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**SEEKING A SOULMATE: A Social Scientific View of the Relationship between
Commitment and Authentic Intimacy**
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“[It] is not good that the man should be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him.”

(Gn 2:18)

In a world all too often marked by fleeting and fragile relationships in the marketplace, the public square, the church, and even one’s family of origin, it is no wonder that so many of our young people are looking for a soulmate who will give them the intimacy they have not yet found in this world—someone to share their lives, their dreams, and their desires for an enduring and heartfelt love (Whitehead and Popenoe 2001; Stanley 2005). What many young people do not know is that this desire for human intimacy has also been placed on their hearts by God, and is most likely to be realized in the context of a marriage founded on a deep commitment to the welfare of their spouse, and to the institution of marriage itself.

To speak in explicitly Catholic terms, the road to genuine human intimacy travels through a complete “gift of self” to one’s spouse in marriage and to the larger sacramental reality of marriage. This is a narrow, winding, and often difficult road, but it is a road that offers rewards of incalculable value—an intimacy that encompasses the totality of the person. In Pope John Paul II’s words:

Conjugal love involves a totality, in which all the elements of the person enter—appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of the will. It aims at a deeply personal unity, a unity that, beyond union in one flesh, leads to forming one heart and soul; it demands *indissolubility* and *faithfulness* in definitive mutual giving; and it is open to *fertility*. (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 13)

As John Paul II observes, genuine human intimacy is most likely to be experienced in a marriage where spouses respect the goods of marriage—indissolubility, fidelity, and openness to life, among others—and live the virtues that make the realization of those goods possible. It is also more likely to be experienced when persons do not make the search for intimacy or marital happiness their primary marital objective, but instead make it their marital mission to serve God or some other common good, anything that takes their focus off themselves and their own relationship. In this paper, I aim to present the sociological and psychological evidence that shows this deeper Catholic view of human love to be true.

Let me begin by defining intimacy, albeit in relatively crude social scientific terms. Intimacy is a sharing in the life of another. Intimacy can encompass a sharing of physical, emotional, or intellectual life with another person. This paper addresses the intimacy that is found in a marital or nonmarital romantic relationship. For physical intimacy, I focus here on sexual frequency and satisfaction in a relationship, as well as spending time with one's lover or spouse. With respect to emotional intimacy, I focus on satisfaction with the affection that one receives from one's spouse or lover. By

intellectual intimacy, I refer to a knowledge of another's needs, desires, and concerns, and the ability to disclose such needs, desires, and concerns to one's spouse or lover. Finally, I also rely on reports of marital happiness and stability as proxies for intimacy.

Commitment is defined in a double sense as personal dedication to one's lover/spouse and as a normative commitment to marriage itself. Specifically, drawing on the work of psychologist Scott Stanley (2005: 23), I define dedication as "an internal state of devotion to a person or project." This means that one is deeply committed to the person and to their welfare, come what may. Normative commitment to marriage encompasses a commitment to the goods of marriage—marital exclusivity, indissolubility, fruitfulness, and the like. Personal dedication and normative commitment also entail a set of virtues that make the goods of marriage possible—such as fidelity, loyalty, generosity, and fortitude (Fowers 2000). This paper shows that couples who are personally dedicated to one another, and who share a normative commitment to marriage, are much more likely to experience the kind of total intimacy described by Pope John Paul II than couples who are less committed to one another and marriage.

Two Relational Dead Ends: Divorce and Cohabitation

This section takes up the role that divorce and cohabitation play in affording persons the opportunity to experience authentic intimacy. It considers this basic question: Do divorce and cohabitation make it more or less likely that persons will experience authentic intimacy?

In America today, between 40 and 50 percent of marriages will end in divorce (Bramlett and Mosher 2002; Kreider and Fields 2002). But only about one-third of

divorces involve physical or emotional abuse. Two-thirds of divorces happen for other, less serious reasons: spouses grow apart, they disengage emotionally from one another, or they experience personality clashes, infidelity, communication problems, or financial difficulties (Amato and Booth 1997; Gottman 1994; Waite *et al.* 2002). For many of the men and women who seek to end their marriage for these reasons, divorce may seem to open up a road to a second chance at seeking a soulmate.

