

Marriage and the Common Good

The Good and the Common Good

One of my favourite spare-time activities is hill-walking. Usually I go with a friend but, from time to time over the years, I have organised pilgrim walks on St. Kevin's Way, which crosses the Wicklow Gap from Holywood to Glendalough. In the beginning I used to remind people to bring a "good pair of shoes", but I very quickly realised that everybody has his or her own idea of what that means. In the mountains, that can make life difficult. Mostly, when we use the word "good" it is related in some way to the nature of the thing and the purpose for which the thing is intended. There are shoes for dancing; there are shoes for tennis. They *are* good, but they are not good for long walks in the hills.

I have been asked to talk about *Marriage and the Common Good*. Maybe I could just suggest that, somewhere in the back of your mind, you might hold onto that idea that "goodness" is in some way related to "nature" and to "purpose".¹

One of the defining characteristics of our human nature is our rational capacity. Reason helps us to come to an understanding of our world and of ourselves and to reflect on the purpose of our existence. This in turn helps us to come to an appreciation of what is good, and what is good for us as people. Wise men and women have been doing this since the very beginning of time.

In most cultures there seems to be an acceptance that, even though relationship is challenging, people are not meant to live in isolation. The Book of Genesis in the Hebrew tradition expresses this idea as an element of God's plan. "It is not good that the man should be alone". While most of us like to have some time to ourselves, solitary confinement is generally considered to be a very harsh punishment.

This social dimension of our nature means that, while we are inclined in the first place to seek what is good for ourselves, there is also a natural inclination to work together for what is good for all the members of a group or a particular society.ⁱⁱ The good of each person is part of the common good, so the common good is not just the good of the group; it is the balance between the good of the individual and the good of the group; another way of putting it is to say that the common good is the good of each and of all.

One last thing about the "good" is that, when we are talking about what is good for a person, we need to remember what a person is. For philosophers, such as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, a person is a complex unity of body and spirit. More recent personalist philosophers, including Pope John Paul, would say that, in the person, the soma and the psyche are integrated under the guiding influence of the will.ⁱⁱⁱ Either way, the point is that any attempt to understand the good (or the common good) must give sufficient weight to each of those dimensions. Modern thought tends to over-emphasise the mind and the

emotions, while ignoring the fact that the body is also an integral part of who we are.

What is Marriage?:

Before I checked the Concise Oxford Dictionary, I would have defined marriage as "a faithful union of one man and one woman, oriented towards the mutual enrichment of both and towards the procreation and care of children". The dictionary definition is actually quite similar, though it leaves out the notions of fidelity and mutual enrichment. Marriage is defined as the "condition of man and woman legally united for the purpose of living together and usually procreating lawful offspring; (it is) the act or ceremony or procedure establishing this condition; (it can also refer to) one particular such union".^{iv}

While there is a tendency, for obvious reasons, to associate marriage with religious belief, the reality is that the committed union of man and woman, oriented towards procreation, predates all the mainstream religions and the great world cultures. Marriage is not a Christian construct or even an invention of religious people. The reverse in fact is the case. Primitive societies recognised what was already written in the nature of man and woman. They discovered the essential reality of marriage and institutionalised it, with variations. That reality was the committed relationship of man and woman oriented to the procreation of children. In most societies it was regulated by law, because the care of women and children required some degree of permanence. This pattern is well developed in the cultures of Greece and Rome, as well as in Buddhism, Judaism and Islam.

Keeping that in mind, we can now look at marriage in the Judaeo-Christian culture. Christians see the universe as the result of a coherent plan brought about by a loving God. One of the earliest expressions of this faith is the account of creation, told in symbolic language. Central to this story, is the truth about the love of man and woman, who are intended to be "companions and helpmates." The idea that woman is formed from the rib taken from the side of man, is actually a symbolic way of saying that they are "of the same substance." Man and woman are, therefore equal in dignity but, because they are in a very real sense different, they complement one another. The book of Genesis, with its instruction that man and woman should "increase and multiply" places procreation alongside companionship as the purpose of human sexuality.

In Christian marriage, a man and woman commit to one another that they will be faithful all the days of their life and that they will accept from God the children he may give them and bring them up in accordance with the law of God and of the Church. "Sacrament" means a "visible sign". Through their commitment to life-long fidelity, together with the openness to new life and the responsibility of care, the husband and wife become a visible and effective sign of the love of God who is always faithful, who gives life and who cares for the life that he gives. There are, of course, other kinds of loving relationship which reflect the love of God, but marriage is unique.

