

The Role of the Family and the Sacrament of Marriage As the Foundation for Christ's Church

*Family Honor Conference, Atlanta
July 23, 2004*

By Bishop Victor Galeone

In my diocese – the Diocese of Saint Augustine – confirmation candidates are expected to write a letter, telling me something about themselves and why they want to be confirmed. This quote from one such letter is typical of dozens that I receive every year:

“In my family, I have one real brother called Dan, and one real sister called Hannah. My parents divorced a few years ago and both got remarried. On my Dad’s side, I have two stepbrothers called Michael and Richmond. On my Mom’s side I have one stepbrother called Matthew and three stepsisters Erin, Leah and Jackie. My Mom got remarried to a man called Matt; and last year, my Dad remarried a woman called Carol. All four of them are good at parenting and seem to understand me well.”

Last week, the local Jacksonville newspaper carried a front-page story of a 14-year-old boy who was taking legal action to divorce his father. The father is serving a life sentence for murdering the boy’s mother. The article recounted the tragic details of the killing: “Patrick Holland was 8 years old the night his father smashed a window in his Quincy, Massachusetts home with a golf bag, shot his mother eight times, then beat her in the face with the rifle.”

I could go on multiplying anecdotes about the present state of marriage and the family in our modern culture. Instead, I’d like to quote the opening paragraph from Dr. James Dobson’s *Focus on the Family* newsletter of this past April:

“Dear Friends: I write to you today with a profound sense of concern and apprehension for the welfare of the family, and indeed, for the future of our nation. I do not recall a time since the beginnings of *Focus on the Family*, 27 years ago, when the institution of marriage faced such peril, or when the forces arrayed against it were more formidable or determined. Barring a miracle, the family as it has been known for more than five millennia will crumble, presaging the fall of Western civilization itself. This is a time for concerted prayer, divine wisdom, and greater courage than we have ever been called upon to exercise.”

Dr. Dobson is referring, of course, to the mad drive to legalize same-sex marriage. He goes on to give ten reasons why such legalization would be detrimental to the family, as established by God. I would like to focus our attention on just three of his reasons:

First, educators will insist that the pictures in your child’s textbooks include same-sex couples as normal. Furthermore, your child may have to attend “sensitivity sessions” to learn how to relate to children raised in same-sex homes.

Second, pastors will be forbidden to preach against homosexual behavior as sinful in accordance with biblical teaching. Such pronouncements will be declared “hate-speech” and discriminatory.

If you think I exaggerate, there is a Lutheran pastor in Sweden at this very moment, serving a one-month jail sentence for preaching that message.

Third, same-sex marriage will be only the first step in reconstructing our society. How will you say “No” to these social engineers when they demand to marry multiple wives? Or to marry their siblings?

To bring this exercise down to concrete everyday experiences, I’d like to ask:

- How will you react when your new same-sex neighbors invite your kids over to their house to play with their kids?
- How will you react as you’re watching the evening news with your children when the screen shows two men or two women, locked in a passionate embrace?
- How will you react when your daughter brings home a young man that she loves who was raised by a lesbian couple? What role model does he have for treating his future wife?

Moving on, I’d like to pose this question: Have you ever wondered what’s behind the drive for same-sex marriage? Consider this: At a time when heterosexual couples are opting for cohabitation rather than marriage, why are homosexual couples so determined to have the state recognize their cohabitation as a valid marriage?

The answer is given by Dr. Claudia Navarini, a bioethics expert who teaches in Rome. She maintains that the drive for same-sex marriage is **ideological** : (namely) “to weaken, to split and finally to eradicate the very meaning of marriage, by deforming it with (same-sex) simulations, and thus **destroy the family**, the reality of which proclaims the radical truth about our human nature.”

The accuracy of Dr. Navarini's assessment is borne out by the gay-activist author of *Equal Marriage for Same-Sex Couples* :

“We hope that this (i.e. same-sex marriage) will cause people with spiritual aspirations to question their beliefs...Whether we’re dealing with gays or Galileo, if a heresy proves to be otherwise, then the **dogma must change. This is perhaps the biggest impact that same-sex marriage** will have on these failed (do-gooders).”

