

“Marriage: The Foundation of a Civilization Built on Truth and Love”

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Introduction

It's been almost seven years now since I moved up to the Bay Area from San Diego where I am originally from and had been serving as the auxiliary bishop there, when I was named the Bishop of Oakland. But the memory is still clear in my mind: I had traveled to the Diocese for the press conference on the occasion of the announcement, and one of the priests gave me a tour of the city. I especially wanted to see the inner city neighborhoods—Oakland is notorious for them, and they comprise a large part of the city. I remember that every so often I would see a billboard typically showing something like a picture of an African-American man holding a baby in his arms with the words above, “Take Time to be a Father Today.” I was encouraged by what I perceived to be some sort of a campaign to promote fatherhood. (I later learned that this is campaign of the U.S. government to promote responsible fatherhood. In fact, I just saw another one of those billboards in downtown Baltimore the other day during our recent USCCB meeting.) I don't know what could be clearer than that the plight of our inner city neighborhoods is the result of the scourge of fatherlessness. Now, this was in March of 2009, just a few months after the election that approved Proposition 8, defining marriage as between a man and a woman in the California state constitution. At one point during the tour, we drove past a public school where I saw a sign on the window, facing out to the street, with the words, “Vote No on Proposition 8.” Then, when we reached the end of the block, I looked across the street, and what did I see? A billboard announcing, “Take Time to be a Father Today.”

This anecdote is emblematic of the societal schizophrenia our nation (and much of the rest of the world, too) is now suffering regarding the idea of marriage. Of course, the disconnect here could not be more obvious: one cannot, at one and the same time, both affirm the importance of fatherhood and deny the need for children to be connected to their mothers and fathers. Indeed, this is the very purpose of marriage. Nature connects *mothers* to their children, but not the father. We are now reaping the bitter fruits of the demise of fatherhood, and they are most especially evident in our inner city neighborhoods. As someone much smarter than I on this subject put it, when a baby is born, the mother is sure to be somewhere nearby; there's no guarantee, though, that the father will be. Society needs a cultural mechanism that attaches fathers to their children and to the woman with whom they brought those children into the world. That cultural mechanism is marriage, and it's the only one there is; there simply isn't any other. Just think again about our inner city neighborhoods: think of what those neighborhoods were like fifty years ago in many of the big cities in our country, and what they are like now. Is this not due, in large part, to the scourge of fatherlessness? And so it is that societies that don't manage the procreative implications of the sexual act don't last for very long.

There is, of course, tons of social science data on this. It is not a “Catholic thing” to say that children need a father as well as a mother in order to have the optimal

environment for their own flourishing. A couple of years ago the book, “Do Fathers Matter?” was published, with the subtitle, “What Science Is Telling Us About the Parent We’ve Overlooked”. In it, author Paul Raeburn points out, “There is no example of a human society in which fathers do not help raise the children” (Raeburn, 19) and that, “For most of human history, fathers were responsible for protecting their children and for teaching them the things they needed to know to survive and prosper” (212). He explores many of the new experiments that have been completed on animals that appear to shed light on the unique contributions of fathers on children. A study from David Popenoe at Rutgers University, cited in the book, says that “the evidence is overwhelming” that a family of mother and father is better for the child than one parent (222).

The State of Marriage

But before we go any further, we need to go back, way back, back, in fact, to the very beginning: the creation of the universe, and of the human race. “It is not good for the man to be alone” the Book of Genesis tells us (Gn 2:18). With these words, the Word of God reveals that each of us has been made not to live a solitary life but to live in communion. Each of us is called to love. This call can take different forms, such as the call to self-gift through the commitment of priestly celibacy or the vow of consecrated virginity or through the covenant of marriage. No matter our state of life, each of our lives is stamped by this call to be with and for others. And the natural place we are meant to receive and be formed in this call is the family founded on marriage, the permanent, faithful, and fruitful union of a man and a woman.