But for most men and women, divorce where abuse is not involved proves to be a dead end. Take sex. Married adults have more sex and they enjoy it more, compared to divorced adults. The National Sex Survey found that divorced men and women are about half as likely as married men and women to have sex twice a week or more (Waite and Gallagher 2000: 79). This survey also found that approximately 42 percent of married women and 49 percent of married men report they find sex extremely emotionally satisfying, compared to 27 percent of divorced women and 23 percent of divorced men who are sexually active but not cohabiting (Waite and Gallagher 2000: 82).

What about the possibility of a happy and enduring second marriage in the wake of divorce—other important signs of successful intimacy? My own research suggests that remarriages are characterized by less intimacy than first marriages. Specifically, I found that women married to a man who was previously divorced are significantly more likely to report unhappiness with their husband's affection and understanding; remarried men are also less likely to report spending quality time with their second wives, compared to men who have only been married once (Wilcox and Nock 2005).

Another study by Linda Waite and her colleagues indicates that unhappy married couples do better if they remain married, rather than divorce. Waite tracked married

couples from 1988-1993 who indicated that they were unhappy in 1988. Among those who honored their wedding vows and avoided divorce, 64 percent reported that they were happily married five years later. By contrast, only 24 percent of those who divorced in their study were married five years later. Among these remarried couples, 81 percent indicated that they were happy in their marriages. This means that only 19 percent of spouses who were unhappy in 1988 and divorced were happily married five years later, compared to 64 percent of couples who honored their marital vows (Waite *et al.* 2002: 12).

Finally, remarriages are more vulnerable to divorce than first marriages. For instance, one recent federal study found that second marriages were 25 percent more likely to end in divorce in the first 10 years than were first marriages (Bramlett and Mosher 2001). Given current divorce trends, this suggests that most remarriages will fail. As Samuel Johnson observed, “A second marriage is the triumph of hope over experience.”

Thus, the data do not suggest that—on average—divorce offers a route to the renewal of intimacy for married adults who have fallen into marital difficulties (excepting abuse), unhappiness, or who have grown apart. With respect to a range of markers of intimacy—sexual frequency and satisfaction, relationship quality, marital happiness, and marital stability—men and women who divorce typically do worse, and sometimes much worse, than men and women who remain married. To be fair, some of the differences between married and divorced adults are due to selection; generally speaking, those who remain married have happier marriages than those who divorce. Nevertheless, Linda Waite’s longitudinal research tracking couples who were all unhappy in 1988 is

suggestive. Most of those who honored their wedding vows found marital happiness five years later, whereas most of those who broke their vows did not find marital happiness. So, even though our society holds up divorce as an opportunity to start over and find a new soulmate, the data suggest that the failure to live the virtue of marital loyalty has unintended consequences that make it a dead end for a majority of adults.

Cohabitation is another common but chimerical road to intimacy in our society. Approximately 60 percent of marriages are preceded by cohabitation, and about 60 percent of high school seniors now agree that it is a “good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along” (Stanley 2005; Popenoe and Whitehead 2005). So, the common idea is that cohabitation allows couples to test their compatibility and their commitment to one another to see if they are capable of being soulmates. Couples that survive the cohabitation test, the thinking goes, will have a better chance of achieving genuine intimacy and marital success than those who do not live together.

Nevertheless, there is no empirical evidence that cohabitation represents a successful road to intimacy. Indeed, most research suggests that cohabitation is associated with more relationship problems and divorce for those who marry after cohabiting. Part of the reason that cohabitation seems to harm marriage is that it can start the relationship off on the wrong foot.

Although they have sex more often than their married peers, cohabiting couples report lower levels of emotional satisfaction with sex than do married couples; interestingly, the satisfaction gap is bigger for men (48 percent of married men are extremely satisfied emotionally with their sex lives compared to 37 percent of cohabiting

men) than women (42 percent of wives versus 39 percent of cohabiting women), perhaps because cohabiting women tend to be almost as committed to their partner as married women, whereas cohabiting men are much less committed to their partner than married men (Waite and Gallagher 2000: 83; Stanley 2005). Moreover, cohabiting men and women are more than four times as likely to be unfaithful to their partners, compared to married spouses—an important violation of physical intimacy (Laumann *et al.* 1994; Stanley 2005).