As stark and bleak as the foregoing may appear, Benjamin Wiker paints an even bleaker picture in the article he wrote in the current issue of *Crisis Magazine*. In his article entitled *The Death of Morality*, Dr. Wiker stresses that the greatest moral crisis is now upon us. And it isn’t abortion, or infanticide, or even blatant homosexuality. No, these have all existed in the past, at the time of the Roman Empire.

Dr. Wiker explains: “If these ills were all that plagued us, we would only be facing an especially ugly relapse into the darkness of paganism. But underneath these ills lies a darkness against

which even the darkness of paganism is light — the rejection of human nature itself, and hence the rejection of *all* morality.”

Traditionally, the Church has always taught that man is bound by the natural law. Namely, there are certain actions that are intrinsically good or evil depending on whether or not they conform to our human nature. However, in our relativistic age — where there are no more absolutes — everything is negotiable. “What may be true for you is not true for me! So don't try to force your morality on me!”

In a clever paragraph, Wiker imagines some future supercilious history professor telling his students with a smirk: “Catholics (used to think) that human nature itself was some kind of an eternal given, that it provided a kind of impassable limit, and that from the ‘eternal givens’ (chuckle, chuckle) of human nature something called mo-ral-i-ty (and here he will need to spell this strange word) arose from these givens. This is a somewhat understandable error.

Just as it appears that the sun is rising, so also it appeared to them that human beings could only be created in the same way as is common among other animals. This lack of imagination was rooted in a lack of technology . . . Telescopes allowed human beings to see that the vastness of the cosmos demonstrated how insignificant a speck they were, and hence they wisely gave up the belief that the Earth was at the center of the universe. So also, the new genetic technologies have made clear: ‘Our only limit is our imagination !’...The question now becomes — not what **ought** to be done, but what **can** be done.”

With such a depressing outlook, one might be tempted to despair. After all, the situation does seem utterly hopeless!

My friends, I ask you to recall the words that Mordecai spoke to Queen Esther. At the time, she was wavering about whether to intercede for the Jews — her fellow countrymen — all destined for extermination. At that point, Mordecai confronted the queen with this challenge: “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to the throne for just such a time as this.”

Yes, my brothers and sisters, who knows? Perhaps you and I have been placed where we are for just such a time as this! And let us never forget, “When the night is the darkest, the stars shine the brightest.”

That said, I propose that the main task facing us is this: To bring our fellow citizens — and even fellow Catholics — back to the basics. **Yes, we must re-teach the basics of family life!**

At the conclusion of my talk, I will stress why this is so crucial.

In returning to the basics, I propose to do so in two stages:

- First, I want to establish that the family is the basic cell of society.
- Second, I will attempt to show how sacramental marriage is the basic cell of the Church.

First, let us examine the family as the **basic unit of society**. In this task we are joined by most other Christians as well as Orthodox Jews — namely, everyone who takes Genesis 1 and 2 as divine revelation. There we see that the family was established neither by the state, nor by the Church, but by God himself.

There are two accounts of creation in the book of Genesis. The first account occurs in chapter one: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them.” The next verse contains the very first command given by God: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” We thus see that God's first purpose for marriage is that it be *life-giving*. Without the love embrace between husband and wife, human life would cease to exist on this earth.

In the second account of creation — in Genesis 2, we learn that the other purpose God has for marriage is that it be *love-giving*: “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a helpmate as his partner.” Yes, God meant husband and wife to be intimate friends, supporting each other in mutual and lasting love. Accordingly, marriage exists to communicate both *life* and *love*.

Every Wednesday between September of 1979 and November of 1984, our Holy Father dedicated his General Audience talks to an explanation of human love according to God's plan.

These talks have come to be known as “The Theology of the Body.” I do not wish to preempt my fellow presenters following me this afternoon by delving into this rich mine of our Holy Father's profound insights.

