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# Marriage: A Personalist Focus on Indissolubility

by

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Procreativity and the unbreakable character of the conjugal bond: these two aspects of marriage — traditionally regarded in Christian thinking as essential matrimonial properties — are being specially questioned today. A current attitude, also among some Catholics, is that these two aspects are not “values” in a personalist sense, but rather potential or real obstacles to personal fulfillment and happiness. Moreover, it is at times suggested within the Church that this diffident attitude about having children and about indissolubility is in some way rooted in or justified by the personalism of the Second Vatican Council.

This latter idea does not stand analysis. The principal personalist text of Vatican II is *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24: “man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself”. Man is in fact made for others. Hence derives the contemporary analysis of conjugal consent as the gift of self mutually made and accepted<sup>1</sup>. Within the renewed Christian understanding, in other words, the happiness and fulfillment that marriage promises depends on the spouses’ capacity for self-donation.

There is a deep contrast between the idea of “self-sufficiency” presented by much of modern psychology, and the Christian ideal of realization through self-giving. “Only by transcending themselves and living a life of self-giving and openness to truth and love can individuals reach fulfillment”<sup>2</sup>. Self-sufficiency has always been a radical temptation for man; one that he needs to overcome if he is to give himself and realize himself, and in the end be saved.

Marriage, being by essence a covenant of self-giving, presents itself in the plan of nature as a safeguard against the trap of self-sufficiency. As Vatican II says, “this [conjugal] partnership of man and woman constitutes the first form of communion between persons. For by his innermost nature man is a social being; and if he does not enter into relations with others he can neither live nor develop his gifts.”<sup>3</sup> Man is especially made for conjugal dependence. It is natural therefore to understand marriage in terms of mutual support and dependence; to regard it simply as a means of personal satisfaction is individualistic, as well as a sign of defective anthropological thinking.



A true personalist analysis of marriage underlines how its traditional properties - the exclusiveness of the conjugal bond, its openness to life, and its unbreakable character — contribute so powerfully to the realization or fulfillment of the person who marries. I have elsewhere considered the personalist aspect of procreation, maintaining that to have children is not only a natural human tendency but one also which contributes powerfully to the human maturing, happiness and fulfillment of the spouses<sup>4</sup>. My present purpose is to consider how indissolubility can and should be understood in personalist terms.

### Reactions to the Truth of Indissolubility

It is of course an integral part of the Catholic faith that marriage is indissoluble by nature (which means by divine design). This was defined as dogma at the Council of Trent<sup>5</sup>. As such, it should be handed on by those entrusted to preach and teach the Faith. It is clear however that our preaching and teaching will lack force and conviction, if the issue is reduced just to an obligation of accepting a dogma or obeying the magisterium. It is the *truth* of the matter which has to be understood and set forth because, of course, a dogma is a revealed truth. We need to be convinced about the truth of this point of Catholic belief, since we have to make every effort to render this truth intelligible to others. And the truth we are dealing with is one that is especially urgent for people to be convinced about.

It need be no matter of surprise if people's first human reaction to this truth is negative. So it was initially with the Apostles, when Our Lord Himself reaffirmed its validity (Mt 19, 3-10). "The disciples said to him, 'If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not wise to marry.'" Better not to marry, they felt, if a person is caught for always. It is up to priests, religion teachers, catechists and marriage counsellors, to understand and help people understand the positive content and purpose of this truth about the most natural of institutions.

When Our Lord told the disciples that divorce was not God's plan, he gave them a key to a positive understanding of this, referring them back to the original divine design for marriage. The Church has always taken this as its reference point, in analysing the matter. In the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 1605), we read: "That man and woman are made for one another is affirmed by Holy Scripture: "It is not good for man to be alone". Woman, "flesh of his flesh", that is, his "other self", his equal, so closely associated to him, is given to him by God as a "helpmate", so representing God from Whom comes our help. "Therefore a man will leave his father and his mother and unite to his wife and the two will be in one flesh" (Gen. 2,24). That this signifies an unending unity of their two lives, was indicated by Our Lord Himself, recalling what was the design of the Creator "at the beginning": "So they are no longer two, but one single flesh" (Mt. 19,6).