Cohabiting couples also score lower on a range of other measures of intimacy: relationship satisfaction, communication, and constructive conflict. One study by psychologists Galena Kline and Scott Stanley found that couples who lived together—particularly couples who moved in together before getting engaged—had “lower satisfaction, poorer communication, more conflict, higher rates of physical violence, and less confidence in their relationships” than married couples (Stanley 2005: 152). Other studies come up with similar results, and they also suggest that cohabiting couples become less committed to marriage as a consequence of cohabiting (Popenoe and Whitehead 2001). The bottom line is this: cohabitation does not do a good job preparing couples for marriage; indeed, cohabitation often appears to supply couples with vices that they take into their marriages, and which then sabotage their efforts to experience authentic intimacy in marriage.

One final, and important, indicator of the way in which cohabitation is a dead end when it comes to intimacy is that most studies indicate that cohabitation is associated with markedly higher rates of divorce. Married couples where both spouses have cohabited are between 33 percent and 50 percent more likely to divorce than married

couples where neither spouse has cohabited (Cherlin 1992; Laumann *et al.* 1994). Couples are most at risk when they cohabited prior to engagement, or when one spouse had one or more sexual partner besides his or her spouse. By contrast, the elevated divorce risk associated with cohabitation seems to be nonexistent for couples who cohabited after engagement and were not sexually active with anyone but their spouse (Stanley 2005; Popenoe and Whitehead 2005). But even these exceptions prove the rule: successful marriages are built in part around the virtue of sexual fidelity and against a horizon of commitment—both of which are most easily realized in the bonds of wedlock.

Roads to Authentic Intimacy: Marriage, Personal Dedication, and Normative Commitment

So what are the best roads to authentic intimacy? What should be clear by now is that the institution of lifelong marriage has a clear advantage over the alternatives—divorce and remarriage, cohabitation, and serial dating—in its capacity to lead adults to the authentic unity of physical, emotional, and intellectual life with another person that most of us seek. Compared to adults in other types of intimate sexual relationships, married couples experience higher levels of emotional satisfaction with their sex lives, better communication, less domestic violence, and more happiness in their relationships (Waite and Gallagher 2000; Nock 1995). What is more, these patterns seem to extend across racial and ethnic lines in the United States. For instance, my own research with a sample of predominantly Black and Latino parents from urban America indicates similar patterns: married mothers and fathers of small children living in urban America report significantly more relationship happiness, compared to unmarried parents who are

cohabiting or dating with one another; married fathers of small children are also more likely to report that the mothers of their children are affectionate, encouraging, and understanding than are unmarried fathers (Wolfinger and Wilcox 2005). One review of the social scientific research on family structure by 16 family scholars summed up the research in this way:

[M]arriage typically fosters better romantic and parental relationships than alternatives to marriage... [A]dults who are married enjoy happier, healthier, and less violent relationships, compared to adults who are in dating or cohabiting relationships. Parents who are married enjoy more supportive and less conflictual relationships with one another, compared to parents who are cohabiting or otherwise romantically involved with one another. (Wilcox *et al.* 2005: 15-15)

In sum, social science clearly finds that the institution of marriage offers important advantages to men and women who are seeking an avenue to authentic intimacy.

But not just any marriage will do for those looking for a soulmate for life. The research on marital intimacy also indicates that commitment—measured both by personal dedication and by a normative commitment to the institution of marriage itself—is the surest path to authentic intimacy. This research also suggests that those who believe that they should remain married for as long as their love shall last are in for a cruel surprise. Ironically, those who make the feeling of love or romance the foundation of their marriage are *less* likely to experience marital intimacy and more likely to find themselves

in divorce court (Fowers 2000; Wilcox *et al.* 2005). As psychologist Blaine Fowers (2000: 4) observes, many Americans “expect marriage to make us happy and provide us with an emotionally fulfilling life. Those high expectations make it all too easy for us to become disillusioned, and divorce is a natural response to our disappointment.”

