

Marriage and its Meaning for the Church

The following is a catechesis developed for use in St. Margaret Mary parish. There are links to the Diocese of Joliet Marriage Catechesis website and of course there is further reading available in Catechism of the Catholic Church. This essay deals with three themes: sexuality, commitment and the sacramental aspect of marriage in the Church.

The Church's understanding of marriage does not begin with itself or its own foundation as with the other sacraments. Marriage has been with the human race from the beginning of human time. Human beings have bonding properties different from other species. Human beings have factually preferred monogamy on the whole. Here monogamy means one husband and one wife. Ancient societies did practice polygamy [many wives] and polyandry [many husbands], but these arrangements have not gained wide acceptance. Even in the Old Testament, where kings and patriarchs had both many wives and concubines, there was much conflict, both among the wives and concubines and the children. In modern times, even when divorce is common and marriage is not regarded as permanent, marriage has been between one man and one woman at a time. This indicates some natural tendency. Recent studies of the human brain have brought to light certain reasons for this preference. You may consult The Medical Institute for Sexual Health for credible scientific information about sexuality and sexual behavior. [www.medinstitute.org]

Part I: Marriage and sexuality

Marriage is intrinsically related to human sexuality. The bonding associated with marriage has a physical origin in sexuality and therefore we will begin with an essay on sexuality and the human brain.

The center of human sexual behavior in both males and females is the human brain. Sex is about chemicals that work within the brain. The feelings of attraction and attachment that are so basic to human life take place due to various activities in the brain. When the human being is studied in her uniqueness, the complexity of the brain becomes of paramount importance.

Human sexuality is related to the sexuality of other primates, but is distinct just as the human brain is distinct. This means that we have to study the brain to understand human behavior. Although there are an enormous number of chemicals surging through the human body/brain three are most significant in the discussion of sex and marriage. Dopamine is a chemical called a neurotransmitter that rewards behavior that is exiting or risky. It is not rational; it rewards behavior regardless of the wisdom or propriety of the behavior. Dopamine produces a high that is pleasurable and addictive. And dopamine is produced in abundance from puberty onwards. Unfortunately the full development of the brain especially the frontal cortex is not complete until the mid-twenties. So from puberty to the mid-twenties young adults are being urged by their brain chemistry to take risks that they have no internal way of evaluating, good, bad, worthwhile etc. Not only is this a serious concern for that period of life, but for the whole of life because the brain is always being molded by behavior and experience and this molding is pronounced during the teen years so that risky and ill-advised choices begun during adolescence become a habitual way of experiencing life.

Besides dopamine two other neurotransmitters we need to be familiar with are oxytocin and vasopressin. Both may exist in both sexes, but oxytocin is very prominent in females and vasopressin in males. They are bonding agents. They connect the brain with a sexual partner. Oxytocin in females also bonds them with their children. The bonding part of the brain is different from the pleasure centers of

the brain. However sex is definitely about bonding and not only about pleasure. Many studies indicate that the combination of bonding and pleasure produces a great sense of well-being. On the other hand, when people either engage in sex for pleasure alone or when they bond and break up often, they actually experience frustration and, frequently, depression and anxiety. The greatest sexual satisfaction is reported by people in long-term commitments.

Adolescents who engage in short-term bonding or hooking up with no interest at all in the partner, often mold their brains in such a way that later on they cannot experience long-term bonding and commitment, perhaps because the synapses which are for that purpose have shrunk. Adults who engage in such behaviors usually began such behaviors in adolescence. As the chemical bonds are broken immediately or in a short time, the ability to make new connections lessens. Further the pleasure experienced by the dopamine decreases calling for more and more risk to replace the reduced experience of excitement. Eventually there is a great deal of pain and unhappiness that requires a great struggle to overcome. Perhaps a great deal of dissatisfaction with contemporary mores will cause people to look again at the perennial philosophy which lies at the foundation of traditional beliefs about marriage and sexuality. As Dr. J. McIlhaney et al put it:

The important thing to recognize is that the desire to connect is not just an emotional feeling. Bonding is real and almost like the adhesive effect of glue—a powerful connection that cannot be undone without great emotional pain. J. S. McIlhaney et al, Hooked: New science on how casual sex is affecting our children, [Chicago, IL: Northfield Publishing, 2008], p.37 cf. Naomi I. Eisenberger and Matthew D. Lieberman, “Why Rejection Hurts: A Common Neural Alarm System for Physical and Social Pain” Trends in Cognitive Sciences 8, No 7 [2004]: 294—300.

To summarize: by nature males and females bond sexually and find maximum satisfaction in a committed relationship that is stable in all ways. Since sex also tends to produce children, nature favors this stability for the offspring as well. Therefore the three qualities of marriage according to traditional thinking correspond exactly: they are permanence [commitment], unity [bonding], and children [offspring]. What modern studies have shown is that the brain is not wired for multiple partners, but for one. So far this concerns only the basis of marriage in nature itself. Now we will look to the spiritual qualities as well. For more information on any of the above topics see: McIlhaney, Joe S. Hooked, [Chicago IL: Northfield Publishing, 2008], Passim.