It is interesting here to note the *two* complementary narrations in Scripture of the creation of man and woman. The first, in Chapter One of Genesis, states: "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply' . . ." (Gen 1, 27-28). The other passage is in Chapter Two, and part of it appears in the point just cited from the new Catechism. "The Lord



God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him' . . . Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen 2, 18-24). The first of these two narratives stresses the procreational end of marriage; the second, to which Our Lord refers in Mt. 19, stresses the aspect of mutual enrichment, usually described as the personalist end.

Here we also take note of the unquestionable development in Church teaching about the ends of marriage. The idea of a primary end and two secondary ends has given way to one of two co-equal ends: the good of the spouses, and the procreation of children<sup>6</sup>. Some careless thinking draws a contrast between these two ends, presenting the "good of the spouses" as the personalist "non-institutional" end, and procreation as *the* institutional end. But this is incorrect. *Both* are institutional ends, standing in harmony not in opposition<sup>7</sup>.

When one considers things from the viewpoint of the good or the interests of the children, it is easy enough — and very important — to adduce reasons for marriage being indissoluble. My concern here however is to relate indissolubility directly to the *bonum coniugum*, the good of the spouses, which is a great end but not one that is easily achieved.

No one can come out of himself or herself and so mature, without getting involved in a deep and permanent commitment, learning to face up to its demands, not just for a brief period and not just when things are easy but also when they are difficult. While man and woman are made for one another, the enrichment that comes from the covenanted union between them is not attained without real and sustained self-donation. This is why we can say that marriage, in God's plan, is not so much a haven of love as a school of love. Married people are apprentices of love, as indeed all of us are in this life. The happiness that love offers depends on the gradual overcoming of selfishness; and therefore it is a happiness which takes an effort. It is only fooling oneself to think that happiness can be achieved without effort.

### The Conjugal Instinct

People realize this, and sense how it applies particularly to marriage. There is a natural instinct — what I would call a conjugal instinct — that draws people to the marital commitment. One sees it in the traditional formula by which marriage vows are exchanged: "For better or for worse, in sickness or in health, until death."

It would reveal a profound pessimism or scepticism about human nature to think that people are not attracted by the idea of a permanent commitment to a loved one. There is something natural in this indissoluble commitment: the good of a life shared together, of a mutual "belongingness" that will not be reneged upon. People are made for this, and not only want it but expect that it will require sacrifices, sensing moreover that these are worth it. As 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."<sup>8</sup>

It is through dedication, effort and sacrifice, especially when made for the sake of others, that people grow and mature most; that way each one comes out of

himself or herself and rises above self. Loyalty to the commitment of married life — to be mutually faithful, to persevere in this fidelity until death, and to have and rear children — contributes more than anything else to the true good of the spouses, so powerfully realized in facing up to this freely accepted commitment which, by mutual consent, also becomes a duty owed in justice. In a 1987 Address to the Roman Rota, John Paul II described this duty as involving “a conscious effort on the part of the spouses to overcome, even at the cost of sacrifices and renunciations, the obstacles that hinder the fulfillment of their marriage” (AAS 79 (1987) 1456).

The thesis “there should be divorce,” or “people have a right to divorce”, simply amounts to, “people have a right to the easy way out.” It really means that people should not be asked to sacrifice themselves, and implies that they are not up to it. God thinks otherwise, because He has not only made marriage with the idea of raising man above himself, but has made him capable of rising so, and gives him the grace to do so. Here we should not forget another point in the teaching of new Catechism: the spouses “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” (no. 1608).

### The “Easy Way Out”

God knows something that human experience should have taught man by now, i.e., that the easy way out very often proves to be the hard way out. A person divorces because he or she feels that happiness is impossible in the present marriage. And then so often it is found that happiness keeps on escaping him or her in any subsequent “marriages”. It is a significant fact that the rate of divorce among divorced people who re-marry is four times higher than among those who marry for the first time. This is not very surprising, for divorce after all is a very demoralizing experience:

- a) it is an expression of disillusionment;
- b) it is an admission of failure;
- c) it is an acknowledgement of weakness;
- d) it involves the betrayal of one’s children<sup>9</sup>.

