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Thomas J. Casey

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# Sociology and Christian Marriage

THOMAS J. CASEY, S.J.

To anyone acquainted with the Christian ideal of marriage a striking paradox is apparent. The Christian ideal of marriage seemingly is the answer to modern man's quest for abiding friendship and personal commitment. A depersonalized society which emphasizes utilitarian relationships has left modern men and women with a tremendous hunger for the love, understanding, and intimacy which only the home can supply and the Christian home guarantee, with its sanctioning of nothing short of a life-long commitment of absolute fidelity of husband and wife in the bond of conjugal love. Yet if it is clear that the ideal of Christian marriage does guarantee fulfillment of this human aspiration, it is equally clear that Christian marriages that realize this ideal today are at least a statistical infrequency. Consequently the question comes to mind: who is wrong here, the Church in proposing such a lofty ideal or Catholics in their all too frequent failure to realize the ideal?

Perhaps sociological analysis may help us comprehend the paradox. Sociology cannot solve social problems, but it can contribute to their solution by identifying causal factors and dimensions of the problems. It can also point out what is amenable to social control and change and thus greatly improve the chances of finding an answer to problems with which society is confronted. Such analysis resolves itself into two basic movements. First a clear description

of what is going on here must be obtained. Then an answer to the question why this is taking place must be formulated.

Prior, however, to beginning such an analysis of present day Christian marriages, it might be well to briefly review the details of the Christian blueprint for married life. With the ideal clearly in mind we should be better able to assess the present condition of modern marriages. Now the first thing a Christian view of marriage would find existing between husband and wife is the greatest of friendships. In his *Summa Contra Gentiles* Saint Thomas Aquinas takes this viewpoint and consequently sees marriage as being intrinsically indissoluble. Friendship must be permanent and anything that would jeopardize this permanency would imply a defect in the friendship itself. Fair-weather friends hardly realize the ideal of friendship and as the diamond industry is happy to remind us in its advertisements, it is the diamond's enduring qualities that enable it to symbolize so well the pledged love of man and woman. A further characteristic of the uniqueness and supremacy of this marital friendship is its demand for absolute fidelity and loyalty. The friendship of marriage has an exclusiveness that does not permit the admittance of a third party at the same level of intimacy and commitment which binds the marriage partners in a union of two in one flesh as Scripture calls it.

The second point made in the Christian blueprint for marriage is that married love is the most creative of human loves. The love and happiness which man and wife find in their marital friendship is communicated to and shared with their offspring. *Casti Connubii*, Pius XI's great encyclical on Christian marriage, reiterates that among the blessings of marriage it is the child that holds first place. It is this "good" of children that sets married love apart from other human loves and founds its true dignity and value. This same married love, once it has inspired parents to procreate new human life, enables them to continue the communication of life through the process of educating their children to maturity. Made one through their wedded love, the couple represent the fullness of human nature which is initially expressed bisexually and finds its completion in the reproductive couple. As one principle they continue to be the wellspring of that human life which they are continually sharing with and building up in their children. Consequently, within marriage and as parents men and women play the social role that is most creative and humanly fulfilling. The sculptor expresses himself in wood or stone, but the parent is given the incomparable opportunity of expressing himself and being creative in God's own image, namely, the human nature of the child *whose personality has to be fashioned by the educative hand of his procreator.*

Thirdly, attention should be called to the Church seeing marriage as the adequate and proper symbol for ex-

pressing Christ's love for His Church. Man and woman bound in the bond of matrimony are seen as the symbol which expresses the bond of Christ to His Church and the members of His Mystical Body. Now the first importance of a symbol rests in its meaning, in what it signifies, and the purpose of a sign is to lead to a knowledge of something other than itself. But men have always thought that a symbol of something truly worthwhile should also have some dignity in itself. The primary value of a wedding ring comes from the love it symbolizes yet we feel that it should be made of precious metal and a work of art so that it may function properly as symbol. Hence we rightly conclude that if God chooses marriage to symbolize His love for His Church and her members, then in itself marriage must have an incomparable worth. Otherwise it could not fittingly symbolize the love and relationship that actually do exist between Christ and the Church.