Part II Marriage and commitment: a Social Contract

If nature has a bonding process and males and females find themselves drawn to each other and connected in a deep and lasting way, society would have to acknowledge this fact and that acknowledgment is marriage. Society does not so much create marriage as it receives marriage from nature. Of course this claim itself has become controversial. Some would claim that marriage is or can be whatever people want. But through the ages certain facts of life remain with us. One of the convictions of traditional wisdom is that marriage is really for children. Today some would rather see marriage as an institution for the wishes and needs of adults. Or some today believe that human nature is endlessly flexible and capable of any goal or purpose that human beings want to subject it to. This is a radical departure from the wisdom of the past.

Indeed children form a central reason why men and women sacrifice their independence and freedom in coming together in marriage. This very sacrifice has been greatly criticized by various voices especially in the Women's Movement, but an astute female critic put it this way:

It is as if these women believe that children are nothing more than a codicil to the arrangement, an add-on option to a marriage like a leather interior and digital compass in a new car, and not the fundamental reason why men and women join together for a lifetime. Danielle Crittenden What Our Mother Didn't Tell Us, [New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 1999], p.97.

The important term here is “fundamental reason” for the commitment that is marriage. Such reflections do not come from the Church, but the Church herself has received them from our human nature, which is often reflected in social institutions. But it is important to add that children are not the only reason for marriage because the very stability that children need and serves them so well also serves the needs of adults who form life-long companionship that keeps them company into old age. When couples are most giving, generous and trusting they not only provide the best home for children, but also for each other.

What is sad today is the fact that in most places the society does not support the stability of marriage. Many states have no-fault divorce which means that the commitment of marriage can be dissolved by either party at any time. People who abandon their families used to face public disapproval, but not today. The Church's interest is in helping people commit themselves morally to the adventure of life-long marriage and help them to make the necessary sacrifices to achieve this goal. The losers in marriage breakup are the children. Many years ago there were attempts to establish that children do just fine in divorce. This has not proved true. Again Ms. Crittenden:

As sociologists Sarah McLanahan and Gary Sandefur discovered in their landmark 1994 study of children of single parents, children who grow up without the continuous presence of both mother and father are twice as likely to drop out of school as children raised by both biological parents. They are more likely to be addicted to drugs and alcohol, to commit crimes, to never seek higher education and to have more difficulty in sustaining relationships. Young women who grow up without fathers are two and a half times as likely to get pregnant in their teens. One could go on and on. Crittenden, p.103.

This is a detailed way of saying that the breakup of marriage or the foregoing of marriage while having children is a great cause of poverty. Those who believe in God know that God wants his children to prosper, but prospering requires something from us including a willingness to sacrifice our egoism for the good of others and the willingness to put up with suffering and tedium for the sake of a greater good, which involves not only the good of children, but a stable friendship and companionship for the adults. We can see in this regard that both self-importance and short sightedness are playing havoc with the choices people are making.

When children are young they suffer from divorce. Very often the mother suffers, whether she has young children to care for or she has spent much of her life caring for the children and home, and therefore not up to par with her age group in the work force. So divorce is often disastrous to women and children.

Part III Marriage: Covenant and Sacrament

The third consideration is marriage as covenant and sacrament. It is important to note that this third category includes the other two categories, the sexual and the social, and adds an additional dimension. By covenant we mean that marriage in scripture involves a relationship with God. In the ancient scriptures of the Hebrews the notion of covenant qualified the unique relationship God established with

the Israelite people. The unusual aspect of this relationship was that human relations became imbued with divine significance. Thus offenses against one's neighbor became also offenses against the covenant. Doubtless people found stealing, lying and adultery negative experiences, especially for the victims, but now they become sins or offenses against God. God has an interest in maintaining the proper order within the covenant community.

Not only is marriage protected by divine sanction, but also marriage has a meaning relating to the very creation. In the Book of Genesis God creates the male and female as one reality. There is in the picture language of that work a unity prior to the later diversity into two different sexes. This means that there is a complementarity between the male and the female, so that alone they are not whole, but only find wholeness through the other. The two become one flesh. The natural physical bonding of sexuality, which we have discussed, the social commitment necessary for stability, takes on a deeply psychological and spiritual meaning. The partner is the other self.

Jesus approves of this early understanding of marriage before the advent of divorce, with the phrase “in the beginning.” In other words, in the beginning there was such a unity of persons, divorce was not possible. Divorce would be cutting away a part of oneself. He also quotes: “A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and become one flesh.” This incidentally was not a description of the social custom of the Hebrews. In fact the wife came to live with the husband in the family cluster. What Jesus meant was the connection between a man and his wife had to be stronger and take precedence over the bond he had with his father and mother, which in a so-called patriarchal society was the strongest social bond. This was an ideal that may not have been realized often.

The Church's understanding of marriage grew for centuries. The transformation that comes about through faith and Baptism could not but influence marriage. Gradually the Church discerned that marriage exists in two forms, one natural and open to all people and the other supernatural and open to people who share the gift of faith. The supernatural form of marriage is called a sacrament and it is a sign of Christ's unity with the Church his bride. If marriage is a sacrament, then it is in and through marriage that Christ sanctifies married couples. They do not receive the sacrament from the priest but administer it to each other.