And, of course, in the divorced person’s heart, there is the sense of having turned his or her back on God. I have met many divorced people who have argued that they had a right to do what they did. I have met none prepared to argue that God really approved of what they had done.

Divorce involves a very particular surrender to selfishness. The point here is that a person looking for a divorce is really saying, in effect, “I was prepared to get on with this person when love was easy. But not now when love is difficult.” Such persons know very little about the real nature of love. They could learn from the example of Christ — who loved us unto death, even though He found death difficult<sup>10</sup>. Love, if it is genuine, is as difficult as it is worthwhile: this is a truth that needs to be constantly presented in instruction on marriage.

From the start, we have to teach young people that when they marry, they are



going to marry someone with defects; and that if, when they fall in love, they think that the other person has no defects, they are wrong. Just as they would be wrong if when they begin to discover the other person's defects, they let themselves think that love is at an end. On the contrary, it is then that love has come to a turning point towards — or away from — maturity.

Blessed Josemaría Escrivá was a man who helped many married persons to look on their marriage as a direct calling to sanctity. He insisted with them that their love for God was inseparable from their loving one another and, with keen psychology, would help them realize what this implied. Talking with a married couple he would often ask, perhaps beginning with the wife, "Do you love your husband?" — "Of course", she would reply. "Do you love him very much?" — "Very much!" "Do you love him with his defects . . . ?" And if there were a moment's hesitation at this he would add: "because if you don't, you don't love him." And then he would ask the same of the husband.

In marrying, then, one has to be prepared to love the other person with his or her defects. Otherwise it is not a real person that one wants to marry. To learn to love someone with defects is of the essence of true love and loyalty, and is always a major task for spouses. We might mention in passing that a family where the spouses learn to live so, becomes truly a school for the children, preparing them for life, in a special way for modern life, where people are running out of patience with one another, where young people only see older people's defects, employees only see defects of employers, priests only those of bishops. . .

There is of course a theological point here, of evident application. To love a person — to learn to love him or her — with his or her defects, is to learn to love as God loves. God doesn't love us because of our defects, he loves us because of our virtues. And though, if we may put it that way, he has a keen eye for our defects, he has a keener eye still for our virtues. He doesn't love us because of our defects, but, as Msgr. Escrivá never tired of repeating, he loves us *with* our defects. All of us should try to imitate him in this; and especially married people in the way they consider each other. If we see many defects in other people, we should try to see many more virtues. The person in contact with God, the person who prays, will be given a keen enough eye to see them. To do this perseveringly in married life, over a life-time, is to follow a way of sanctity. The final result of such a persevering effort should be two people well prepared, well matured, for heaven.

### **Love as a Duty and Not Just a Right**

Vatican II says that what makes married love an "eminently human love" is the fact that it is "an affection between two persons rooted *in the will*" (GS 49). Love tends to begin on the level of feelings; but it can never mature and become truly deep if it remains on that level (which after all is the surface level of human relations). In order to grow, love must not remain a purely emotional matter; it needs to become a matter of deliberate and voluntary choice. The law of indissolubility says to a married person: "Love in marriage is a duty as much as a right. Therefore you have no right to give up the effort to love even if marriage proves difficult or runs into unforeseen obstacles, least of all if the obstacle is simply your spouse's unforeseen defects. He or she has the right to be loved with



those defects: that is, as the true person he or she is; and you have the duty to love him or her so. That is what genuine love consists in. Therefore, in the face of difficulties and defects, you have no right to quit: have no right to let your spouse down, or your children down, or other people down . . . And, finally, you have no right to let yourself down; to think you can find a better happiness than the one God has planned for you. You won't be happy that way. It won't work."

