



Equipes Notre-Dame

The meaning of marriage

Introduction

You may be surprised by the title of this “study topic” as it is something that we probably don’t give much thought to. As members of “Teams of Our Lady” we are helped to build and strengthen our marriage with our regular meetings and endeavours. Pope Benedict XVI in his recent address to the members of the Tribunal of the Roman Rota says ‘this crisis of the meaning of marriage is also influencing the attitude of many of the faithful’¹.

I would imagine that when we approached the Parish Priest about getting married, be it five, ten, 15 years ago (or longer!) and then received a checklist of things to be done that it was viewed as a hindrance more than anything! Little did we realise that this was all so that we were following the Code of Canon Law – the law of the Catholic Church and marrying correctly!

Our perception of marriage is greatly influenced by our own experiences – Jack Dominian in his book “Marriage, Faith and Love” reminds us that ‘partners come to marriage with a mixture of good and bad experiences of love. Marital stability depends on whether the good experiences outweigh the bad ones’.² Pope Benedict also reminds us that ‘People who contract marriage must be definitively committed to it because marriage is such in the plan of creation and redemption’³ and ‘they may not withdraw without contradicting what God himself has wrought within them’⁴.

The history of marriage

Augustine, circ 500 AD, identified three “bonas” of marriage – the *bonum proles* (good of children), *bonum fidei* (the good of fidelity), and *bonum sacramenti* (the good of the sacrament or permanence) and these are still representative of marriage today.

Definitions from the Codes of Canon Law.

Canon 1055 of the 1983 Code⁵ describes it as ‘The marriage covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of their whole life, and which of its own very nature is ordered to the well-being of the spouses and to the procreation and upbringing of children, has between the baptised, been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament.’ It should be added that Vatican II was extremely influential in changing how marriage was defined and viewed. This is a much-changed view from the previous Code of Canon Law (1917 Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law⁶) when marriage was defined in Canon 1013:1 as ‘The primary end of marriage is the procreation and education of children, the secondary [end] is mutual support and a remedy for concupiscence. The essential properties of marriage are unity and indissolubility, which in Christian marriage obtain special firmness by reason of the sacrament’.

The Debate

Yet it may come as a surprise that respected canon lawyers and theologians have been debating, since the promulgation of the 1983 Code of Canon Law on whether there is actually a fourth bona of marriage the *bonum coniugum* – well being of the spouses and whether it is there at the start of all marriages, or is it that this is actually achieved as a result of the other three bona (as described by Augustine above). Part of the problem has stemmed from the fact that the 1983 Code does not attempt to define the essence of marriage and this therefore has allowed interpretation to lead jurisprudence.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the members of the tribunal of the Roman Rota. Accessed on www.vatican.va on 1/2/07.

² Dominian, Jack; *Faith, Love and Marriage*. Fount Paperbacks. 1984. Page 44.

³ Pope Benedict XVI. www.vatican.va on 1/2/07

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI. www.vatican.va on 1/2/07

⁵ Gratianus Collection Series; *Code of Canon Law Annotated Second Edition*. Midwest Theological Forum and Wilson and Lafleur Limitee.

⁶ Peters, Dr Edward N *The 1917 Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law in English with extensive scholarly apparatus*. Ignatius Press 2001.

The 1983 Code clearly suggests that the *bonum coniugum* (well-being of the spouses) is an essential part of any marriage. It must be remembered to avoid two extremes that the '*bonum coniugum* means only that the spouses should be civil to each other'⁷ or 'that spouses must be madly in love with each other or there is no marriage'.⁸

An introduction to the discussion

Having been married for over 17 years I have spent a lot of time reflecting, both on my own, and with my husband, on the meaning of the *bonum coniugum* or "the good of the spouses" and what it means to me/us and what part it plays in our marriage. When we got married it was with the full intention of doing everything to ensure that the other spouse would be happy throughout our marriage and nothing has changed to that intent today! We believe part of the difficulty is perhaps 'How do you measure the well-being of the spouses?' For us it's the emotional support, the friendship, and the knowledge that someone has my best interests at heart. At times during a marriage when support is needed this support is often conveyed by touch, gesture or even a glance. Marriages develop over time so that understanding each other so well becomes instinctive but the desire to do this must be there from the start.

A marriage consists of two individuals yet the knowledge that your husband/wife also considers your needs as highly as their own strengthens both, particularly to deal with the social and moral pressures of today's modern society. Many couples will advise young couples 'to work at their relationship/marriage'. But what is this work? This includes talking, making time to share their lives relating to work, continually assessing their relationship and building on the foundations that grow throughout the years of their marriage, sharing parenthood, just being with each other and learning the ability to put others first. The *bonum coniugum* is also that commitment to the development of a marital relationship. Initially there is that promise of development – being madly in love, with this possibly changing to being more of a friendship 50 years later which can be considered faultless and is the full acceptance of the *bonum coniugum* in a marriage.

You will note that 'love' has not been mentioned so far, yet most young people today would cite 'love' as their reason for getting married and of course 'love' does have a major role in any marriage.

Questions for discussion:

- 1) Do we, as Catholics, get married to be happy?
- 2) Why do we get married?
- 3) Are children a necessity for a marriage to be considered a good marriage?
- 4) What do we mean by a good marriage?
- 5) Do you think the *bonum coniugum*/well being of the spouses grows or is it present when you exchange your marriage vows?

As we belong to Teams of Lady (Reading 5) we used this as a study topic and it was interesting to see that marriage can mean different things to different people. It was an extremely lively discussion and we all felt that perhaps other Teams could benefit from it as well!

The original text for this study sheet was based on my dissertation for an MA in Canon Law and titled "What do we mean by the *bonum coniugum* in contemporary western culture"?

Judith Crimmins

⁷ Wrenn, Laurence; *Refining the Essence of Marriage*. The Jurist (1986) 46. Pages 532 – 551.

⁸ Wrenn, Laurence.