

Marriage and the Family: Humanity's Future

Biblical Reflection for 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time B

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, SEPT. 30, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Rather than commenting in detail on each of the readings for the 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B), I would like to offer some general reflections on marriage and family life that flow from today's readings. In today's Gospel (Mark 10:2-16) the Pharisees once again confront Jesus with the divisive issue of divorce and its legitimacy: "Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?"

"What did Moses command you?" Jesus asked. They replied that Moses permitted a husband to write a bill of divorce and dismiss the wife. Jesus declares that the law of Moses permitted divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1) only because of the hardness of hearts (Mark 10:4-5). In citing Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, Jesus proclaims permanence to be the divine intent from the beginning concerning human marriage (Mark 10:6-8). He reaffirms this with the declaration that what God has joined together, no human being must separate (verse 9).

Jesus wisely and prudently responds to the loaded question by appealing to God's plan of complete unity and equality in drawing men and women together in marriage. He affirms that husband and wife are united so intimately that they actually become one and indivisible. In answering a direct question that was deliberately designed to entrap him, Jesus was speaking of the nature of marriage and of that only. His emphasis is on its holiness and covenant fidelity and not on the illegitimacy of divorce. The goal of marriage is not divorce and annulment!

Divorce, annulment and remarriage

Jesus did not condemn people who did their best and ended up divorced. He was not judging such people, throwing them out of the community of the Church, or assigning them places in hell. He was only affirming the outlook taken by couples themselves when they stand before the Church's minister and pronounce their wedding vows.

Today Catholic annulments look to many like a simple Catholic divorce. Divorce says that the reality of marriage was there in the beginning and that now the reality is broken. Annulment is a declaration that the reality was never there. The Church declares many marriages invalid because of some impediment present at the time of the marriage.

Over the years of my pastoral ministry, I have met many divorced people who feel very alienated from the Church. For many, divorce was the last thing they ever dreamed of or wanted. In many instances, it hit them unexpectedly, forcefully and tragically. No one I met ever told me that they looked forward to a divorce. They simply didn't see any other alternative.

Some divorced men and women have erroneously been told by well-meaning people that they are excommunicated from the Catholic Church, which is certainly not true. Their pain is often enormous; their

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need for understanding and acceptance is great. They need unambiguous Catholic teaching to enlighten them and lead them to Christ. They need friends, people to pray for and with them, and they need God in their lives in the midst of rupture and brokenness. They deserve our understanding and our prayerful care.

A positive teaching on annulments should be offered in every parish community. Though it may be a tedious and painful process for some people, an annulment can be an instrument of grace, healing, closure, and peace of mind and heart.

The future of humanity passes through marriage and the family

In the papal encyclicals from "Humanae Vitae" (1968) to "Evangelium Vitae" (1995) and especially the apostolic exhortation "Familiaris Consortio" (1981) and the magnificent "Letter to Families" (1994), Popes Paul VI and John Paul II have dedicated much attention to marriage and the family in today's culture. From the first year of his pontificate, John Paul II constantly emphasized: "the family is the way of the Church." The family is a school of communion, based on the values of the Gospel.

Last year on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the encyclical "Humanae Vitae," the bishops of Canada released a very important document in which they wrote (#19): "In short, Pope Paul VI's encyclical 'Humanae Vitae' and the subsequent 'theology of the body' developed by Pope John Paul II issue an immense challenge to a world that is too often occupied with protecting itself against the extraordinary life potential of sexuality. In the wake of these two prophetic Popes, the Church, 'expert in humanity,' issues an unexpected message: Sexuality is a friend, a gift of God. It is revealed to us by the Trinitarian God who asks us to reveal it in turn in all its grandeur and dignity to our contemporaries at this start of the third millennium. The theology of the body has been compared to a revolution that would have positive effects throughout the 21st century of Christianity. We invite the faithful to be the first to experience its liberating potential."