Instead, I would like to cite just a simple case to show how John Paul's vision is inspiring even some of our separated brethren. This is a short passage from *A Plea for Purity*, written by Johann Christoph Arnold of the Bruderhoff Community in Pennsylvania:

“As the union of husband and wife under God, sex fulfills its divinely ordained function in a profound way: it is tender, peaceful, and mysterious. Far from being an animal-like act of aggression and lust, it creates and expresses a unique bond of deep, self-giving love.

“When a couple experiences the sexual sphere in this way, they will feel that their union cannot be meant only for procreation. At the same time, they must remember that through their uniting, a new soul may be called out of eternity to earth. If they are truly reverent, they will feel such an awe for the holiness of this fact that their union will become like a prayer to God.”

Yes, the opening chapters of Genesis teach us that God himself is the author of marriage. He was the one who designed marriage as the union of a man and a woman marked by four distinct qualities: It must be **free**, **faithful**, **fruitful** and **forever**. If just one of these qualities is lacking, there is no marriage.

At the risk of seeming pedantic, I would like to spend a few moments discussing each of these qualities.

First, the marriage must be **free**, that is, the couple cannot be forced to marry. I recall an incident that took place during the early 70s in Peru. At the time, I was serving as a missionary in a town located high in the Andes. This particular afternoon, I was conducting the prenuptial investigation with a young Indian couple. As most of you know, the prenuptial forms are filled out separately in the presence of a priest or deacon. On being asked the question, “Is there any person or circumstance forcing you into this marriage against your will?”, the bride-to-be answered in Quechua, “Arí/Yes.” Thinking she must have misunderstood my pronunciation, I summoned the catechist, a native Quechua-speaker, to repeat the question. Again, she answered “Arí.” I had the catechist inquire why she was there, if she did not want to get married.

She explained that the groom’s father had given her father a cow in exchange for her; but in reality, she could not stand the young man and did not wish to marry him. Calling both sets of parents in from the plaza, I proceeded to give them a strong lecture on how they were making a mockery of marriage, and that the cow should be returned at once.

Second, marriage must be **faithful**, that is, exclusive. In the simplest of terms, husband and wife promise to limit their marital relationship only to each other. If either party entered the marriage while still intending to be intimate with someone else, the marriage would be null and void from the beginning.

Furthermore, fidelity in marriage is important even on the purely natural level. Governments spend billions of dollars annually to combat the devastating effects of AIDS and 50 other sexually transmitted diseases — and in many instances, all to no avail.

- But consider this: If starting today, every couple planning to marry would do just two things, practice abstinence before marriage, and
- b) remain faithful to their spouse exclusively during marriage, AIDS and all STDs would die out within a single generation. Which proves the old adage: Good morals make for good medicine.

The third quality is marriage must be **fruitful**, that is, open to children. Again, I’d like recall another prenuptial investigation, this one from the early 90s in my former Archdiocese of Baltimore. I had just asked the bride-to-be the question, “Do you plan to have children during your marriage?” To which she responded, “No.” Since she was still in her 20s, I asked her why not. I shall never forget her response: “You’ve heard about how much President Bush hates broccoli, haven’t you? Well, that’s just how much I hate kids. I can’t stand them.” I asked if her fiancé was aware of this decision. She answered that he was; and even though he wanted children, he was willing to forgo them in order to marry her. I summoned her fiancé into the office and informed both of them why they could not be married in the church. The marriage would be non-existent from day one.

This aspect of marriage, namely, that it must be open to new life, is the reason why the state takes such a keen interest in regulating marriage. Consequently, I fail to see how the state can approve of so-called same-sex marriage. Let’s say we place 20 **heterosexual married** couples on a deserted island for 20 years. At the end of that period, what do you suppose we would find?

More than likely, 80 to 100 persons. And if we were to repeat the same experiment with 20 **homosexual** couples, what would the result be after 20 years? The same 20 couples, 20 years older.