As you might imagine, I believe in the Christian ideal of marriage. I am fortunate to have had parents who believed in it. I love to share that ideal with others and to celebrate it as a priest. I am convinced that it contributes to the common good. But when I speak to you this evening about marriage and the common good, I am not speaking particularly about Christian marriage. You don't have to be a Christian to recognise the truth about human sexuality; the joy of it and the heartbreak of it; the great potential that it has to bring stability to society and to the lives of children.

In What sense does Marriage serve the Common Good:

Now we can move on to look at the relationship between marriage and the common good. I mentioned a few moments ago that, within the Catholic tradition, we speak of married people "being" a Sacrament – a visible and effective sign of the love of God. In other words, they concretise that love for one another, for their children and also for the community in which they live, the neighbours, the parish and the wider world. This is marriage at the service of the common good, as seen from a uniquely Catholic perspective. The love of the couple is seen as their Christian vocation. Indeed, I have often thought that the words of Jesus in the institution of the Eucharist, "This is my body, which is for you", must surely have particular significance for a Catholic married couple. After all, they give themselves generously to one another on a daily basis and the reality of that gift finds expression in the language of the body.

Grace perfects nature, as we learn from Thomas Aquinas, but it does not contradict nature. When we dig a little deeper, therefore, we should not be surprised to find that the essential elements that allow us to recognise Christian marriage *as* marriage, are not unique to Christianity. They are derived from the nature of our humanity and they are "part and parcel" of the way that marriage is understood in most religious traditions and in most cultures. These essential elements include:

- the consent of both the man and the woman
- a commitment to permanence and to fidelity
- a commitment to mutual care
- an openness to the procreation and care of children
- the complementarity of woman and man

It is precisely *because* these elements of the marriage commitment contribute to the common good that they are valued by civil society. It is worth considering these elements of marriage more closely to see how they contribute to the common good.

- i. ***Mutual consent:*** Although we sometimes use the expression to "take someone in marriage", the reality is that one person cannot take the other in marriage, unless the other consents. In the absence of consent, there may be a certificate, but there is no marriage. The Catholic Church places significant emphasis on the importance of consent for the validity of marriage. The state does likewise. Consent is important, because a society in which people simply take what they want carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction. If this principle applies to property, it

clearly applies even more so the human person. Through their gift of themselves to one another, the husband and wife, place their personal freedom at the service of their marriage, which is society in miniature. The rapid rise in the number of couples choosing to cohabit rather than deciding to marry, suggests an almost “cultural” incapacity to commit, with corresponding consequences down the road for the common good.^v

- ii. ***Permanence and Fidelity***: The ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, when he began to reflect of the reality of change, commented: “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man”. Heraclitus would feel very much at home in a society in which people regularly change their mobile-phones, their careers, their homes and even their partners. But there was another Greek philosopher, Parmenides, who held firmly to the view that, for change to be possible, there must be something that remains the same. When a society is in flux, where is the point of reference? Through their life-long commitment to one another, a married couple provide that point of reference, not just for one another, but in a particular way for their children. Anecdotally, we hear of parents for whom the flame of love has died down, but who “stay together for the sake of the children”. One might be inclined these days to wonder why they bother, but in so doing – sometimes at personal cost – they serve the common good. Many societies – including our own - provide for divorce, but I cannot think of any society in which couples getting married do not promise to be true to one another for life. The Catholic Church takes people at their word.
- iii. ***Mutual Care***: The traditional commitment of the couple “to love one another truly, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health” is not always expressed in the same words, but it does form an integral part of the ceremony of marriage in most traditions. It is, essentially, a commitment to the common good, even at great personal cost. The fact that people sometimes do walk away from the responsibility when serious difficulties arise, does not change the significance of the commitment. When the duty of mutual care is neglected, the partner who is abandoned, together with the children, are either left to fend for themselves or thrown back on the resources of the state. The failure to care, in this way, has an impact on the common good of society as well as on the common good of the family.

As Pope Francis commented in a recent address:

“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”.^{vi}

- iv. ***Openness to the procreation and care of children***: Marriage is not the only relationship in which people consent to live together, promise to be faithful to one another and to care for one another. What makes marriage unique is the orientation of this committed relationship to the procreation and care of children. (I choose, incidentally, to use the term

procreation, because I believe that parents transmit the gift of life in partnership with God. The term reproduction seems to reduce everything to biology).