Finally, marriage is seen as a sacrament by the Church and this means that it serves not only as a channel for the communication of human life but also as a vehicle for the sharing of God's own supernatural life. As one of the seven sacraments the Church administers for the sanctification of her members matrimony shares the common sacramental property of not only symbolizing God's supernatural life but of also effecting or bringing about the birth or increment of that same life. Certainly we must conclude that any social institution which possesses such properties and po-

tentialities for human growth and development must be holy and completely in accord with human dignity. In view of such teaching on matrimony by the Church, one can only wonder what sources are being used by those who accuse the Church of harboring a very negative view of marriage and married love.

Granting the Christian view of marriage to be that sketched, the answer to why the Church proposes it is really quite simple. The Church proposes it because it corresponds to what God made marriage to be and to what He instructed His Church to teach her members about marriage. If she is to be faithful to her teaching mission which implies that she teach Christ's doctrine and not construct her own, then she must teach the doctrine outlined. Confident of divine assistance in her teaching mission, the Church is equally confident that in proposing the ideal of Christ's teaching on marriage she is giving to men the teaching on marriage which they need to satisfy finally their human aspiration for love and fulfillment. With Saint Peter the Church is wise enough to recognize that Christ and He alone has the words that lead to eternal life. Hence in proposing so lofty an ideal for wedded love and family life the Church knows that she cannot be making impossible demands on weak human nature.

But if the ideal of Christian marriage is a real possibility for man and wife and God does expect the ideal to be reduced to practice, why so little success? Certainly that human weakness that sees sin and ignorance vitiating all human en-

deavors is partly the cause of failures to realize the ideals of married love. But this problem is common to all ages and seemingly of no age is further from the ideal than were our predecessors. Is this to be attributed to a unique perversity of our own generation? I think not but would rather attribute the current breakdown of marriage and family life to the area of social environment rather than to personal ineptitude or bad will. This is not to deny the tremendous responsibility which individuals have to see that their marriages succeed. Ultimately success in marriage is owing to the determination of the couple to succeed. But it is part of realism to recognize that the way men perform is partly caused by the relationships they have with others and the social groups to which they belong. In the long run it makes little difference whether the camel's back is broken by the initial load or the final straw; it is still broken. Presumably with a few less straws on their backs many Catholic couples would manage to carry the burden of married life without being broken by it. Starting from this premise I shall try to show why so many marriages fail today. Then I shall try to outline a program that promises a realization of the Christian ideal in marriage.

As is true for every social goal for man, and marriage presents a social goal, a social structure or pattern of interaction and organization are demanded which will implement the realization of the goal. One never achieves the ideal of one's dream home merely through the

services of an architect. One must also employ the services of a contractor who reduces the architect's blueprint to a home in which one can live. Similarly the ideal blueprint for married life is only the first step in achieving the ideal marriage. Social and familial interaction must be so patterned that the ideal may be reduced to practical living. Developing such patterns which reflect the norms of behavior the blueprint demands establishes what the sociologist calls a social structure.

Now the basic problem facing American Catholics today as they strive to realize the Christian blueprint for married life lies here. Catholics have to realize their family ideals within a larger society which has largely rejected at the practical level the Christian blueprint of marriage and which has already developed social structures to realize the new values and goals implicit in such a rejection. Men do not operate in a vacuum. As soon as they reject one vision of man they immediately substitute another operative blueprint for what they conceive man and his goals to be. Hence the position of Catholics has become comparable to team members who feel constrained to continue playing soccer while the majority of players have changed over to regular football with its greater freedom of movement. Naturally Catholics feel that they are out of step with the dominants in their culture and they find their position frustrating. The temptation is to get in step with the dominants and play the game of life according

to their rules. But such a solution implies loss of self-identity and means that Catholics cease to be Catholics in anything more than name. This is no more a solution for the present "Catholic problem" than the elimination of Jews from Nazi Germany was a solution to the so-called "Jewish problem."

If Catholics are to survive in such circumstances they simply have to devise social structures of their own that will allow them to interact among themselves and maintain self-identity. At the same time they must continue to interact with the dominant members of the society in those areas where the dominants allow them to interact without first demanding the rejection of essential elements of Catholic life. Admittedly such a solution is always going to involve some frustration to all parties involved and has the seeds of considerable discord sown into it. But it is the only solution which our political pattern of cultural pluralism makes feasible at present and it does allow for survival. A totally adequate solution involves the re-Christianization of our society.

