



Responsibility and Joy: Catechesis and the Promotion and Protection of Marriage

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I wish to set forth the central role, for the Church and for society, proper to the family based on marriage. The family is a unique [*insostituibile*] institution in God's plan, and the Church cannot fail to proclaim and promote its fundamental importance, so that it can live out its vocation with a constant sense of responsibility and joy.

Pope Benedict XVI, Welcome ceremony at Manises Airport, Valencia, Spain, July 8, 2006

At the beginning of Pope Benedict XVI's apostolic journey to Spain on the occasion of the Fifth World Meeting of Families, which I was happily able to attend along with half a million or so of our Holy Father's closest friends, the Pope recalled the central and unique place of the family based on marriage. He noted how the family's ability to live its vocation with responsibility and joy is linked to the Church's proclamation of the truth and importance of the family. This proclamation includes the Church's continued catechesis on marriage and the family. As our Holy Father stated about the life of the family, we are all called, no matter what our particular vocation and state in life, to rediscover and renew the "responsibility and joy" that should be ours in handing on the truths of marriage and the family.

The family is founded on marriage. Marriage, inscribed by God our Father at the very creation of the human person, is the permanent and exclusive union between one man and one woman, ordered toward the good of the spouses themselves and toward the procreation and education of the children with whom the marriage may be so blessed. This is a great truth! In fact, it is a beautiful truth and part of the Good News of Jesus' redeeming love.

The truth of the family, founded on marriage as the union of one man and one woman, is a truth accessible to reason. We "read" this truth in the language of the body and in the fundamental nature of the human person, created as male and female. History and societies testify to the

irreplaceable role of marriage and the family as the key unit to any society and as the school of love and communion with others. The social sciences and all science and human investigation, as long as they are carried out at the service of truth, bear witness to the beauty of marriage and of spousal and familial love, including the importance of the love of a mother and a father.

As Catholics, we know that the truth of marriage and the family is ultimately illuminated by faith. Christ has not only raised marriage between two baptized persons to be a sacrament, but he also opens our hearts to receive and witness to the Good News and to our Father's plan for marriage and the family. "Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator '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?'" (Mt 19:4-5).

The challenges to marriage and the family today are various and interconnected. Not only have some people chosen not to make commitments to marriage and the family, many also appear not to understand or even consider the importance of marriage and the family. Why is this so? The reasons are many: the growing experience of broken marriages and divorce, the rising acceptance of cohabitation as a step toward or replacement of marriage, and the view that marriage is primarily a private matter without consequence for the common good and society. These are just a few of the challenges that have had a profound

effect on how our young people view and understand love and commitment.

Focus groups that have been conducted for the bishops¹ show that Catholic young adults have a difficult time understanding that spousal love involves a gift of self in good times and in bad. Although the desire for commitment is present, the woundedness and brokenness that these young people have witnessed and experienced cause them to question the very possibility of the enduring commitment of marriage and the structure needed for such commitment. Thus, the promotion and protection of marriage and the family today are all-embracing tasks. The bishops' National Pastoral Initiative on Marriage

(see www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/npim.shtml), which is currently one of the five priorities (the priority on strengthening marriage) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), is one way we bishops have been seeking to promote a renewed understanding and appreciation for marriage and the family in the face of the various challenges of today.

Catechesis to promote and protect marriage is greatly needed and is a significant responsibility. At the same time, let us be convinced that such catechesis is a great joy, for it is a great *yes* to the beauty and truth of marriage and the family as well as to the intrinsic dignity of all human persons. Our catechesis must open the

1 See Steven Wagner, QEV Research Analysis: Focus Groups Regarding Marriage with Catholics in Their 20s (Washington, DC: QEV Analytics, 2009).

door to this beauty. In this article, I will offer first some essential catechetical points on the defense of marriage in light of its institutional weakening in society; then I will speak to the integral connection between marriage and the inviolable dignity of the human person. Finally, I will reflect on how promoting and protecting marriage are tasks for all. I hope this article can be a source of encouragement in our shared responsibility and joy in upholding marriage and thus assisting in the Lord's work of opening hearts and minds to the intrinsic truth, goodness, and beauty of marriage.