Yes, the family is the basic unit of society. And the foundation of the family is marriage, as instituted by God. In his 1947 book, *The Family and Civilization* Harvard professor, Dr. Carl Zimmerman documented that every past great civilization began its demise when the family structure fragmented. And what were the signs? Rampant divorce, adultery, abortion, homosexuality, and the like. Today, it's a case of *deja-vu*.

Before leaving our discussion of fruitfulness in marriage, I would like to state emphatically that this is the linchpin for restoring stability to marriage and the family. Our culture has broken the link in the marital act — established by God himself — between making love and making babies. And until that link has been reestablished, we will continue to have pandemic abortions, divorces and brazen homosexuality.

After all, if sex is meant only for pleasure, why limit it just to marriage? And why just to **hetero**sexuals? We will continue to have divorce, abortion and the homosexual agenda as long as we continue to foster marital contraception.

We now come to the fourth and final mark of marriage: Marriage must be **forever**, that is, until one of the spouses dies. This aspect of marriage is not directly evident in the Genesis account.

However, in rebutting the Pharisees' question about the possibility of divorce, Jesus first quotes Genesis, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and unite with his wife and the two shall become one flesh." He then goes on to add: "They are no longer two but one flesh . Therefore what God has joined together, let no one ever separate."

The Pharisees were stunned: "Why, then, did Moses permit divorce?" Jesus replies that it was due to the "hardness of their hearts." That is, to avoid a possible worse evil for the poor woman, divorce was tolerated for a while. (Did he mean, perhaps, divorce, Italian-style?) But it was not so from the beginning. Mark and Luke have Jesus concluding: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman, commits adultery."

Matthew's gospel adds the so-called exception clause: "Whoever divorces his wife, except for *porneia* — it says in the Greek — and marries another woman..."

- Most non-Catholic versions translate *porneia* as "adultery."
- "Adultery" in Greek is not *porneia*, but *moicheia*, used in the very same verse! *Porneia* is used elsewhere, meaning "incest" (1 Cor 5:1) or "concubinage" (Jn 8:41)
- Therefore, the "exception" clause in Matthew is no real exception: *Porneia* implies there was no valid marriage to start with. Truth be told, the couple should separate.

And so we see that Jesus, by returning to God's original plan, established marriage as a permanent, "until-death-do-us-part" union between husband and wife.

Our discussion on the permanence of marriage is a good time to transfer our attention to the second and last stage of our reflection, namely: **Marriage, as a sacrament, is the basic cell of the Church.**

Why is this such a good point to shift gears? Well, when Jesus insisted that marriage is forever, not only were the Pharisees shocked, so were his disciples. Back in the house, they objected, “Lord, if that’s the case between a man and his wife (that is, no possibility of divorce), then it’s better not to marry.” Listening between the lines, what do we hear? “Lord, you don’t understand. You’re asking the impossible. A man could be stuck with a shrew, or a woman with a brute, and yet you’re insisting that there is no remedy — except death or the monastery?”

Back in the 70s, at a workshop I attended for divorced and separated Catholics, during the panel discussion one of the participants asked: “In the Old Testament, the Chosen People were allowed to divorce. Now then, since Jesus gave Peter the authority to bind and to loose here on earth, couldn’t the Pope permit divorce with the right to remarry in certain, very specific cases? After all, if God allowed Moses to grant divorces, why not the Vicar of Christ?”

To this day I recall how the panelist responded: “A man can no more divorce his wife than Christ could divorce the Church. Yes, considered from a mere human perspective, the Lord does seem to be asking the impossible. But we’re no longer under the Old Covenant of the Law. We’re under the New Covenant of grace. Jesus died on the cross to join himself to the Church as her bridegroom. The early fathers saw in the blood and water flowing from Jesus’ side, symbols of the chief sacraments that were to nourish his beautiful bride: the water of baptism and the blood of the Eucharist. St. Paul told the Ephesians, “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her.” So just as Jesus would never divorce the Church, — “The two shall become one flesh” — in the same way, a Christian husband should never divorce his wife — “They are no longer two, but one flesh.”