By contrast, couples who are committed to the good of their spouse, and to the goods of marriage, are more likely to experience authentic intimacy in their marriages. I focus first here on the consequences of personal dedication and then turn to examining the consequences of normative commitment. Recall that dedication is a forward-looking commitment to the good of your spouse and the relationship more generally. More specifically, in Scott Stanley’s formulation (2005: 24), dedication has the following components:

- A strong couple identity—that is, the ability to think in terms of “us” and “we”;
- A desire to make one’s spouse and marriage a high priority;
- A commitment to avoiding attractive alternatives to your spouse;
- A willingness to sacrifice for your spouse without resentment;
- And, a strong sense of one’s future as a couple—that is, the ability to take the long-term view.

How, then, is personal dedication related to marital intimacy? First, couples who score higher on these indicators of dedication are more likely to report that they feel comfortable disclosing their deepest dreams, desires, hurts, and failings to one another (Stanley 2005: 62-63). Individuals who avoid thinking about alternatives to their current

spouse, and do not commit adultery, are more satisfied with their marriages and are also more satisfied with their marital sex life (Stanley 2005: 95). People who are willing to give up activities that are important to them for the sake of their marriages also report significantly higher levels of happiness and marital stability than people who do not regularly sacrifice for the sake of their marriage (Stanley 2005: 126). Happy couples are also more likely to talk about their future together, whereas unhappy couples dwell on past failures, conflicts, and disappointments in their marriage (Stanley 2005: 176-177). A strong sense of a marital future also makes it more likely that couples will talk about their individual and collective dreams (Stanley 2005: 179). In sum, when a couple share personal dedication to one another, and to their marriage as a whole, they are more likely to experience the physical, emotional, and intellectual intimacy that most of us look for in life.

Normative commitment to marriage also serves as an important road to authentic intimacy. In my work on marriage, I have conceptualized normative commitment with a view to the unitive and procreative character of marriage, in large part because marriage is the institution that virtually every society in the world has relied upon to bind parents to the children they bring into the world by uniting them to one another in a faithful, lifelong relationship (Wilcox *et al.* 2005). Specifically, my research (Wilcox 2004: 216; Wilcox and Nock 2005) defines normative commitment to marriage in the following ways:

- A belief that children should be born in wedlock;
- A pronatalist orientation;

- A commitment to viewing marriage as a lifelong enterprise;
- A strong disapproval of divorce, especially when children are involved;
- And, a belief that marriage is a better state of life than singleness.¹

What have I found in looking at the relationship between normative commitment and intimacy? Not surprisingly, couples who share a normative commitment to marriage that encompasses support for marital childbearing, an openness to new life, and a belief that marriage is for life are much more likely to experience the joys of marital intimacy. Wives who share this type of commitment with their husband report spending more time alone with him, more meaningful marital conversations, and more shared couple activities (but husbands' reports of such quality time are not affected by their normative commitment). Husbands and wives who share this commitment are also more likely to report happiness with the affection and understanding that they receive from their spouse. Moreover, husbands and wives who are both deeply committed to marriage as an institution are more likely to report high levels of marital happiness (Wilcox and Nock 2005).² Finally, other research indicates that married men and women who oppose adultery and premarital sex—two acts that contradict the unitive character of marriage—are significantly more likely to report that they are very satisfied with their sex lives (Waite and Gallagher 2000: 95).

¹ Bear in mind that my work relies on a national sample where I am not specifically targeting Catholics. Furthermore, my survey does not qualify the marital preference in terms that would allow a respondent to indicate that celibacy might be a preferred route for some people. So my classification of normative commitment to marriage does not adequately address the theological nuances of Catholicism when it comes to discussing the relative merits of the single and married states in life.

² For this paper, I conducted additional analyses of the National Survey of Families and Households (1992-1994) to investigate the consequence of normative commitment for wives' investments in quality time, their affection and understanding, and their husbands' marital happiness.

Taken together, this research indicates that it is not just marriage per se that offers a route to intimacy but the idea of marriage itself. People who believe that marriage is sacred, that it is set apart for certain goods—sexual and emotional intimacy, procreation, childrearing, and lifelong love—are significantly more likely to partake of the fruits of a good marriage—an enjoyable sex life, meaningful conversations, expressions of affection, and the like—than are people who commit themselves only to remain married so long as they both shall love one another (Wilcox *et al.* 2005).

