourself, now. Practice self-giving *now*, in your teens, at home, in service activities. Second, don't give yourself sexually until the moment comes; and that moment is marriage. Giving yourself before, you give in parts and too easily, and have little or nothing left to give when the moment comes (a powerful argument in favor of pre-marriage chastity). Third, when the

moment does come for marriage (if that is your vocation), give yourself really, in the full gift of your conjugal self.

b) *Sex-education.* Though some would deny it, the contemporary attitude not just toward marriage but toward sexuality is tinged with profound pessimism. When sex is presented as easily-accessible pleasure, it becomes almost impossible for people to understand its importance and its fragility in so many aspects of human development. Proper sex-education must help young people:

— understand the truly human side of sexuality: not only the equal dignity of the sexes, but especially the value of sexual complementarity. Here we are up against a pervasive unisex culture and philosophy.

— achieve proper sexual identification, seeing the development of masculinity and femininity as goals to be pursued. Many girls (just to take one example) seem today to have little idea of those traits of feminine nature which can captivate a man, and hold him captive, even as physical charms may wane.

— understand the delicacy of the sexual relationship¹³. Sex used to be an area of happiness - a promise or a hope of happiness - surrounded with danger. The danger has been taken away, but with it the hope of happiness seems to be going too.

In this work, our educators ought to be the first to realize that when sexuality is reduced to the level of physical differences, women are the losers; for on the merely physical level, man is the stronger and can easily dominate. Whereas, when the more truly human and spiritual aspects of sexuality are operative, woman tends to acquire a special ascendancy and superiority.

Educators need equally to realize that an over-emphasis on independence with an under-emphasis on complementarity, can make the achievement of true sexual identity almost impossible. Many marriages fail today because there is not enough masculinity or femininity to keep them together. No preparation for marriage is adequate if it does not help toward spousal role identification.

Pastoral Care During Marriage

a) *toward a couple as spouses.* It is easy to make the marital commitment. It is not easy to maintain it, to perfect it, so reaching, as *Veritatis Splendor* says, "that maturity in self-giving to which human freedom is called"¹⁴. Along with prayer and the sacraments, people need to be reminded of a main key to success in conjugal love (i.e. the love that binds together two persons with defects): learning to forgive and asking for forgiveness. Each time husband or wife acknowledges his or her defects to the other, he or she becomes more human, and therefore more lovable. The husband or wife who denies their defects or seeks to justify them, becomes more proud, more isolated; less loving and less lovable.

Not only the spouses themselves, but their relatives and friends need to be taught to understand and respect the demanding beauty of the conjugal relationship, in the life-long task of learning to love. People need support: from relations and friends first; and then from pastors and counsellors. There is need for a constant catechesis which shows a new appreciation of the commitment involved in marriage, especially of the goodness of the bond; so that the very *beginnings* of trouble are met with positive help and advice, not with encouragement to seek an annulment

(which may not be granted in the end). Friends and neighbors need all to be reminded of their grave responsibility to be a help and not a hindrance to the perseverance of married persons.

b) *toward a couple as parents.* Wise spouses learn how to distribute parental roles. As in any team, this approach of complementing one another obviates difficulties in getting along. But if the team approach is lost, if they let themselves be pushed into a power-struggle, the family enterprise is almost bound to end in failure.

The help that families need cannot come mainly from outside, nor will it suffice if provided on a merely collective or social level: e.g. family days or activities organized by the parish. It is in the home itself that families need to develop their personality and strength. The family life of each Christian home needs to take on a forceful quality, expressed in family conversations, plans, projects, which are humanly attractive. No easy task, given the attraction of other forces? Agreed; but there is the challenge to parents to be the creators of something unique. They need to find encouragement from their pastors in this, just as they certainly will find the grace of God.