In many cultures and for many centuries, the understanding of the family built on marriage was obvious. In the natural order, marriage is the clearest way to bind fathers to their children and to ensure the safety and thriving of the family. Throughout history, marriage has never been understood as a merely private institution but rather as “the foundation for the family” and essential for the good of society (see the pastoral letter of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan”).

Today, the natural structure of marriage has come into question, and it is not very hard to see why. Over the last fifty years or so, the dominant influencers of American culture—including the three branches of government at all levels—have slowly eroded the concept of marriage as a lifelong, faithful and fruitful union. Not surprisingly, that concept of marriage is contained right within the Church’s Rite of Marriage:

“Have you come here freely and without reservation to give yourselves to each other in marriage?”

“Will you love and honor each other as man and wife for the rest of your lives?”

“Will you accept children lovingly from God, and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?”

Do these questions sound familiar to you? For those of you who are married, they were asked to you by the priest or deacon who witnessed your marriage at the moment right before you pronounced your vows. This is the “statement of intentions” which establishes what is necessary for a canonically valid marriage, and the Church requires that this be attested to before the couple puts the marriage bond into place with their exchange of consent. The first question pertains to free will, for each spouse must be freely choosing marriage for him or herself with the other. The other two questions pertain to what the Church refers to as the three “goods” of marriage: permanence, fidelity and openness to offspring. It is these three goods of marriage that distinguish marriage from any other type of relationship, and identify what it is in nature and define what it is in the law.

So, allow me to observe for you how, considered in this light, it becomes clear that the current crisis of marriage of which we are all painfully aware has really been going on in our society for a very long time. This latest debate about the essential meaning of marriage is simply the next logical—albeit thus far most extreme—step in changing the idea of marriage in the social consciousness that has been going on for the last several decades. That is, marriage was already redefined in the culture, and the law is now beginning to reflect that. Looked at from the standpoint of the three goods of marriage, we can see how this banalization of the concept of marriage has been going on for at least the last fifty years, that is, since the so-call “sexual revolution” of the 1960’s. Just consider:

Permanence: There is no question that the widespread acceptance of no fault divorce dealt an extremely severe blow to the concept of marriage as a life-long commitment. This already redefined marriage as an adult-centered institution based on what the adults look to get out of it. When the needs of one are no longer being met by the other, the basis of the relationship is gone and the disappointed party can legally back out of it, *even against the wishes of the other spouse who wishes to keep the marriage together*. Perhaps you, as I, have known people who have been severely harmed by this decision—they wanted to stay in the relationship and keep it working while the person’s spouse simply backed out and filed for divorce. Now, if we add to this the now almost universally accepted practice of cohabitation outside of marriage, and recognize how easily couples move in and out of relationship, whether it’s cohabitation or marriage, we can see that there is not really that much difference the popular mentality ascribes to those who are married and to couples who are not.

Fidelity: Certainly widespread promiscuity does violence to the idea of marriage as a commitment of exclusive fidelity. Commonplace cohabitation also contributes to the loss of the sense of fidelity as one of the defining goods of marriage, even if, of the three, this one does still have some resonance in the popular culture, at least as an ideal. The social changes that erupted fifty years ago also eventually led to such aberrant practices as so-called “open marriages” and “swinging.”

Offspring: We are now witnessing the phenomenon, until recently inconceivable, of couples marrying with the intention of not have *any* children at all. With contraception

and then—necessarily, given the mentality—abortion, sex has become redefined, no longer understood as procreative and unitive, but seen rather as a means for pleasure. Because the concept of sex has now become disconnected from procreation and, in turn, from marriage, motherhood today is seen as a matter of choice and increasingly a lifestyle choice. We hear absurd statements such as, “just because she chose to be a mother doesn’t mean I chose to be a father.” Or the woman who says, “I don’t know how I got pregnant, it wasn’t supposed to happen.” (I have actually heard this one myself!)