The Church teaches that the transmission of life is one of the highest purposes of marriage and that couples should always remain open to life. For serious reasons couples may use natural periods of infertility to regulate births, but not artificial contraception. In principle the unitive and the procreative goals or intents in marriage remain intrinsically connected.

As discussed above marriage requires both the man and the woman to sacrifice their egoism and many personal preferences. Such sacrifices may be motivated by the needs of children, but in Christian moral thought and teaching, the transformation of a person from self-centered to other-centered is a good in itself even apart from children. Catholics believe that it is God who inaugurates this transformation and who provides all necessary graces toward its accomplishment. Again God wants his children to be happy, joyful and prosperous. The sacramental graces of marriage or matrimony are ways God uses to bring that desire into fruition.

Also see Joliet diocesan website www.dioceseofjoliet.org/marriagecatechesis.

The following is a homily reflecting the Church's theological, pastoral and spiritual aspects of marriage, from the wedding of Noelle and David.

God's Will for Us Sacrament of Matrimony Saturday, July 7, 2012 2:00 PM Gn 1:26-28, 31a; (Gn 2:15-24); 1 Cor 12:31b—13:13; Jn 15:9-12 (If we walk with God every day and we put our trust in God, we can love one another as Jesus has loved us.)

“This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you.”

The three readings today all speak of the **tremendous joy that God wants his people to have.**

The language of the first reading is the poetry of ancient Israel, and it is not our poetry; it is not our way of thinking. But what it is trying to say is not how God created the earth or humanity or the animals, but rather why. **What is the meaning in our creation?** And it doesn't give a full answer. It simply hints that the meaning that God has placed in the creation is that **God has given** the creation his own imprint, **the imprint of his own image and likeness in the human nature.** So in spite of what we may think about human beings, however we may talk about people, the word of God says “in the beginning” humanity was intended to be the image and the likeness of God, **meaning sharing in God's own nature by participation.** How?

Well, in one way you could say the entire creation shares in God's nature. Anything that is, shares in the being of God who is, but human beings have something special; **human beings have self-awareness, the feeling of “I.”** This is our greatest treasure and our greatest problem. This makes us different from all the rest of creation. **This challenges us to be like God,** and that's exactly how the Fathers talked about it, the Fathers of the Church; they said our destiny is to become God, to become divine; **that's why we are created as we are with awareness, with freedom to choose the kind of person we are going to be.** At the same time that feeling of “I” also can often imprison us in all kinds of smallness and all kinds of fears. So here we are. This is the plan. The plan is simply begun but not finished. And it's **our role to finish the work God has begun, not only in the world by tilling and dressing the earth, but in ourselves,** by completing the canvas that is only sketched out in our birth and in our formation.

Now this poem points out that “it is not good for the man to be alone.” No, **it is not good for us to be alone,** for anyone to be alone. **We are meant for others; ultimately we are meant for God.** And **ordinarily the way we get to God is through others.** One principal way, pointed out already in the very beginning of the Bible, written a long, long, long time ago, was the very reason we are here today, **the coming together of man and woman in a covenant. A covenant is a pact or a treaty and it joins people on one level, man and woman, with God on another level.** This is the very idea of a **sacrament, an outward sign indicating something way beyond what we can see, a transcendent reality.**

If it's a sacrament, it's a way to God. If it is a way to God, then it's about Christ and in Christ, since he is the way to God: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” So **matrimony is about Christ,** and the prayer of the Church says that. And Christ said, **“No greater love has anyone than to lay down his life for his friend.”** Well, if marriage isn't about friendship, I don't know what it is about! And the only way we can really be friends in the way Jesus talked about friendship is to lay down our lives. And this is **what all married people are asked to do,** to lay down their lives for each other **in such a selfless way that they begin something that extends beyond themselves, family and beyond family.** And this is a great thing. This is the way God wants to improve the world and complete the world. **He wants children to be conceived in bliss and joy, and that's why he gives us the gift of sexuality.**

And so this is a great mission that David and Noelle are undertaking. It's a mission from God. It's a vocation from God. And they do not do this alone. **"As the Father loves me, so I also love you."** Jesus says that today to Noelle and David. **"Remain in my love." And that is possible.**

We gather together in Eucharist because it is in the Eucharist that Jesus feeds us with sustenance. And he will continue to **feed Noelle and David throughout their lives with the sustenance of his own body and blood**, his own life, poured out on the Cross, and **enabling them to do the same for each other**. And that will bring them unspeakable joy.

Now today **a lot of people are having trouble with commitment**, and a lot of people are having a lot of trouble with values. And sociologists will some day write about it—the end of the twentieth century, the beginning of the twenty-first century—what happened and what happened to the society. I think the main thing is **a lot of people have lost their sense of God. We come from God; we are destined to return to God, and the only way we can ever be happy is in God. If we walk with God every day and we put our trust in God**, then we can do this. **We can love one another as Jesus has loved us, and we can be saints, and we can lead others to holiness and to happiness, and to a life of true thriving.** And this is God's will for us, and this is God's will for you, Noelle and David.