Marriage: A Received Truth

The unique nature of marriage as the union of one man and one woman is a received truth. It is not arbitrary or made up. Neither is it old-fashioned, out of touch, or extrinsic to our identity and deepest concerns. Marriage is prepolitical and even prereligious, received from the very hand of our Creator. As we know, truth is meant to be discovered and respected; only when this is the case are we truly free. Pope Benedict XVI wrote, "Truth, and the love which it reveals, cannot be produced: they can only be received as a gift."² Let us ponder some of the essential and unchangeable truths of marriage that should inform our catechesis today.

God is the author of marriage. The Second Vatican Council wrote, "The intimate partnership of life and love

which constitutes the married state has been established by the creator and endowed by him with its own proper laws. . . . God himself is the author of marriage."³ Marriage is created at the same moment, and in the very same breath, as the creation of man and woman (see Mt 19:4-6; Gn 2:23-24). Marriage and human life go together. Marriage is a truth foundational to the very meaning of human life and is meant to be held sacred. It is a truth grounded in nature—not "nature" in the simple terms of trees and butterflies, but the nature of the human person, the nature of man and woman, which encompasses the whole person, body and soul.

Marriage is a two-in-one-flesh communion of persons. Sexual difference and the complementarity between man and woman are intrinsic to marriage. "What is unique about marriage is that it is truly founded on the bodily union made uniquely possible by the sexual complementarity of man and woman—a complementarity that makes it possible for two human beings to become . . . one flesh."⁴ Marriage, by its very nature, is the

2 Pope Benedict XVI, *Charity in Truth [Caritas in Veritate]* [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2009], no. 52. Subsequent references are given in the text.

3 Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, no. 48, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (new rev. ed.), ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996); see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana-USCCB, 2000), no. 1603.

4 Robert P. George, "What Marriage Is—And What It Isn't," *First Things* (August-September 2009): 35.

permanent and exclusive union of one man and one woman. Unlike any other relationship, the relationship between man and woman in marriage is ordered to the unique and intrinsic good of the two-in-one-flesh communion of persons, the grounding point of conjugal love. No other relationship is structured around, or can ever achieve, this good of the two-in-one-flesh communion of persons between man and woman. Catechesis can help hand on this great truth! Heterosexual difference and the beautiful and irreducible complementarity between man and woman are essential ingredients for conjugal love, which also of course calls for faithfulness, indissolubility, and openness to life (i.e., fecundity, which is part and parcel of conjugal love even for infertile or unintentionally sterile couples). Without a man and a woman, we cannot even begin to speak of marriage.

Marriage is open to the child. The true nature of marriage protects the intrinsic good of children and the unique importance of mothers and fathers. The conjugal love between husband and wife is always meant to be fruitful. Even when the gift of a child does not come about, the paths of fruitfulness and spiritual fecundity are manifold and may be realized through adoption or foster care, as well as special service to families, the Church, and the community, including demonstrations of solidarity with the poor, needy, weak, and forgotten.⁵

5 See Pope John Paul II, *On the Family (Familiaris Consortio)* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1982), no. 41; subsequent references are given in the text. See

This is a truth often misunderstood today—hence the need for catechesis. We need to rediscover the great gift of marriage’s openness to the child and all that such openness embraces. To welcome a child is to welcome hope. True conjugal love is always open to life (even for infertile or unintentionally sterile couples, as noted above); it does not intentionally withhold one’s fertility from the other. And it is only in the marriage between one man and one woman that openness to the gift of the child is interwoven into the very fabric of the relationship. Marriage is never a matter of only two consenting adults; rather, it has an intrinsic, fundamental structure for life-giving love, which is only possible in the spousal love of man to woman and woman to man. Marriage protects the fact that the child is always a great gift, meant to be the fruit of the loving union of husband and wife. A child is meant to have a mother and a father. Although we must continue to support the many heroic single parents who sacrifice so much for their children, we cannot lose sight of the rights of the child and the unique role of a mother and a father. Only a man can be father; only a woman can be a mother. Children depend on marriage.

