

A Selected List of Teaching and Pastoral Statements

NOTE: The following text is the final section of a talk delivered by Bishop Joseph E. Kurtz at the annual convention of the National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers (NACFLM) on June 21, 2006.

The National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage: Six Next Steps

Allow me to mention six words or phrases to keep in mind as we move forward together in this pastoral initiative on marriage.

1. Deepen and speak the conviction that marriage is not simply a private affair.

Brad Wilcox, a social scientist at the University of Virginia, has written extensively on the public nature of marriage and family. He claims that a person who marries really has two commitments. The first is to his spouse, whom he loves dearly, and the second commitment, sometimes forgotten, is to the institution of marriage and its preservation. What the Church in her canon law has called the “commitment to the bond” is a commitment to society and future generations. This commitment is clearly seen as a couple brings a child into the world. In our age of personalism, it has been so tempting to have marriage devolve into a simply private affair. There is ample testimony of this in the very informal ways couples wish to begin their married love together, with purely personal vows devoid of any words beyond them, or even with no vows at all. One of my ministries as bishop is responding in a pastoral way to couples whom I must persuade to have their marriage vows in the sacred place of a church. I take my time in explaining the importance that their vows have to the Church and society and pray that my advice is heeded. I must say that in my pastoral ministry over the years it has not always been easy for me to give full attention to both the private and public aspects of marriage. How tempting it has been, when a couple comes in need of help, to encourage them to take the easy way out. It is not just secular therapists who sees divorce as the solution to the first problems that are confronted. It is tempting to see a dichotomy between upholding the bond of marriage and being pastorally sensitive. In truth, we family ministers must maintain that double commitment. As a therapist I was trained to take a "presenting problem" of a client and reframe it into a wider context that would allow for a healthy therapeutic direction. This is what we do when we expand the words of private commitment into the wider context of the sacred bond of marriage. Some studies will help us on the way. One study mentioned last October at the Creighton University Colloquium described the perceived happiness of couples whose lives were followed five years after they had sought counseling for their troubled marriage. On average, those who stayed together reported that they were happier than those who separated or divorced. Pope Benedict in *Deus Caritas Est* reminds us that we ought not to be too reliant on social scientists as a substitute for the truth. However, these findings can be very useful as an encouragement to us who promote marriage as more than

a private matter.

2. Seek and tell the story of individual couples, and never lose sight of the person.

I have been deeply involved in the Pro Life Movement for years and have admired the leadership and conviction of Cardinal Keeler of Baltimore, who chairs that committee for the bishops. Once he was asked how he maintains zeal for the cause of life, and he said, "If even one mother carrying a child beneath her heart realizes that there is a child's heart beating beneath her own, then any effort we make is worthwhile." It is in the experience of the individual person that we are renewed in our zeal. I believe the very same is true for the apostolate of marriage. It is the way we rejoice at the faithful witness we find that will help us and others remain faithful. This is true in all aspects of life. Emulating sports champs and imitating their success makes our efforts better. Ask any weekend golfer. The same is true for marriage in helping couples maintain their zeal. I recall the great response from young engaged couples to an older team couple who witnessed after years of married love. Contrary to the fear that their witness would be judged as irrelevant, it was that wiser couple that often inspired and made for positive comments on evaluations. Not long ago I received a letter from a parishioner in Chattanooga, Tennessee about her heroes. I asked her permission to read the letter to you today, and she agreed. Here is the text:
Dear Bishop Kurtz,

I'm a member at St. Jude Parish in Chattanooga. I have information that I want to share with you about a couple, not in your Diocese, but that you might be interested in through your role in the Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Marriage and Family.

My grandparents, Leo and Lucille Wenstrup, will celebrate their 70th anniversary on May 30 this year in Cincinnati, Ohio. They are truly an excellent example of what married life should be. In the last 70 years, they have lived through some wonderful events, such as the birth of their 5 children, 15 grandchildren and 15 great-grandchildren. They have also weathered some very difficult times, and through it all, they truly take care of one another. At 91 and 90, they still live alone together.

I was able to visit them recently and, as always, what struck me is how wonderfully they take care of one another. I watched Gram wrap Grandpa's elbow in ice where he has a knot that is having trouble healing. I saw Grandpa count out her pills and be sure she took each one at the appropriate time. She ties his shoes for him and he helps her with dinner. They are truly a team in all aspects of life.

They are also truly in love, even after 70 years together. Consistently, when I've called them, I'll tell Grandpa to give Gram a kiss for me. He'll say, "Oh, I'll enjoy that!" I remember remarking at their 50th anniversary how they still held hands. ...

Since they've been retired, Grandpa has tried to say one rosary for each of their five children every day. Grandma also reads her missal every day without fail. They get Communion as often as possible, even though they haven't been able to get to Church recently because of health problems.

As you can see, God has an active part in their lives and marriage.

Leo and Lucille Wenstrup serve as a tremendous example of married life. They are an inspiration to me, a true gift from God. We hear so much about the statistics on divorce and how difficult marriage is. I thought this wonderful statistic of the success of marriage was worth sharing.

Thank you for your interest and may God bless your work.