Signs of hope for marriage, family life and vocations

To accept Jesus' teaching on marriage requires the openness of children and a sense of dependence on God's strength matching the child's sense of dependence on parents. When love is authentic, strong, sincere and firm, it is accompanied by vision, joy and creativity, new life and a desire for holiness. When married couples allow Christ to be at the center of their project, they experience deeply the peace outpoured by God -- a peace that flows forth to their children and grandchildren.

The crisis of vocations in the Western world requires that we rethink not only our manner of promoting vocations, but the terrain where seeds of vocations are sown. This fertile soil for vocations is the family, the domestic Church. This reality is brought about by the presence of Christ in the home, from the graces of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, and from fidelity to the Gospel and the teachings of the Church.

There are some voices in our society and Church that don't have much hope for the sacrament of marriage and for family life. I beg to differ with such voices of doom and despair. Each of us is responsible for fostering a true culture of marriage and family life as well as a culture of vocations to the priesthood and religious or consecrated life.

Over the past year in particular, I have witnessed some very hopeful signs for marriage and family life among young adults in various parts of the world. I had the privilege of leading two retreats for university students -- one for the John Paul II Catholic Chaplaincy of Sheffield's Hallam University in England and the other for the Catholic Students' Association of Victoria University in British Columbia in Canada.

The wise, ecclesial leadership of university chaplains -- Sister Anne Lee, NDS in Hallam and Father Dean Henderson in Victoria -- gathered together some remarkable young adults from many countries of the world.

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They are the young men and women of the generations of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, freed from the ideological strangleholds and liberated from the barren, spiritual wastelands of my generation. Their eyes are fixed on Christ and they love the Church with all of her shadows and light.

I never had more open conversations about marriage and family life than I did with those students in Hallam and Victoria these past months. Many spoke openly about their parents who were divorced and alienated or simply absent from the Church. The students said that they learned from the mistakes and losses of their parents, and wanted to pursue the path of a holy marriage and family life. They desire to have Christ, the sacramental life, and the teachings of the Church at the center of their lives.

I have also been very moved and edified by the young men and women who form the staff of the Salt and Light Television Network in Canada. Their simple and clear faith, deep joy, sterling commitment, visible love of Christ and the Church and ardent desire for evangelization is inspiring. Over the past six years, I have been privileged to witness the religious professions and ordinations of several Salt and Light colleagues, and to celebrate seven marriages of my staff -- several who worked with me in preparing World Youth Day 2002. And now we are into the season of baptisms! It is from this generation of children that will come forth vocations for the Church. How could there not be vocations when the terrain was so fertile and the parents so open to the Gospel and to the Church?

For reflection, discussion and prayer

We must never forget that other bonds of love and interdependency, of commitment and mutual responsibility exist in society. They may be good; they may even be recognized in law. They are clearly not the same as marriage; they are something else. No extension of terminology for legal purposes will change the observable reality that only the committed union of a man and a woman carries, not only the bond of interdependency between the two adults, but the capacity to bring forth children.

This week, let us recommit ourselves to building up the human family, to strengthening marriage, to blessing and nurturing children, and to making our homes, families and parish communities holy, welcoming places for women and men of every race, language, orientation and way of life.

In our pastoral strategies, programs and preaching, how do we welcome the sanctifying role of Jesus Christ in the marriage of a man and woman? Are we ready to offer Jesus' teaching on marriage with the openness to children? What are some of the weaknesses and painful situations that afflict marriages today? Can these marriages be saved and the brokenness in the husband-wife relationships be healed? What is the role of faith in all of this?

Let us pray today for married people, that they may grow in this awareness of the sacramentality of marriage and its capacity to reflect the love of God to our world. Let us continue to help one another to bear the blessings, burdens and crosses that the Lord has given to us. And let us never forget those who have loved and lost, and those who have suffered the pain of separation, divorce and alienation. May they find healing in the community of the Church, and welcome from those whose marriages have borne much fruit.

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