What are the steps to be negotiated if the Christian ideal of marriage is to be reduced to practice in American society? First, Catholics must devise a flexible program that shows clear awareness of the difference between the essential elements of the Christian blueprint for marriage and the transitory vehicles employed to realize these ideals in a particular society or culture. Ends endure while means change. Probably the most noticeable characteristic of our society is constant change

and movement. Hence while Catholics keep in mind past solutions of previous eras as they strive to implement the Christian ideal for marriage, they can expect to find only limited help here in devising solutions to current problems. Their position is somewhat comparable to that of our experts in the aerospace industry who are striving to put a man on the moon by 1970. All the knowledge and know-how which has been gathered from previous travels in space is treasured and utilized. But we shall only place a man on the moon and bring him safely home again if our aerospace experts continue to be creative and ingenious in solving problems previous flights in the atmosphere did not meet.

Now as a prerequisite to the creativity and ingenuity needed for the solving of modern marriage and familial problems there is need for a clear understanding of the organization of American society with the values that are implemented through such norms and patterns of behavior. This knowledge must be complemented with a similar knowledge of the ideals of Christian marriage and the ways these ideals are implemented today by Catholics. While maintaining without compromise the essential goals of Christian marriage, Catholics must be ever ready to change the vehicles of their expression as soon as it is seen that they are no longer useful or that some new pattern of behavior is now required to maintain the ideals alive in practice. Obviously such knowledges are not easily acquired and leadership which is capable of developing social structures that meet

modern needs must be found for the Catholic community. Such leadership becomes a possibility once a clear awareness is had of the basic characteristics of our dominant American culture and the Catholic sub-culture, together with the essential similarities and differences of the two.

In addition to the development of such leadership three further steps must be ascended if the ideals of Catholic family life are to be expressed in everyday living. Man's human activity begins with his powers to know and to love. Therefore Catholics have to acquire the requisite knowledge for operating effectively in marriage today. Then they have to be motivated to act in accord with the demands of this knowledge. The Catholic community is thus confronted with a tremendous educational task which must be carried out in the home, at school, and through the educative facilities of the Church. Each education must be very human and practical which implies that it is complemented with a love for what is taught so that Catholics are motivated to implement the blueprint for behavior presented. Finally, group solidarity must be promoted among Catholics, for the assurance of support and approval from like-minded people with whom one constantly associates is a normal human need of Catholics as well as of others who wish to realize group goals.

Fortunately we can point to programs which already exist within the Catholic community which are answering some of the needs we have just indicated. Certainly the

Christian Family and Cana movements qualify in meeting the requirements of an effective program of survival for Catholic married life. They emphasize education for marriage in a setting that motivates one to embrace the Christian ideal. The fact that they effectively promote Christian solidarity and an awareness among participating members that they are not alone in their pursuit of Christian perfection is, given man's social nature, probably of greater significance and importance.

Moreover, the Catholic community is increasingly encouraging its scholars to acquire and diffuse a knowledge of the dominant American culture and the distinctive features of the Catholic subculture. With such knowledges we can reasonably hope to see develop within the Church a clerical and lay leadership that will show the Catholic community how to interact with the dominant society without losing self-identity or its own distinctive way of life. Increasingly Catholics are becoming aware that they must adapt to changing times while maintaining essential values. Once the wheat and chaff of American society are clearly known for what they are, as well as the wheat and chaff of the Catholic subculture, we should be able to accept the good and reject the bad. Appropriate so-

cial structures may then be developed so that Catholics may interact with minimal frustration with the dominant society while they continue to realize the ideals of their Christian way of life.

Finally, attention might be called to the development of diocesan family clinics and parish mutual-aid societies which are giving practical assistance to Catholics in meeting the current problems involved in fidelity to Catholic ideals of family planning. Instead of having to go-it-alone they now have practical evidence that the Catholic community at least is supporting them. Admittedly most of these programs are small and reach relatively few Catholics. But they do show what can be done in a practical way. There is no essential reason why they should not be expanded and made to meet the needs of the Catholic community and not merely of an elite few. If they and similar programs are thus expanded we may hope to see an end to the paradox of Christian marriage to which attention was called at the beginning of this article.

Father Casey of the Society of Jesus is an instructor in sociology at Regis College in Denver. He has a master's degree in sociology from St. Louis University, along with degrees as Ph.L. and S.T.L. He is chairman of the sociology department at Regis with the rank of assistant professor.