Procreation has enormous significance for the common good. In the first place, the future of society depends on procreation. The growing separation of sexual activity from procreation is not just a "Catholic issue"; it has serious implications for the common good. An interesting statistic is that, while there has been a 360% increase in the number of cohabiting couples, there has been a 119% increase in the number of children being raised outside of marriage.^{vii} Another way of expressing this is that many of the cohabiting couples are either not having children or are having them in smaller number or later in life. In the past, when there was no social welfare, people had large families, in the hope that their children would look after them in their old age. Now, in Europe at least, the average married couple has far fewer children and, in many countries, the number of births is not sufficient to replace the existing population. There is already clear evidence in many societies that there are not enough young people to support an ageing population. Good news? Bad news?

The basic principle that procreation should take place within marriage is not just a "Catholic thing" either. It takes many years for children to come to maturity. The average child has lived 20% of the allotted life span before his or her education has been completed. It is this education that prepares them to live a fully human life, which includes being good citizens, respecting the lives and the property of others, doing an honest day's work, caring for the sick, working for human rights and social justice. The family is truly the "school of humanity".^{viii} During that time of formation children require economic and emotional stability, as well as the example of parents who love and respect one another. Society has a major interest in the successful outcome of parenthood and I personally believe that the connection between marriage and procreation is the primary reason for the state to take any interest in the regulation of marriage.

- v. ***Complementarity of man and woman:*** I have referred already to the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus. Five hundred years before the Christian era, Heraclitus commented: "*Couples are wholes and not wholes, what agrees disagrees, the concordant is discordant. From all things one and from one all things*". I have no reason to believe that he was speaking of married couples, but what he says holds true. The very difference between the sexes is part of what brings richness into the lives of married people and into the lives of their children. Pope Francis, once again, expresses this very well:

In effect, this complementarity lies at the foundation of marriage and the family, which is the first school where we learn to appreciate our talents and those of others, and where we begin to acquire the art of living together. For most of us, the family is the principal place in which we begin to "breathe"

values and ideals, as we develop our full capacity for virtue and charity. At the same time, as we know, in families tensions arise: between egoism and altruism, between reason and passion, between immediate desires and long-term goals, and so on. But families also provide the environment in which these tensions are resolved: this is important.^{ix}

In the Irish Constitution (Bunreacht na hÉireann) “the state pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded, and to protect it against attack”.^x Given the extent to which marriage contributes to the common good, I believe that it would be fool-hardy in the extreme for the state to do otherwise.

Guarding with special care does not, of course, simply mean defending the legal status of marriage. It also means creating the socio-economic conditions which allow couples to enter marriage with confidence and to sustain family life. As Pope John Paul wrote:

since in many regions young people are unable to get married properly because of extreme poverty deriving from unjust or inadequate social and economic structures, society and the public authorities should favour legitimate marriage by means of a series of social and political actions which will guarantee a family wage, by issuing directives ensuring housing fitting for family life and by creating opportunities for work and life.^{xi}

Redefining Marriage:

There is a proposal to re-define marriage so that it would no longer be a life-long commitment between one man and one woman, which is open to the gift of life. In a culture of “live and let live”, there might be a tendency to say, sure what harm will it do if the two men or the two women love one another?

The opposition of the Catholic Church to the re-definition of marriage, is not about homosexuality or the gay life-style, it is about the meaning of marriage. The Catholic Church clearly teaches that people who are homosexual must always be treated with respect and condemns without reservation words or actions which are intended to injure, ridicule or undermine homosexual people.

To extend civil marriage to include a relationship between people of the same sex, however, would be to change the meaning of marriage. It is not just be a case of adding “another kind of marriage” alongside what we already have. Not only would marriage no longer, of necessity, be between a man and a woman, but the unique relationship between marriage and procreation would disappear completely from the definition of marriage. Since this is probably the principal reason for the state to have any interest in regulating marriage, one might ask, why bother regulating it at all? One might even ask, why in that case would the state restrict marriage to two people? What, in the final analysis, is the difference between a “sexual friendship” (in which the state has no interest) and a marriage? The answer is that

societies rely on families built on strong marriages to produce what they need but cannot secure: healthy upright children who become conscientious citizens. As they

mature, children benefit from the love and care of both mother and father, and from their parents' committed and exclusive love for each other. Unlike friendships, which vary in kind and degree and formality, marriage ... has enough objective structure, apart from the spouses' preferences, to be legally regulated. ^{xii}