Committing to the Difficult Path

The best things in life are often purchased at a great price. The path to authentic intimacy is no different; it is a difficult, winding route that often descends into deep valleys of suffering and sacrifice before climbing to the heights of human experience. Authentic intimacy requires the constant gift of self, often to the point of dying to the felt needs and desires of the self, and it also requires a common vision of the good life that allows spouses to look beyond themselves. This insight helps us to understand how and why the seemingly easy paths of divorce, cohabitation, and low-commitment marriage are not likely to lead to a lifelong soulmate. In this section, I offer a few explanations for why these paths are dead ends and why committed marriage is a better path for men and women seeking intimacy.

There are at least two reasons why divorce is not likely to secure an adult a new chance at authentic intimacy. First, one reason that divorce happens is that at least one spouse is not committed in a personal or normative sense to the marriage. This lack of commitment will remain with the divorcing spouse as he or she enters a new relationship

or marriage, and will seriously reduce the likelihood that he or she enjoys a stable, high-quality relationship in the future. Second, in many cases, divorce is often seen as a quick fix for individual or relationship problems—communication difficulties, alcohol abuse, unemployment, emotional disengagement—but often does not address the underlying vices, illusions, or vulnerabilities that made the marriage difficult in the first place. What they do not realize is that most married people who have experienced serious unhappiness or difficulties but do not break their wedding vows later report that they have worked through their problems or made peace with marital differences and difficulties; consequently, later on, most of these couples report that they are happily married and that they are glad they stuck it out (Stanley 2005:140; Waite *et al.* 2002: 12). By contrast, for those who seek divorce as an easy way out of marital difficulties, the relationship or individual problems that harmed a first marriage will often come back to haunt a second marriage. For these reasons, divorce is not a reliable route to a new shot at authentic intimacy for most married adults experiencing marital problems.

Cohabitation is also not a good way to go about finding a soulmate, for four reasons. First, precisely because cohabitation entails less commitment, less deliberation, and less ceremony than marriage, couples often cohabit who have little in common, have not thought seriously about their relationship, and have different objectives in cohabiting (one partner wishes to save money on rent whereas the other partner sees the relationship as an opportunity to prepare for marriage) (Wilcox *et al.* 2005). Accordingly, cohabiting couples tend to be less compatible, less committed to one another, and more confused about their common future together—all factors that make it more difficult for cohabiting couples to form and maintain a meaningful relationship (Popenoe and Whitehead 2001;

Stanley 2005). Second, cohabiting couples who are not particularly committed to one another often slide into marriage; they do so because they have already invested by default in a life together—from a house to a common circle of friends—and marriage seems like the logical next step to them, their friends, and their family. The problem is that they carry this lack of commitment into their marriage, thereby reducing their chance of experiencing a stable, high-quality marriage (Stanley 2005).

Third, insofar as cohabiting partners view cohabitation as an opportunity to test the quality of their relationship or the personality and character of their lover, they are setting themselves up for failure. Men and women who adapt this consumer mindset are more likely to take a critical view of their relationship and partner; they are more likely to keep an account of who does what in the relationship; and, they are less likely to devote themselves unreservedly to the relationship and to their partner. In more straightforward terms, this consumer mindset stands in direct contradiction to the gift of self upon which authentic intimacy depends. For all these reasons, cohabiting couples are less likely to receive and extend authentic intimacy in their cohabiting union. Moreover, if they transition from cohabitation to marriage, they are less likely to enjoy a high-quality, lifelong marriage because they have acquired the vice of looking at their relationship and spouse through a consumer lens (Brines and Joyner 1999; Fowers 2000; Stanley 2005; Wilcox and Nock 2005).

Fourth, because family members, friends, and other interested parties (clergy, employers, neighbors, insurance companies, etc.) do not know how to assess the commitment of each cohabiting partner, they tend to offer less emotional and financial support to the relationship. Moreover, parents of cohabiters tend to be less supportive of

the couple even after they marry precisely because their relationship with the wife or husband of their child is more likely to have gotten off to an uncertain and rocky start (Popenoe and Whitehead 2001; Wilcox *et al.* 2005). As a consequence, cohabiting couples and couples who cohabited prior to marriage are less likely to receive the social support that can be an important element of a successful relationship.