So, you can see how all of this has whittled away at the three defining goods of marriage, and therefore at the very concept of marriage itself. No fault divorce was, especially, the pivotal moment, for that put into the law the idea that marriage is for the gratification and benefits of adults and not about the needs and rights of children. For those of you old enough to remember, do you recall the arguments that were being made for no-fault divorce when objectors to the new idea pointed out the need to support the good of children? “Children are resilient,” the protagonists said. “It’s a bump in the road, but they can get on with life and do fine.” We now know that isn’t quite the case; the children, in fact, never give up hope that mom and dad will get back together. Now, I recognize that I must immediately qualify this statement, because there are lots of single parents, who have often gotten there through no fault of their own, who make huge sacrifices to do the best for their children in a less than ideal circumstance, and often their children do manage well in life. They need and deserve our love and respect and, especially, support. When the optimal situation isn’t possible for the child, we do what is in the child’s best interest. The point, though, is that it is an injustice to *intentionally* deprive a child of a mother and a father, or to put the desires of adults before such a basic good for children. Society should do its best to create the circumstances in which it is most likely that a child will have the blessing of knowing and being loved by their mother and father in a stable, low-conflict marital relationship.

“Living together without the benefit of marriage”: remember that old phrase? You don’t hear it anymore. But just what are those benefits? It’s not simply those material perks the government gives to married couples. Most especially, it’s what in the Church’s canonical and theological tradition is referred to as the two “ends” of marriage, the procreation and education of offspring, and the mutual good and unity of the spouses: the consolation of children, love becoming incarnate, passing on one’s lineage; and the care the spouses give to each other, being faithful, not just in their sexual behavior but in all aspects of their affection and the practical support they give to each other, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health—to have that kind of security, to always count on the other person, who has made a sacred vow to bind him or herself to the other, is a great thing. Notice, it’s not a one-way street: because the benefits are mutual, so are the responsibilities.

The three “goods” of marriage define what marriage *is*, the three things the spouses must intend in giving their consent in order for the marriage bond to be put into place, such that if a spouse were to intentionally exclude anyone one of them from his or her consent the marriage would not be valid. The two ends of marriage, on the other hand, define what marriage is *for*, the purposes for which marriage is ordered: whether

or not they are attained, and the extent to which they may or may not be attained, does not invalidate the marriage or minimize its value. However, if the couple willingly places obstacles to the attaining of these ends it does do harm to the marriage in the sense that the marriage does not become that “school of self-perfection” to the full extent that it is meant to be, training the spouses to live ever more perfectly conformed to the Gospel norm for marriage at its deepest level, at the heart and most intimate part of the couple’s marital relationship: their spiritual-sexual union.

If you think about it, the formula is quite simple and clear: healthy societies are built on healthy, united families; healthy, united families are based on healthy, happy, harmonious marriages; and at the heart of marriage is the spiritual-sexual relationship between husband and wife. It all really comes down to that. The whole point is the plan of God for our happiness: it is clear that in the plan of God marriage is meant to be a faithful, fruitful, life-long union between a man and a woman. This school of self-perfection is necessary not only for the flourishing of the individual but also for society as a whole. The breakdown of this beautiful tapestry, though—and St. John Paul II has made this abundantly clear to us in his teaching—has ultimately come from the attack on marriage at this deepest, innermost core: the contraceptive mentality. This is the mentality that divorces the procreative from the unitive end of marriage, eventually undermining both by engendering the attitude of using the other for one’s pleasure and excluding the comprehensive meaning of the marital embrace. Even if the couple does not consciously mean this, it is what they are saying with their bodies. The contraceptive mentality thus corrupts the spiritual-sexual relationship between the man and the woman, and so all else becomes tainted.

So you can see how the evil one works: it is the Garden of Eden all over again. Just as in the Garden, so in our own time the evil one has infected this awesome plan of God for our own human flourishing and happiness with Him at its root: he attacks the most intimate part of who we are; he attacks the woman’s fertility so that it is no longer seen as a good and a blessing, but rather more like an appliance to be turned on and off at one’s pleasure or, worse yet, as a problem to be “fixed.” And in doing so, he edges the father out of the picture, acknowledging how critical the father is to a child’s healthy development. And he does this precisely because he does *not* want our human flourishing; no, quite the contrary, he wants our eternal demise.