In Summary

a) The true commitment and binding relationship of marriage attracts powerfully, for there is something deeply natural to it. However, for our nature in its present state, there is also something deeply difficult to it. To achieve the fulfillment promised by marriage is not possible without grace; it is possible with grace¹⁵.

b) Our pastoral presentation of marriage must be optimistic: showing the natural attraction, without underplaying the natural difficulties; and emphasizing the supernatural help.

True pastoral care for marriage must therefore be based on:

— sound anthropology, which on the one hand stresses the complementarity of the sexes and of sexual roles no less than the equal dignity between man and woman; and which then particularly underlines the main aspects that make marriage attractive and worthwhile, especially offspring and indissolubility;

— sound psychology, which helps people realize that difficulties, even severe ones, must arise in marriage; and that it is there that love, which means giving, is tested and grows or fails;

— sound pastoral and sacramental theology, which equips married people to face difficulties with full reliance on sacramental grace, and on prayer and guidance¹⁶;

— sound ascetical theology, which reminds those preparing for marriage, and in marriage, of what Vatican II so stressed: that marriage is fundamentally and ultimately a vocation to holiness¹⁷; it means constant exercise in true love, which consists in self-giving, self-sacrifice, losing self for others and so finding oneself.

In the end we cannot and should not want to get away from the fact that happiness - also the happiness that marriage promises - is not possible without generosity and sacrifice. I often heard Blessed Josemaria Escriva, the Founder of

Opus Dei, say that happiness has its roots in the shape of a Cross.¹⁸ It is the rule and apparent paradox of the Gospel: only by “losing” and giving ourselves — the essence of love — can we begin to find ourselves and, even more than ourselves, the happiness we are made for.

Our preaching on marriage will produce no renewal if it does not reflect this basic truth. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church says: “Following Christ, denying themselves, taking on themselves their own cross, the spouses can ‘understand’ the original sense of matrimony and live it with the help of Christ. This grace of Christian matrimony is a fruit of the Cross of Christ, the source of all Christian life.”¹⁹

References

1. cf. *Humane Vitae*, no. 9; *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 13; *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 7, etc.
2. Bearing in mind that the idea of “giving oneself” — *se tradere* — can only figuratively imply a gift of one’s actual person. The gift involved is rather the fullness of complementary conjugal sexuality.
3. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 2363) insists on the “double end of marriage: the good of the spouses themselves and the handing on of life.”
4. cf. C. Burke: “Marriage: a personalist or an institutional understanding?": *Communio* 1992-III, 287ss.
5. *Nevertheless*, since the contraceptive mentality certainly provides part of the explanation why spouses stick together less, *this point/- the personalist value of procreation* — is a theme that urgently needs to be developed: cf. C. Burke: “Matrimonial Consent and the Bonum Proles”: *Monitor Ecclesiasticus* 114 (1989-III), 397-404.
6. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 48.
7. *Ordo Celebrandi Matrimonium*, no. 25.
8. cf. C. Burke: “Personalism and the *bona* of Marriage”: *Studia Canonica* 27 (1993), 411-412.
9. General Audience, Apr. 21, 1982 (cf. *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, V, 1 (1982), p. 1344); cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 34: “sacrifice cannot be removed from family life, but must in fact be whole heartedly accepted if the love between husband and wife is to be deepened and become a source of intimate joy.”
10. *Summa Theol.* I, q. 100, art. 2.
11. cf. VS, Chap. I: “What good must I do?”
12. Psychiatric studies show that the choice to live together, instead of marrying, easily induces deep-rooted anxiety and insecurity: cf. Nadelson-Notman: “To Marry or Not to Marry: a Choice”: *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 138 (1981), p. 1354.
13. cf. *Cat. of the Cath. Church*, 1607.
14. VS, no. 17.
15. cf. VS, nos. 102ss.
16. Married couples “have need of the grace of God . . . Without this help, man and woman cannot achieve that union of their lives for which God created them at the beginning”: *Cat. of the Cath. Church*, 1608.
17. cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 39-41; *Gaudium et Spes* 48-49.
18. cf. *The Forge*, Scepter Press, New York, 1990, no. 28.
19. no. 1615.