Of course it is not easy for two people to live together for life, in a faithful and fruitful union. It is "easier" for each to live apart, or to unite casually or for a short time, or to avoid having children. It is easier, but not happier; nor does it contribute to their growth as persons. *Non est bonum homini esse solus*: it is not good for man or woman to live alone, or in successive temporary associations that tend to leave him or her more and more trapped in self-isolation. Married commitment is not an easy endeavor; but, apart from normally being a happy one, it is one that *matures*.

Therefore, it is precisely the unbreakable character of the marriage bond that makes it contribute so powerfully to the "good of the spouses". Indissolubility tells them that God wants them to remain committed to one another even when commitment seems pointless (perhaps there are no children) or impossible; that he wants them to keep loving one another even when all feelings of love seem to have died. That too is why the "bad" moments of marriage — the hard moments — can also be specially good moments, always provided a person is prepared to rise to the challenge they pose.

Indissolubility, we might say, is God's plan to defend the spouses themselves from selfishness: and *for* happiness. God knows that happiness depends on love, on the ability to love, on *developing* this ability. And his design for marriage is that it should be a constant spur to this development of the capacity to love. This, from the personalist point of view, is what marriage is in fact about. It is on this that the true *bonum coniugum* — the "good" or "well-being" of the spouses — depends. That is why there is no true married personalism which ignores or fails to stress the goodness — for the spouses, and not just for the children — of the conjugal commitment.

### Happiness and Difficulties

Everyone has a chance of happiness in life. But many people throw their chance away because they don't or won't face up to the challenge that it involves. Any true pastoral work needs to take account of this element of challenge that also enters into God's plan for human happiness. People in difficulties need consolation; they need to be helped out of these difficulties if this is possible. But sometimes the only truly pastoral possibility is to help them face up to the difficulties and to the challenge they imply.

A law forbidding abortion or divorce is not creating problems; it is seeking to avoid false "solutions" to problems. This is the clear-sightedness required of our priests and pastoral workers: to see that it is not the law which creates the problems or the difficulties — the difficulties are already there — it is the "solution" which would make them worse. It is a superficial and mistaken pastoral vision, therefore, that sees law as an obstacle blocking the way to



happiness. Law is a signpost pointing out the way to happiness.

How all of this needs to be meditated by those of our priests and counselors who feel that if they give a pastoral "No" to a person in trouble, they have nothing further to offer. They have a challenge to offer.

Why do we seem reluctant to put challenges to people today — the challenge of chastity, of generosity, of fidelity? Perhaps we don't have the same confidence in people that Christ has; He put challenges constantly. Perhaps we need to examine ourselves and see how positively and forcefully we in turn accept and live these same challenges in our own lives.

The challenge holds good even for what one may be tempted to classify as utterly hopeless marriage cases. For instance, marriages where one of the spouses has become totally alcoholic or has been given a life-sentence in jail. It is easy to argue that when a person promised to accept the other "in sickness or in health", "for better or for worse", he or she did not foresee eventualities like these. Nevertheless, the anticipation of even such eventualities is what is literally and directly implied in the promise. Otherwise this promise expresses nothing more than a conditioned and worthless "love": "I promise to love you, always provided loving you involves me in no sacrifice."

The fact is that to describe such situations as "hopeless" makes no pastoral sense. Pastoral terms of reference can never be exclusively human. Otherwise, to take the example of something like a terminal cancer, a medical judgment that the case is hopeless would signify that, pastorally speaking, there is nothing more to be said. This is not true. The doctor may have no hope to offer, the pastor has; any Christian has.

Similarly in these extreme marriage cases, if indissolubility is to stand, human wisdom may have no hope to offer. Christian wisdom has: the hope of the immense reward reserved for the person who keeps fidelity — not only with his or her spouse: with Christ! — in carrying the Cross.

The new Catechism says: "This unmistakable insistence on the unbreakable character of the marriage bond has been a source of perplexity to some, appearing as an impossible demand. Nevertheless Jesus has not weighed down the spouses with a burden that is impossible to bear, heavier than that of the Law of Moses. Having come to reestablish the initial order of creation upset by sin, He Himself gives the strength and grace to live marriage in the new dimension of the Kingdom of God. Following Christ, denying themselves, taking upon 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" (no. 1615).