Now, every one of us here has our own personal story about family. It is never picture-perfect. It is not the Garden of Eden before the fall. We all know the experience of brokenness in our families, even when our parents have done their best. But family life does not have to be idyllic for children to have the ideal. If mom and dad are just there for them and reliable—and especially dad—even in their brokenness and imperfection, this is a huge advantage for them. And even in the brokenness we can see the grace of Christ overcome human weakness, if we have the eyes to see it. Love never fails, as St. Paul reminds us.

So, from the widespread use and acceptance of contraception to “no-fault” divorce, marriage slowly changed in the minds of many of our neighbors from a mission of self-

gift to a goal of self-fulfillment. This mentality is pervasive and affects many in the Church as well; it is the air that we breathe, so much so that, now, living out the truth of marriage is harder than ever before because it is no longer supported by the culture. In fact, we can unwittingly slip into this trap ourselves, even while trying to defend the truth of marriage and those who stand up for it. But we must be wise, we must be perceptive, and we must see through it all. We must not allow ourselves to be unwittingly tricked into thinking in categories and using words in a redefined, revisionist way that in and of themselves are in contradiction to the true meaning of marriage.

Christians seeking to preserve the good of sexual union as being for the purpose of “babies and bonding,” and so strive to maintain fidelity in marriage both interiorly and exteriorly and to be open to any children that God wishes to give them, are swimming against the tide. I probably don’t need to tell you this; you have experienced it yourselves.

It is you, faithful lay people, who are being called to heroic witness in what used to be an ordinary way: marrying and giving life.

Human Ecology

Pope Francis has gained quite a name for himself for his teaching and advocacy on behalf of the environment. But he has also not been reticent to speak about the good of the complementarity of man and woman, and the urgent need for societies to recognize this. Very importantly, he has highlighted the connection between the two on more than one occasion. Just listen to these words he spoke a year ago at this time, in an address to the participants at the International Colloquium on the Complementarity between Man and Woman sponsored by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the Vatican:

Marriage and the family are in crisis today. We now live in a culture of the temporary, in which more and more people reject marriage as a public obligation. This revolution of customs and morals has often waved ‘the flag of freedom’, but it has, in reality, brought spiritual and material devastation to countless human beings, especially the poorest and most vulnerable. It is ever more evident that the decline of the culture of marriage is associated with increased poverty and a host of other social ills that disproportionately affect women, children and the elderly. It is always they who suffer the most in this crisis.

The crisis of the family has produced a human ecological crisis, for social environments, like natural environments, need protection. Although humanity has come to understand the need to address the conditions that threaten our natural environment, we have been slow — we have been slow in our culture, even in our Catholic culture — we have been slow to recognize that even our social environments are at risk. It is therefore essential that we foster a new human ecology and make it move forward.
[n. 2]

A “new human ecology”: that is, the principle according to which all of the different spheres of our existence are interrelated—the physical, the spiritual, the social, and so forth.

This is a point we can immediately understand at the level of the physical environment. A river that’s polluted in one country will be polluted in its neighboring country. The bad air quality in one city will affect the communities surrounding it. We can also certainly understand its application to the economy. If there could ever be any doubt about that, the global economic crisis that hit in 2008 has done away with that. But this is a basic operating principle of all of life and therefore one which applies at all other levels as well: at the level of physical health where the various systems of the body are all interconnected; at the levels of spiritual and moral health, which in turn affect the quality of our human relationships and even economic health. That is, all of these levels are furthermore interconnected among themselves. They all affect each other. And so, in his very Encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis can be so bold as to say the following:

Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology. Also, valuing one’s own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different. In this way we can joyfully accept the specific gifts of another man or woman, the work of God the Creator, and find mutual enrichment. It is not a healthy attitude which would seek ‘to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it’. [n. 155]

