

COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 42

The value of marriage

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The focus of today's article will be *The value of marriage* Chapter 5, II a.

Today many persons challenge, question or have serious doubts about the value of marriage to the well being of the individual and the society. Many young adults claim that they are yet to see a good marriage. Their claims may be valid because of the many examples of unhappy marriages, high divorce rates and broken homes.

However if many had a clearer understanding of why marriage is the foundation of the family, and that its success depends not only on the free choice of two individuals to unite themselves, but also on the creator of the institution itself – God, there would be fewer examples of unhappy marriages and those thinking of, or fearing entering marriage, may be more hopeful.

The *Compendium* tells us:

“The family has its foundation in the free choice of the spouses to unite themselves in marriage, in respect for the meaning and values of this institution that does not depend on man but on God himself: ‘For the good of the spouses and their offspring as well as of society, this sacred bond no longer depends on human decision alone.

For God himself is the author of marriage and has endowed it with various benefits and purposes’ (*Gaudium et Spes*). Therefore, the institution of marriage – ‘intimate partnership of life and love... established by the Creator and endowed by him with its own life and love ... established by the Creator and endowed by him with its own proper laws (*Gaudium et Spes*) – is not the result of human conventions or of legislative prescriptions but acquires its stability from divine disposition (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*).

It is an institution born, even in the eyes of society, ‘from the human act by which the partners mutually surrender themselves to each other, (*Gaudium et Spes*)’ and is founded on the very nature of that conjugal love which, as a total and exclusive gift of person to person, entails a definitive commitment expressed by mutual, irrevocable and public consent (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*). This commitment means that the relationships among family members are marked also by a sense of justice and, therefore, by respect for mutual rights and duties.”

“No power can abolish the natural right to marriage or modify its traits and purpose. Marriage in fact is endowed with its own proper, innate and permanent characteristics. Notwithstanding the numerous changes that have taken place in the course of the centuries in the various cultures and in different social structures and spiritual attitudes, in every culture there exists a certain sense of the dignity of the marriage union, although this is not evident everywhere with the same clarity (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*).

The dignity must be respected in its specific characteristics and must be safeguarded against any attempt to undermine it. Society cannot freely legislate with regard to the marriage bond by which the two

spouses promise each other fidelity, assistance and acceptance of children, but it is authorised to regulate its civil effects.

“The characteristic traits of marriage are: totality, by which the spouses give themselves to each other mutually in every aspect of their person, physical and spiritual; unity which makes them “one flesh” (Gen 2:24); indissolubility and fidelity which the definitive mutual giving of self requires; the fruitfulness to which this naturally opens itself (*Familiaris Consortio*).

God’s wise plan for marriage – a plan accessible to human reason notwithstanding the difficulties arising from “hardness of heart” (cf Mt 19:8; Mk 10:5) – cannot be evaluated exclusively in light of the *de facto* behaviour and concrete situations that are at divergence with it. A radical denial of God’s original plan is found in polygamy, “because it is contrary to the equal personal dignity of men and women who in matrimony give themselves with a love that is total and therefore unique and exclusive (*Familiaris Consortio*).”

“In its ‘objective’ truth, marriage is ordered to the procreation and education of children (*Gaudium et Spes*). The marriage union, in fact, gives fullness of life to that sincere gift of self, the fruit of which is children, who in turn are a gift for the parents, for the whole family and all of society (*Gratissimam Sane*).

Nonetheless, marriage was not instituted for the sole reason of procreation (*Gaudium et Spes*). Its indissoluble character and its value of communion remain even when children, although greatly desired, do not arrive to complete conjugal life. In this case, the spouses “can give expression to their generosity by adopting abandoned children or performing demanding services for others (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*).”

In summary, while marriage depends on the free choice of persons to unite themselves and agree publicly to love, cherish and respect each other, and to bring and raise children into the world, its success cannot be legislated by laws relating to pre-nuptial agreements, divorce or the distribution of assets acquired prior to and during marriage, but only on the laws of God who created and blessed the institution. Once God’s laws are followed the dignity of the human person (husband, wife and child) will be ensured and the society benefits from citizens who are loved, happy and well-adjusted.

Another important point from today’s excerpts is that while children are fruits of marriage, the result of spouses giving themselves to each other, marriage is still fruitful even if children are not produced through the union of couples.

These couples have a unique opportunity through adoption and mentoring and other avenues, to provide for abandoned and orphaned children with the love, education and stability of a loving family. They can also give more time to deal with other social issues that will maintain a healthy society.

The discussion on marriage will continue in next week’s article; the focus - the sacrament of marriage.