### **The Saving Strength of Indissolubility**

When people talk of indissolubility being "imposed" by the Church, they are not speaking accurately. Indissolubility is a design and law of God, not of the Church. There is in any case no way that it can be imposed on anyone. Just as happens with all the other laws containing moral norms, it can only be freely and personally accepted; and then it liberates. Or it can be rejected; and then people experience the isolation of having departed from a divine plan of fulfillment.

The indissoluble bond depends for its saving strength on the response of



spouses aided by grace; aided also by that conjugal instinct I have mentioned and which priests and counsellors need to rely upon, appeal to and stir up in couples going through a difficult moment. Faithfulness in such difficult circumstances is precisely an expression of this instinct. That is why it has something deeply *natural* to it, in the challenge that it offers to the better and more generous side of human nature. Just as it is not natural for a mother to reject or abandon her son, no matter how drunk or criminal he may be (it might be easier for her to do so, and to live simply for herself; but she does not do so), so it is neither truly natural nor in any way Christian for a husband or wife to abandon their spouse just because he or she is alcoholic or neurotic. Relatives, friends, pastors or counsellors of the couples whose marriage is undergoing tension, need to build on this conviction; and when they see that some married persons who tend to think or react differently — with too little natural loyalty and courage and with too much natural self-concern and cowardice — *there* it sees a problem to be worked at, so as to help them acquire a more Christian understanding of all the demanding strength and beauty of the married relationship, and to stir up the loyalty to be faithful to it.

Indissolubility is not meant for the easy moments, when the two spouses *want* to be together; then they don't need the help of a law. It is designed for the difficult moments, precisely to be the force that *keeps* them together; then they need the reminder of God's law and its positive purpose, and the encouragement to seek the grace of abiding by it.

I would insist once more: the Church in defending indissolubility is defending people against the constant temptation to softness and selfishness, which are major enemies of personal growth and fulfilment. A person is more undone by being unfaithful to a hard marriage bond, than by remaining bound by it. God knows what He is doing in making the bond of marriage indissoluble. He knows that love means giving and being faithful to one's gift; and therefore He wants husband and wife to be *bound* to the liberating task and saving effort of learning to give and learning to love.

Pope John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio*, speaks of indissolubility in terms of something *joyful* that Christians should announce to the world: "It is necessary", he says, "to reconfirm the *good news* of the definitive nature of conjugal love."<sup>11</sup> If many today find this statement surprising, it is because contemporary society has so largely lost its understanding of the divine plan for man's authentic good. Reconfirming in their own lives and in those of others the good news that married love is too sacred and too important — also for human happiness — to be broken, is a special mission facing Christians today.

#### REFERENCES

1. cf. *The Code of Canon Law*, c. 1057, Article 2.
2. John Paul II: Address to members of the American Psychiatric Association, Jan. 4, 1993: *Osservatore Romano*, Engl. Edition, Jan. 13, 1993, p.4.
3. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 12.
4. *Covenanted Happiness: Love and Commitment in Marriage*, Ignatius Press 1990, pp. 39-52;
- cf. "Procreativity and the Conjugal Self-Gift": *Studia Canonica* 24 (1990), pp. 43-49.
5. cf. Denz. 1807.

6. cf. no. 1660 of the new Catechism; also c. 1055 of the Code of Canon Law.

7. cf. C. Burke: "Marriage: a personalist or an institutional understanding?" : *Communio* 1992-III, pp. 287ss.

8. *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, V, 1 (1982), p. 1344.

9. So true is this point that many couples who no longer feel love for one another resolve to get on — for their children's sake. And the struggle this implies, hard though it is, gives them its own real happiness: far truer happiness, one can be sure, than the uneasy selfishness of the person who is ready to assert what he calls his rights to build a new life for himself, even at the cost of wrecking the one home that his children had the right to regard as their own.

10. Readiness to die for the truth out of trust for God, is a recurrent theme of *Veritatis Splendor* (cf. nos. 52, 76, 90ss, 102), which strikingly brings out the full challenge of Christian moral standards.

11. no. 20; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1648.

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