While technology can circumvent the laws of biology, the human body itself bears witness to the essential connection between our male-female sexuality and the gift of life. This connection pre-dates religion; it is part of the reality of our human nature. As St. Paul once wrote, people who do not know the law of God, are often aware of a law written in their hearts, on the basis of which they make their judgements of conscience. ^{xiii}

It is suggested that people of the same sex could care for children and provide them with love and security. That is undoubtedly true, but it is only part of what we mean by parenthood. "Children have a right", as Pope Francis says, "to grow up in a family with a father and a mother capable of creating a suitable environment for the child's growth and emotional development". ^{xiv} Even where adoption is concerned, in order to replicate as closely as possible the relationship of the natural family, the Catholic Church along with many others, would argue that the adoptive parents should always be one man and one woman in a stable committed relationship.

I am very conscious of the fact that, alongside the current debate, same-sex couples who have lived together in a committed relationship for many years have serious concerns about what happens when one of them becomes seriously ill or dies. There are very real issues about visiting rights and consultation in hospitals and of course about inheritance. These concerns are shared by other people who are not married but who live in long-term committed relationships. By all means, let the state provide for these rights, but let's be clear, people have those rights because they are people, and not particularly because of their sexual orientation.

Challenges Facing the Family – Synod of Bishops

I want to finish by saying a few words here about the recent Extraordinary Synod of Bishops. The stated purpose of the Synod, which is in two stages, was to consider "The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization". Married life makes an important contribution to the well-being of the family, of the Church and of society as a whole. Pope Francis clearly understands, however, as do all of those who participated in the Synod, that the family also faces significant challenges – and not just from proposed legislation. The challenges are emotional, spiritual, cultural and economic. The real life consequences for many couples are a reluctance to commit to marriage on the one hand and a rapidly growing rate of breakdown and divorce on the other.

While the focus of public debate about the synod was on the high-profile issues of "gay-marriage" and whether or not people who had divorced and remarried could receive Holy Communion, these are clearly not the only challenges facing the family and they are not the only focus of the Synod. The second stage of the process, the Ordinary Synod, takes place in late 2015. In the meantime, it remains for us, in our local communities and in our diocese, to ask ourselves

how we can, not simply defend the family founded on marriage, but how we can actively support it and encourage those who seek to live that vision in each of our parishes.

The great values of marriage and the Christian family correspond to the search that characterizes human existence, even in these times of individualism and hedonism. People need to be accepted in the concrete circumstances of life. We need to know how to support them in their searching and to encourage them in their hunger for God and their wish to feel fully part of the Church, also including those who have experienced failure or find themselves in a variety of situations. The Christian message always contains in itself the reality and the dynamic of mercy and truth which meet in Christ.^{xv}

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27th Nov. 2014

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- ⁱ Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*. Notre Dame: University of Nore Dame Press, 1984, 58
- ⁱⁱ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*. Ia, Q.96, art 4, reply
- ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Wojtyla, K. The Acting Person (Analecta Husserliana). Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1969, Ch. 5 & 6
- ^{iv} Concise Oxford Dictionary,
- ^v Cf Census 2011. In the past fifteen years there has been a 360% increase in the number of cohabiting couples.
- ^{vi} Pope Francis: Address to the Participants In The International Colloquium On The Complementarity Between Man And Woman, 17th November 2014, 2
- ^{vii} Cf Census 2011
- ^{viii} Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: (*Gaudium et Spes*). Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965, #52)
- ^{ix} Pope Francis: Address to the Participants In The International Colloquium On The Complementarity Between Man And Woman, 17th November 2014, 1 cf. also Pope Francis, *Evangelium Gaudium*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965, #60.
- ^x Bunreacht na Éireann, (The Constitution of Ireland). Dublin: Government Publications Office. Art. 40.3.1
- ^{xi} Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1981, #81
- ^{xii} Girgis, S et al What is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense. New York: Encounter Books, 2012, 15
- ^{xiii} Letter to the Romans, 2
- ^{xiv} Pope Francis: Address to the Participants In The International Colloquium On The Complementarity Between Man And Woman, 17th November 2014, 3
- ^{xv} The Synod Of Bishops: *The Pastoral Challenges Of The Family In The Context Of Evangelization, Relatio Synodi*, 3