A little before this Pope Francis references Pope Benedict XVI, who teaches at length on the truth of human ecology in his Encyclical on Catholic social teaching, *Caritas in Veritate*. This is Francis’ sort of footnote to Benedict, who opened up this insight for future generations. He cites Benedict’s teaching that there is a relationship between human life and moral law which is necessary to respect for a dignified environment. Quoting Benedict, he says, “man too has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will.” Attempting to do so is another symptom of the social schizophrenia we are witnessing today, where the human person is not seen as an integrated whole, but sort of compartmentalized in silos: the spiritual over here and the moral over there, having nothing to do with each other; or the attitude, “private is private and public is public, and never the twain shall meet.” As Pope Benedict says in *Caritas in Veritate*:

The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other. Herein lies a grave contradiction in our mentality and practice today: one which demeans the person, disrupts the environment and damages society. [n. 51]

All of this comes about from a fundamental misunderstanding of the human person, basically, what a human being is; philosophers would call it an “anthropological error.” Pope Francis refers to it as a “misguided anthropocentrism”: man puts himself at the center and pushes God to the margins. Out of sight, out of mind!

Earlier on in *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis warns that this “misguided anthropocentrism” leads to a misguided lifestyle:

When human beings place themselves at the centre, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative. Hence we should not be surprised to find, in conjunction with the omnipresent technocratic paradigm and the cult of unlimited human power, the rise of a relativism which sees everything as irrelevant unless it serves one’s own immediate interests. There is a logic in all this whereby different attitudes can feed on one another, leading to environmental degradation and social decay. [LS, 122]

Once again, back in the Garden of Eden at the fall: man dislodges God in order to take God’s place, creating his own reality as he sees fit so that he can *decide* for himself what is good and evil, rather than using right reason enlightened by the gift of faith to *discern* good from evil in accordance with the way God has designed the universe. It all ultimately gets down to a spiritual disease. We really have to look at what is deepest and most intimate about us, because that will affect everything else. If there is disorder there, all else will be disordered; if there is proper ordering there at the spiritual level, then there is a much better chance that all else will be properly ordered as well, thus creating the conditions for true human flourishing, both of individuals and of society as a whole.

A Civilization of Truth and Love

“Caritas in veritate”: speaking and doing the truth in love. Truth and love are the solid foundation of any healthy and flourishing society. I was edified awhile back by a group of young people at a large, working-class Hispanic parish in our Archdiocese to where I had gone to celebrate the sacrament of Confirmation for them. At the ceremony, two of the young people shared some reflections on what their Confirmation meant to them. They said that their Confirmation gave them the grace to go forth and “build a civilization of truth and love.” I could not have said it better myself! Caritas in veritate: the foundation of civilization. *Both* are necessary, *both*, together, if we wish to have a flourishing society: truth *and* love.

This is the legacy we have received from our ancestors in the faith. I would call our attention to those first generations of Christians in the city of Rome, who were so often scapegoated by the powerful pagan Roman government. But when a plague would strike the city and the well-to-do fled to the hills for safety until the plague subsided, it was the Christians who stayed behind to care for the sick, and at great risk to their own health and very lives. And not just the Christian sick: *all* the sick, regardless of religion, of how they lived their lives, or even what they thought of the Christians themselves. The historian

Eusebius noted about the Christians of his time, “All day long some of them tended to the dying and to their burial, countless numbers with no one to care for them. Others gathered together from all parts of the city a multitude of those withered from famine and distributed bread to them all.” Likewise, the Emperor Julian complained to one of his pagan priests, “[They] support not only their poor, but ours as well.”