Yours truly,

Melissa Meade

We need to find ways to tell the story of fidelity and openness to life found here in the life of Leo and Lucille Wenstrup of Cincinnati . . .

In the Diocese of Knoxville we are seeking to begin a Marriage Anniversary Mass, a tradition deeply ingrained in the life of many dioceses. I am eager to promote anniversary couples in the Diocese and in the Diocesan newspaper, just as we promote the anniversaries of

priests, deacons and religious each year. My plea is that these anniversaries be renewed every year. I will be going to Valencia in two weeks. Our Holy Father will preside over two events in which I am looking forward to take part. This first is a Saturday evening time of marriage witness. With the

cameras of the world on the city in Spain, the world will hear of faithful and committed married love. And then the next day Pope Benedict will celebrate the Anniversaries of Married Couples from throughout the world as part of the closing Mass. These public testimonies are so important for each of us. I hope to bring these intentions to prayer as I did those of Leo and Lucille Wenstrup of Cincinnati.

3. Seek words that avoid placing blame on who is not doing enough.

Near the end of *Familiaris Consortio* (n. 86), Pope John Paul II calls us to "collaborate cordially and courageously." This is a new moment for such collaboration, a time for all dioceses to reexamine the energy and resources they expend to promote marriage and family. I realize that resources are scarce, so collaboration must be the name of the game. I was encouraged by the response of Focus Group couples to the question about what the Church is doing to sustain marriages. The common answer was: "Not much!" But the couples added that, although there is so little offered in their parishes to sustain marriages, there are efforts that indirectly assist them in enriching their relationships. A number mentioned the Adult Faith Formation in their parishes as a means to join together in discussing and deepening their faith. Even though the topic might not have been marriage, they saw great merits in the offerings, enough to mention them in the focus groups. We need to seek creatively ways for such "win - win" solutions.

In my training for providing family therapy some years ago, I recall one key concept was re-framing, finding ways to express in positive ways the realities of life. In some dioceses, the resources are scarce and in some cases even scarcer than they were before. Nonetheless, we must seek ways to collaborate. This is not to suggest that the spotlight on marriage might not result in more attention and resources to marriage. In the Diocese of Knoxville, our fine Diocesan Director, Dale Powers, conducted a survey of priests on the topic of marriage preparation with very high returns.

4. Preach it.

We are called to preach loudly the whole truth of our faith on marriage and family. We must proclaim the need for partnerships that are fully permanent and faithful and are open to life. Focus groups mentioned the lack of preaching on marriage from the pulpit as a serious defect in our pastoral response. The Pastoral Initiative will be a great opportunity to cultivate such preaching on a number of fronts. Let me explain a few.

First of all, in the pulpit of the world, our Holy Father has great power. We can learn from World Youth Days. I was in Cologne last August and witnessed there and through the media coverage what a great opportunity it was to focus on young people and the church's teachings. Even those who were not in the fields outside Cologne were able to experience the importance of the event. There are opportunities for world-wide exposure for Christian marriage as well. I mention two examples: the teaching of the popes and World Meeting of Families. The work of Pope John Paul II on the "Theology of the Body" continues to reverberate in our Church and our world. I am hearing that it is also increasingly a topic for homilies at Mass. Pope Benedict's encyclical on love has had that effect as well. His imagery in the beginning of the encyclical of the Church being perceived as blowing a whistle has to be a first in very understandable language in an encyclical. Let me quote: "Doesn't she (the Church) blow the whistle just when the joy which is the Creator's gift offers us a happiness which is itself a certain foretaste of the Divine?" He goes on to say that the attraction of eros is a good so long as it is rescued from itself by the self-giving love we call agape. Such words of the Pope are spoken from a pulpit that the world hears, and we need to maximize this. In two weeks we will have another chance to do so, when the World Meeting of Families takes place in Valencia. Again the world's pulpit will witness our Holy Father who will gather on Saturday to listen to the witness of married couples and then the next day at Mass he will honor anniversary couples. I submit that this pulpit deserves our promotion. Allow me to mention some other opportunities. There will be public service announcements on marriage developed for showing in 2007, sponsored by the Catholic Communications of the USCCB. This is great news and judging from past work, it will be great. Look for them. The Bishops' committee will have an opportunity to collaborate in the message. They will be in the form of radio, television and print. I have seen the good effects that the Campaign for Human Development ads on poverty have had in raising consciousness. Obviously, you might increase their good effect in your area by making sure they are shown in the media.

Another opportunity for preaching on marriage will be this year's Respect Life Packet for October. I understand that two of the six pamphlets in the packet will be messages on marriage and family. One will be on the love of spouses and the other on the effects that the intact union of a father and a mother have on the lives of their children.

Yet another is the first efforts which the Pastoral Initiative will make in helping bishops to proclaim the good news of the church's teachings on marriage. Our staff is preparing informal "backgrounders" filled with talking points that draw from Church teaching, social science findings and pastoral practices. We hope to send out the first of these encouragements for

preaching the good news in late September. I thank Sheila Garcia, who is working on these "backgrounders" for our Bishops. These are encouragements for preaching the good news.