Marriage is the cornerstone of society. Promoting and protecting marriage is a matter of justice, essential for human dignity and for the common good. Marriage, and the family that is built on it, constitutes the first form of

also Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005), nos. 212 and 246.

society. The family is the “first and vital cell of society” (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 42). Indeed, this is a central truth in need of unpacking today. The marriage of one man and one woman has a public character imbued with responsibility. Society depends on marriages for the procreation, formation, and education of children in love, and for the modeling and building of a civilization of love that takes its cue and finds its center in the unique form of spousal love and sharing of life. “The family is the basic context in which we human beings receive both nature and culture as a gift entrusted to our stewardship.”⁶ Thus, protecting the true nature of marriage enhances, rather than diminishes, the intrinsic dignity of every human person. The spousal communion of one man and one woman serves the good of all people. Moreover, it is essential for the common good, the sum total of conditions that allow society to flourish while respecting the dignity of the person. The state is called to be at the service of marriage and the family, and it has a responsibility to respect the fundamental institution of marriage and its unique responsibilities for the life and good of society.

Promoting the Dignity of Every Person

An immediate challenge of our day, which questions the very core of marriage (and, hence, the family), is

6 Carl Anderson and José Granados, *Called to Love: Approaching John Paul II's Theology of the Body* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 236.

the proposal that persons of the same sex can legitimately marry. This issue brings with it much emotion and much confusion, even among Catholics. The Church is very clear about the intrinsic dignity of all people, including persons who experience same-sex attraction, and she continues to decry all forms of unjust discrimination. Still, some mistakenly see the Church's protection of the true nature of marriage as discriminatory or unjust. This makes catechesis all the more important.

When the nature of marriage is understood and the unique place of marriage and the family within society is grasped, then it becomes all the more clear how preserving marriage between one man and one woman is not a denial of rights, equality, or fairness to some, or a matter of discrimination. The path of chaste living and deep friendship ought to be in every person's life. The Church decries all forms of unjust discrimination against persons with homosexual attraction. However, standing for marriage between one man and one woman is a matter of justice, which is to be measured by truth and not by whim. Marriage is by its nature the permanent and exclusive union of one man and one woman, ordered toward specific goods essential for society and for the true development of the human person (see *Caritas in Veritate*, nos. 44 and 51). To treat different things differently is not unjust discrimination; it is a matter of justice. The law has a responsibility to uphold justice. For the state to arbitrarily redefine the unchangeable meaning of

marriage would actually deny the rights of children and unfairly ignore the irreplaceable and vital roles and responsibilities of spouses and mothers and fathers. There are many ways to ensure the basic rights that flow from the intrinsic dignity of the human person; however, sacrificing the unique nature of marriage and the family should not be among them.

Promoting and Protecting Marriage Today

The various truths noted above form a beautiful tapestry, which reveals that the promotion and protection of marriage are not isolated concerns for some. Marriage is interlocked with the meaning of the human person, the family, community, and society. Witnessing to the truth, goodness, and beauty of marriage is a task for all, whether one is married, ordained, consecrated, or living within a committed or transitional single state of life.

Those who are married make a profound witness by living God's plan for marriage, saying yes to the other in freedom, and living a love that is total, faithful, and fruitful. The importance of prayer and regular recourse to the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation, is key here. For Catholic and mixed marriages, praying together with Scripture offers a great source for strength, and couples in interfaith marriages can also find appropriate ways to pray together. For those living with broken marriages or families or living in

single-parent homes, the Lord's grace and the support of the Church and others can assist them in witnessing to and protecting the interconnection between marriage and the family.

All people can support marriage in different ways. The witness of faithful virginity and celibacy for love of Christ complements and encourages the faithful love between spouses. Indeed, the witness of chastity in all its forms, no matter what one's state of life, respects and keeps marriage sacred. In addition, all can and should pray for those who are discerning marriage; for those who are engaged; for the married, especially those in troubled or broken marriages; for the widowed; and for those in positions of authority who should protect marriage and particularly for those who wrongly seek to erode the truth of marriage.

Finally, not enough can be said of the importance of preaching and teaching marriage. In a 2006 talk to marriage and family ministers, I said that we are called to preach loudly the whole truth of our faith on marriage and family. This "we" includes bishops, priests, deacons, catechists, teachers, and all the faithful.

Let us all take up this responsibility and joy of handing on the truths about marriage and the family. Even when it may prove difficult, may we find our source of strength and joy in Christ, who is our hope.

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