It is this kind of love and compassion in the service of truth, especially the truth of the human person, that has marked the lives of the holy ones who are our predecessors in the faith: hospitals, orphanages, schools, outreach to the poor and destitute—giving without concern for getting anything in return, seeing in each human being, especially in the poor and destitute, a priceless child beloved by God, whom God calls to turn away from sin and toward Him, so that they might be saved. In 1839 Jeanne Jugan met one such priceless child of God, a blind old crippled woman whom nobody cared for. That night, Jeanne carried the woman home to her apartment, and put her to sleep in her own bed. From this profound encounter was born the Little Sisters of the Poor, who even today are loving, caring for and providing homes for thousands of elderly who deserve dignity as well as care. These are the very nuns who now face the possibility of being shut out of spreading the love of Jesus to the needy because of their refusal to comply with a healthcare mandate that violates their—our—moral convictions, convictions which stand on the truth of basic human dignity.

Let us, then, take our cue from the best our predecessors in faith have inspired, and not humanity’s frequent failings and sins. Like them, we now in our own time need to proclaim and live the truth with charity and compassion as it applies to us today: the truth of the goodness of family based on the union of the children’s father and mother in marriage as the foundational good of society. Yes, this is a foundational truth, and one to which we must witness by lives lived in conformity to it, and which we must proclaim with love. And let us not forget: we must also proclaim this truth especially with love for those who disagree with us on this issue, and most of all, for those who are hostile toward us. And we must be careful not to paint our opponents on this issue with broad strokes. There is a tendency in our culture to do this to groups of people the powerful don’t know and think they don’t like. *We must not do that.* We must recognize that there are people on the other side of this debate who are of good will and are sincerely trying to promote what they think is right and fair. I have no doubts that they are motivated by stories they’ve heard, and people they know, who have been harmed because of their sexual orientation: bullied and beaten, disowned by their families, thrown out on the street. Yes, this does happen, even today, and we must exercise great compassion toward them.

And if we are really going to be true to our predecessors in the faith, and live our Christian religion with heroic virtue, it means that we must treat with respect and kindness even those from whom we suffer harm and retribution. You know the old saying: “violence begets violence.” This is true with regard to moral violence, as well as physical violence. When we are tempted to respond in kind, we must recall the words of our Master: “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44). And we must follow his example: he forgave his persecutors even in their act of torturing and killing him. So let us not allow the angry rhetoric to co-opt us into a culture of hate.

Yes, we must show love toward all of these and more. Love is the answer. But love is in the truth. And the truth doesn't change. Laws might change, but truth doesn't. Those with temporal power over us might choose to change the definition of marriage in the law—or change other laws based on God's design for our human flourishing, for that matter—and might do so even against all that we have accomplished through very generous participation in the democratic process, but our nature does not change. If the law does not correspond to our nature, such that there is a conflict between the law and nature, guess which will prevail? And people will figure it out.

Truths such as every child comes from a father and a mother and it's good for the child to be connected to his or her father and mother may seem obvious to us, but they aren't to everyone while in the heat of controversy. But they will figure out this truth about marriage because it's in our nature, and it's a key to individual and societal flourishing. As I said at the outset, all we have to do is look around and see that our society is broken and hurting in so many ways; there is so much work to do to fix it and bring healing. Yes, it is very complex, and many different things need to be done: we need to fix our economy; we need to pay a living wage to working class families; we need to fix our broken immigration system; we need to improve our schools, especially those that are failing children in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. Yes, we need to do all this and more. But none of these solutions will have a lasting effect if we do not rebuild a marriage culture, a culture which recognizes and supports the good of intact families, built on the marriage between a man and a woman committed to loving faithfulness to each other and to their children. No justice, no peace, no end to poverty, without a strong culture of marriage and the family. This noble cause is a call to love that we cannot abandon, that we will not give up on, and that in the end we know will triumph.

So take heart: the truth spoken in love has a power over the human heart. And the truth will not go away. Let us, then, pick up the torch, and pass on to a new generation the truth about marriage, not just the abstract truth, but the lived reality that makes a difference in children's lives. Let us take heart from the legacy we have received, let us place our trust in God, and let us go forth to build a civilization of truth and love.