The Catechism of the Catholic Church expresses the same theme in No. 1617: “The entire Christian life bears the mark of the spousal love of Christ and the Church. Already Baptism, the entry into the People of God, is a nuptial mystery; it is, so to speak, the nuptial bath, which precedes the wedding feast, the Eucharist. Christian marriage in its turn becomes an efficacious sign, the sacrament of the covenant of Christ and the Church. Since it signifies and communicates grace, marriage between baptized persons is a true sacrament of the New Covenant.”

Here, I would like to emphasize that marriage is a covenant, and not a mere contract. For most of my priesthood I never gave the distinction much thought, until a few years ago when I heard Dr. Scott Hahn elaborate on it. In substance what he said was: “There’s a world of difference between a covenant and a contract. In a contract, objects are exchanged: ‘You give me \$20,000 and I’ll give you the title to this car.’ In a covenant, persons are exchanged: ‘I will be your God and you will be my people.’ With that distinction in mind, we see that marriage is a covenant, not a contract. Standing before the altar, a groom says to his bride, ‘From this day forward I give myself to you alone until the day I die.’ — The bride responds, ‘I accept the gift of yourself. And in return, I give myself to you alone all the days of my life.’ A covenant differs from a contract as much as marriage differs from prostitution.”

Earlier in this talk I mentioned that before concluding I wanted to explain why it was so important to stress the basics. I now do so. Here in America we like to think of ourselves as a Christian nation. When I was still a young priest, yes! But now I feel we are living in a post-Christian era. For starters, I'd like to ask, "How do we differ from our non-Christian neighbors?"

They watch pornography, and so do we.
They cohabit before marriage, and so do we.
They get sterilized, and so do we.
They have abortions, and so do we.
They cheat on their spouses, and so do we.
They get divorced, and so do we.

Jesus challenged his disciples to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Namely, he wants us to be **thermostats**, regulating the moral temperature of our culture. Instead, most of us are only **thermometers**, registering the values of a decadent society. We no longer heed what St. Paul told the Romans: "Do not be conformed to the behavior of this world. Rather, be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

I feel we'd be much better Christians if we were facing a fierce, bloody persecution rather than surrounded, as we are, by so many creature comforts.

Bishop Joseph Nguyen-Cong-Doan of Vietnam expressed that very sentiment during an interview some five years ago: "(In Vietnam) we are now confronting new problems regarding consumerism's impact on the faith. I remember telling my interrogator when I was in jail that Communist atheism is not so dangerous, because Communists are always indirectly reminding us of God. It's capitalist atheism that is much more dangerous because although God can be mentioned, (capitalism) promotes the kinds of material pleasures that make us forget about God completely."

And what is the harvest that we are reaping from our contraceptive, sick-unto-death society? A young man, a member of Generation X, expressed it succinctly during a youth meeting in which he said publicly to the Baby-Boomers present:

"First, you tried to keep me from being conceived. When that failed, you tried to have me aborted. After I was born, you put me in a Day Care Center. Then when I was 12, you broke up our home by getting divorced... And you still wonder why my generation is so mixed-up?"

I would like to conclude with these words from Pope John Paul. It's a perfect summary of what I have been attempting to say so imperfectly:

"Christian families exist to form a communion of persons in love. As such, the Church and the family are each in its own way living representations of the three Persons of the Most Holy Trinity. In fact, the family is called the Church in miniature, 'the domestic church,' a particular expression of the Church through the human experience of love and common life. Like the Church, the family ought to be a place where the gospel is transmitted and from which the gospel radiates to other families and to the whole of society.

“Catholic parents must learn to form their family as this domestic Church, a Church in the home where God is honored, His law is respected, prayer is a normal event, virtue is transmitted by word and example, and everyone shares the hopes, the problems, and sufferings of everyone else. All this is not to advocate a return to some outdated style of living; rather, it is a return to the roots of human development and human happiness... For the future of humanity passes by way of the family.”

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