

Preparing Millennials for Marriage

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 31, 2015

I spent over twenty years teaching marriage preparation for the Archdiocese of New York, and I calculate that if all the couples I've addressed were to assemble in one place, they would easily fill Madison Square Garden. I still occasionally get called off the bench and appear before fifty or so engaged couples who need to check the "Pre-Cana" box before they can marry in the Church.

Not surprisingly, every shade of belief and disbelief is to be found among the couples. There are more than a few non-Catholics, and it's safe to say that a plurality of the cradle Catholics know next to nothing about the faith. Half the couples are living together and seem to think that the solemn promise they're about to make won't change much in their relationship. A sign of this is that some do not plan to take honeymoons after the wedding.

Needless to say, a majority does not share the Church's understanding of sex. For Millennials, sex is an exchange of pleasure between consenting adults who determine its significance on an *ad hoc* basis. There are no *givens* in sexuality; it is simply what you choose to make of it. I exaggerate – only slightly.

I should add that, this being New York, some arrive with an attitude and are prepared to take on the speaker during the Q-and-A. In fact, there are Pre-Cana speakers who won't do an open Q-and-A because this part of the evening can spin out of control.

All these factors make a Pre-Cana class in Manhattan one of the "peripheries" to which Pope Francis often adverts. It is certainly not a comfort-zone for the speaker. But the work could not be more important. Indeed, a priority for any bishop – up there with the seminary and CCD – should be getting Pre-Cana right. It is potentially the last shot the Church has at many of those attending.

Pre-Cana speakers often take one of two approaches, neither of which works. One is the easy, therapeutic route. A middle-aged deacon shows up and starts cracking jokes. He uses a lot of psychological jargon and fudges any Church teaching he thinks won't sit well with the audience. This can be embarrassing. Even non-believers in the audience will get annoyed at the spectacle of a speaker pandering to what he supposes to be mental habits of the young.



Then there are the rigorists. Especially on the topic of sexual behavior, they've come to read the riot act. They announce, for example, that contraception is a mortal sin. Now, mortal sin certainly exists, and the use of contraceptives *is* gravely disordered. But when a Pre-Cana speaker fires the word "sin" at a gathering of Millennials, he is shutting down half the audience. They will tune out whatever else the speaker has to say. He has committed an error warned against repeatedly by the Magisterium – legalism.

I know that in writing this I may disturb conservative Catholics who think Catholic doctrine should be expressed clearly and firmly. I couldn't agree more. But I also agree with Pope Francis that the Church's first obligation is to meet people where they are, with a concern for their well being. So, we first need to recognize that Millennials tend not to be receptive to the laying down of rules or to sin as a theological category.

At the same time, these couples are looking for guidance. They're surrounded by unhappy marriages and don't want to repeat the mistakes of their parents or friends. They want to do the right thing. They will listen to empathetic advice about topics like communication and how to manage (and exit) an argument. They will listen to anecdotes about speaker's own marriage, which can be instructive and amusing.

The "soft" part of the talk can then shade into deeper topics. The speaker can challenge the couples with ideas they may have never heard articulated. For example, that real love resides in the will, not the emotions. That married love is a decision to keep making a decision. That a radical "gift of self" enhances life in unexpected ways. That Christ's teaching about the indissolubility of marriage is a call to make a relationship work. (Happiness is not achieved by people who quit easily.) That Natural Family Planning is a boon to sexual felicity. (If you are going to have sex with one person for thirty or forty years, there has to be an asceticism to make it work.) That children are our most abiding legacy. (Even the most commendable work done at the office ends as a bundle of files in the attic – or is deleted by the firm's IT crew.)

The speaker – or speakers: married couples do this best – should at least leave the impression that the Church has thought deeply about these matters. Catholic teachings about sexuality, for example, were not thought up by a bunch of celibate monks in the early Middle Ages trying to put a lid on everyone’s sex lives. Rather, they are based on a deep reading of men and women as sexual beings. They are meant to help us flourish. As St. Thomas points out, God is only offended by those acts that are not for our own good. At the same time, he delights in our living more fully the “law of gift” inscribed in our being.

Above all, we should persuade these couples that if they work at their marriages, both they and society will benefit. And so will the Church. There is something to [Mary Eberstadt’s idea](#) that the decline of the family has precipitated the decline of religion rather than the reverse.

By the end of the evening the couples may not be aware of how much doctrine they’ve been exposed to. Often, that’s to the good. They may even go home and talk about it.

© 2016 *The Catholic Thing*. All rights reserved. For reprint rights, write to: info@frinstitute.org*The Catholic Thing* is a forum for intelligent Catholic commentary. Opinions expressed by writers are solely their own.