How, then, does a marriage marked by high levels of personal dedication and normative commitment to marriage itself increase the likelihood that persons will experience the joys of authentic intimacy? Essentially, there are four ways that a high-commitment marriage makes it more likely that men and women will find their soulmate in their spouse. First, a high-commitment marriage allows spouses to take the long-term view of their relationship, which makes it easier to put daily challenges, extraordinary stresses, and conflicts into perspective and to take a positive view of their relationship (Wilcox and Nock 2005). Second, this long term view, and the trust associated with a high-commitment marriage, also encourages spouses to invest emotionally and materially in their marriage without fear that their spouse will divorce them, thereby rendering these investments worthless. This is why, as we have seen, personal dedication is associated with higher rates of self-disclosure in marriage; spouses in high-commitment marriages are not likely to worry that their disclosures will threaten their relationship, or be turned against them. The literature also suggests that this long-term view is particularly important for men, who are much more likely to sacrifice for their partner in the context of a relationship that has a long-term future and a set of social norms that encourage sacrificial behavior—i.e., a marital relationship (Stanley 2005; Wolfinger and Wilcox 2005).

Third, by stressing the importance of sexual and emotional fidelity, a high commitment marriage protects intimacy from external threats. This is important in part because infidelity is, for obvious reasons, strongly associated with divorce and marital conflict. But it is also important because spouses who actively resist the temptation to think about alternative partners are more likely to focus on the welfare of their spouse and their marriage (Stanley 2005).

Fourth, partners who are married, and are highly committed to one another, are more likely to receive material and emotional support for their relationship from family, friends, and other interested parties (Wilcox *et al.* 2005). Their commitment to one another sends a signal to these parties that their own offerings of support to the relationship and to each spouse will not be wasted. This support can be particularly important in buffering the married couple from the stresses (unemployment, poverty, illness, problems with children) that can otherwise harm a relationship.

Conclusion

The road to authentic intimacy is difficult. It requires that a person take public vows signaling his or her commitment to the good of his or her spouse, come what may; it requires sexual fidelity, innumerable sacrifices, dealing with lots of foibles and sometimes much worse from one's spouse, sharing one's time and talent with one's spouse, and accepting the challenges associated with having and rearing children. But, as this paper has sought to demonstrate, the social scientific literature on relationships indicates that the narrow, difficult, and often winding road of a high-commitment marriage is the one most likely to lead a person to the heights of human intimacy.

As importantly, although this paper has not focused on the link between marital commitment and parent-child relationships, a high-commitment marriage is also the type of relationship most likely to deliver a high-quality relationship with both parents to a child. First, parents—particularly fathers—in intact marriages spend more time with their children than children in cohabiting, single-parent, or stepfamily homes (Wilcox *et al.* 2005). Second, children are much more likely to report affectionate relationships with both their father *and* their mother if they are in an intact, married household (Wilcox *et al.* 2005). Third, we know that fathers who have a strong normative commitment to marriage are more likely to hug and praise their children very often, compared to fathers who do not have such a commitment (Wilcox 2004). So, not only does a committed marriage offer benefits to adults, it also makes it more likely that adults will enjoy an intimate relationship with the children that follow from their relationship with one another.

Nevertheless, in thinking about intimacy, we should recall that no human relationship—no matter how committed—will fully meet the desires of the human heart. In the words of St. Augustine, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” Even secular observers of marriage such as psychologist Blaine Fowers (2000) have observed that married couples that focus only on their relationship are headed for a harsh reality check—namely, no person or relationship is capable of delivering all that we seek in life. Thus, from a Catholic perspective, married couples should treat their marriage as an opportunity to deepen their intimate relationship with God, recognizing that their hearts will be restless until they rest in God, and as an opportunity to witness to the world the saving relationship between Christ and His

Church (May 1995). Indeed, it is precisely in the most difficult moments of marriage that Catholics will be closest to their crucified savior. The paradox is that a transcendent focus such as this will make their marriage all that much more meaningful, and will deepen their friendship by providing them with a common vision of the good life to pursue together (Fowers 2000; Stanley 2005). Thus, seeing marriage as an opportunity to grow in intimacy with and commitment to God redounds to the benefit of the spouses themselves.

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