A few weeks ago I took part in two press conferences in Washington, DC. The first was on the promotion of Marriage Protection Amendment, defining marriage as the union of one man and one woman and emphasizing that this definition that is God given and not changeable. The second was on the opportunities of the Federal Government's announced funding of Healthy Marriage Initiative projects to assist vulnerable married couples through education, advertising and support to remain married. These public occasions were additional times to educate. Finally I mention a suggestion upon which I have not acted, but which bears some creative initiative. It was suggested that we seek some "best practices" in preaching on marriage. I am not sure about the best format for this, but it bears consideration. I am not sure the best format for this to occur but it bears consideration. I will be exploring with the Presbyteral Council as well as the Diocesan Pastoral Council in Knoxville what we might do. One idea is to ask parishioners to suggest the best homilies which they have heard on marriage and print them in the Diocesan newspaper or place them on the Diocesan web site. Your creative energies might be needed to find the best and most acceptable way to do this. Together we seek to proclaim boldly the teachings of the Church on marriage.

5. Marriages must be sustained by the Christian Community.

One of the most telling remarks by one individual who had experienced a divorce and was part of a focus group was this: "After the marriage preparation and wedding was over, I felt that once married I was seen in my parish as a completed project." This resonated with me. Having being a busy pastor, I must admit that the day of the wedding was a breath of relief that this couple was now a "finished product" in life of parish. But my re-reading of Familiaris Consortio reminds me of the continuum of pastoral care to which the Church must be committed. Given the enormity of tasks facing parish priests and leadership, help is needed to sustain existing married couples and to reach out to those who are hurting. Of course the Church holds up with great gratitude Marriage Encounter and Confraternities that promote marriage, Retrouvaille and programs that help hurting marriages, and New Beginnings and other programs that assist when separations occur. I was encouraged by the pastoral letter of last September by Archbishop Brunett of Seattle on the gift of marriage and the concept of mentoring couples. After extolling the gift of marriage in his letter, he says rightly: "We cannot be so idealistic as to think that happy, joyful and fulfilling marriages just happen. They are the result of an ongoing effort to live the abiding faith and committed love pledge on the wedding day." Later in the pastoral letter he calls for action: "Create mentor programs using experienced couples to assist younger couples to build their marriage and make them stronger during the early, critical years of marriage." I believe this has great potential. I have seen the effects that programs for Confirmation sponsors have in the Diocese of Knoxville. In one of our parishes, St. Patrick's in Morristown, not only do those teens to be confirmed write to me, so do their sponsors. I see first

hand the work being done to cultivate a relationship of support by wise and mature Christians in the lives of those who are being formed. I believe the same potential exists for marriage ministry, and I encourage those dioceses that are already sponsoring such programs to continue doing so. I also suspect that the training and support of mentor couples might be a very fruitful use of the funds that might be available from the Healthy Marriage Initiative that NACFLM hopes to coordinate in selected dioceses. Of course while I realize there is no guarantee that NACFLM will be successful, and we must always read the fine print, I support this government funding.

6. It is Jesus' plan.

The most important point is that it is God who leads, and we must avoid a false sense of self importance and the burden that comes with it. Otherwise we will find ourselves filled with temptations to blame and tendencies to lose our zeal from burnout. It is God who will protect Marriage as a gift. Thus family life ministry must begin and end in prayer.

Last Saturday morning the first reading at Mass was from I Kings. It was the scene between the two prophets. Elijah had just defeated the 300 false prophets of Baal but Jezebel, the Queen, prayed that Elijah might be just as dead as they were. Knowing that prophets were in a small minority, Elijah approached Elisha plowing with oxen in the field. We Family Life Ministers are a bit like each of these prophets. Like Elisha, who received the call of the Lord through Elijah, we might trace our ministry to the kind and perhaps persistent invitation of another. For me it was the bishop inviting me to studies in social work. But I know it was the hand of the Lord. And, like Elisha, who put his past work behind him by slaying and cooking up the oxen for a feast before he left, many of you have sacrificed to be family life ministers. So too there is a little of Elijah in each of us. As Elijah was the instrument of the Lord's call to the new prophet, you and I must heed the Lord's call to invite others into this rich and most important ministry in the Church.

I am reminded of one final story: the pancake breakfast for Kevin and Ryan. Informed by their mother of the treat of pancakes, she then said she could make pancakes for only one at a time. Then before she called for an answer, she reminded them: "If Jesus were here, He would say – Let my brother have the first pancake." So Kevin turned to 3 year old Ryan and said, "Ryan, you be Jesus!" In our Sacramental Church the priest is called to be an alter Christus but indeed the baptismal call is the call to renew the world. Thus we have the tasks set before us: renew the hearts of married couples and of those preparing for marriage. Be the prophet to give them a mind and heart steeped with the rich teaching of our faith on marriage. Or to quote Kevin, "You be Jesus!"

"The future of the world and of the Church passes through the family." May the Pastoral Initiative of the U.S. Bishops be an occasion to lift up and support married couples, and may the Lord bless you, His Family Life Ministers, in the task ahead.