

What does GETTING MARRIED MEAN?

Montserrat Gas Aixendri

UIC Barcelona

Marriage and the family have never been so clearly understood as they are today although paradoxically people's lives do not reflect this progress in terms of understanding marriage. We can see this misunderstanding of the very essence of marriage in the proliferation of couples who live together without getting married, the ever increasing divorce rate, and the growing number of children born outside marriage. Added to this are recent legislative changes which seem to confirm that marriage is now considered to be an obsolete system that should be substituted for other types of unions that are in line with new social ideas and intellectual progress.

We know that behind the apparent "demands" of new regulations for these family models there has been a great deal of pressure from groups and platforms that have little or nothing to do with the real wishes of the majority of ordinary citizens.

Actually these "new" models are not new and are not models because they are dysfunctional imitations of reality. The reality is that there is only one *real* type of family: the "traditional family". It is the only type of family that has resisted all types of threats throughout the history of mankind. This in itself is proof enough that the traditional family is not just another option but is the model to imitate.

Some ambiguities in our culture

The dominant culture is often wrong when they define marriage and because of this they offer a warped definition that with time and repetition becomes more and more distant from reality.

In the first place, they confuse marriage with a legalised form of cohabitation. It is common to find people who identify marriage with the legalities surrounding a wedding.

If marriage was simply legality, it would be easy enough to remove the paperwork, which is actually a mere accessory, and discover that the essence of marriage is the cohabitation of two people who love each other.

Marriage is also defined as a relationship between two people built on their deep love for each other.

However, even though it is true that love is an important ingredient in marriage, there are many relationships built on love (such as friendship or love for a parent) that do not involve any legal attention or regulation, whereas marriage is regulated down to the smallest detail.

What makes marriage a marriage is not cohabitation, or deep love or even laws although all these elements are important aspects of marriage and the family.

Let us look at what it actually means to get married

Getting married means establishing a personal relationship based on the correct understanding of the nature of man/woman. A correct understanding of what is male and female which permits a correct understanding of their duty to protect and educate future generations.

Marriage is not, therefore, **a relationship created by the legislative system or by a public authority**. If this were so, there would be no problem with modifications to provide it with the structure required at different times in history just as we can change inheritance laws or trade laws or any other man-made law.

Marriage is not an institution invented by human beings; rather we have discovered that it is an inherent aspect of human nature. When we say that marriage is an institution of natural law, we mean that it is present in the very structure of the human person; both male and female. This means that the core definition of marriage, its characteristics and its point of existence, are not arbitrary and outside of mankind but part of the very essence of mankind. For that reason human beings of all eras and from all cultures have discovered this fundamental aspect of their being, even though they can err in some of their conclusions.

The human person is naturally open to others; they are the only creatures capable of establishing interpersonal relationships. However, joining together in marriage is not just any relationship, but a deep bond between man and woman, based on mutual diversity and sexual complementarity. This relationship is so profound that it exists in every culture as the first and most basic expression of human sociability, essentially linked to the birth of new human beings.

The foundation of marriage is the sexual union; if this desire for fertility is missing then the marriage does not exist. No matter how many laws are written, without the desire for fertility the marriage is empty of content and is nothing more than a *nomen iuris*.

For that reason marriage has a function, which is to ensure human reproduction and that children are socialized in a stable environment. This makes marriage-based families a group of people who are of the utmost importance in society.

Marriage means committing to love, but not just any type of love. It is a commitment to conjugal love.

It is important to make the difference between the feeling of love and the will to love. This is the difference between eros and agape so brilliantly explained by Benedict XVI in his encyclical *God is Love*. “In the gradual unfolding of this encounter, it is clearly revealed that love is not merely a sentiment. Sentiments come and go. A sentiment can be a marvelous first spark, but it is not the fullness of love.”

A love based only on feeling is still an incomplete love that is immature, possessive and self-centered, seeking personal satisfaction in the experience of love but as such incapable of giving what it commits to.

Conjugal love is mature love between a man and a woman. Benedict XVI tells us that “It is characteristic of mature love that it calls into play all man's potentialities; it engages the whole man, so to speak. “Marital love is, for that reason, a love that is selfless; it is a love capable of giving that does not depend on feelings but on personal freedom. In marital love, one loves the other as a benefit in itself not as a benefit for oneself.

Love in this sense, therefore aspires to permanence. Converting this mature love into a commitment and duty by law is the only way to give the union the definitive and stable quality longed for by those who have discovered this love.

However, is this possible? Western cultures in which rationalism and individualism have taken such a firm hold seem to deny humankind's potential for permanent commitment. The anthropological basis for Western culture's acceptance of divorce as unavoidable is that the human being is incapable of making a commitment for life.

On the other hand, Christian anthropology considers human beings to be creatures endowed with freedom, able to govern them and navigate their future, able to commit freely, and to give themselves to another or to a cause.

Freedom and commitment are not in opposition to each other, as our culture tries to tell us by offering the idea of freedom as simply the ability to make a choice. Frequently we see that people are afraid of commitment because they believe that they will remain free as long as they do not make permanent commitments.

Many people today decide not to marry because they do not "want to lose their freedom." This attitude only seems like freedom but in fact it is the opposite. The inability to commit in fact makes one a prisoner of one's whims. People frequently become inconsistent, irresponsible, informal and dependent on the circumstances of the moment. They wander through life without a moral compass to make their decisions or guide them in the correct use of their freedom.

The only way that human beings have to perpetuate their love is through an act that promises love to another, into the future, for life. The difference between a couple in love and a married couple in love, is that the couple in love love each other every day whereas the married couple love and **have promised to renew their desire to continue loving each other forever every day. It is a question of having the will to love.**

This commitment is expressed through marital consent, which is the moment in the marriage rite that determines the validity of the act and for this reason there is a specific right.

It is the existence of a commitment that marks the fundamental difference between a marriage and any other form of cohabitation, as D'Agostino says.

Western societies tend to blur this important point. The extent of the social phenomenon of legal recognition of domestic partnerships, has led to the trivialisation of an act that is essential in the constitution of the family; the formal promise.

Furthermore, marriage means that there is a reciprocal gift, in the act of consent, forming the first and inalterable relationship between the man and the woman.¹

This gift of self is the greatest act a human being can undertake and is only possible because he/she is free. In this freely given gift of self each human being demonstrates their ability to take part in their own development as a relational being. A person's identity takes shape and form in as much as it relates to others.; first to the members of his/her own family. We are all sons or daughters of someone, brothers and sisters of someone and fathers or mothers of someone.

Marriage brings forth the first and strongest of these relationships: the conjugal relationship. The conjugal identity is of the same nature as the identities that take their origin from a blood relationship (filial, paternal, maternal or fraternal). In fact, some authors claim that conjugal identity can be even stronger because children and parents do not belong to each other whereas spouses have given themselves to each other. The point is that the conjugal and family relationships are ontological and cannot be erased.

Once created, the family relationship exists regardless of the intentions of the people involved. The concept of an “ex-family”, “ex-father” “ex-son” or “ex-sister” has not taken hold in Western culture. However, the concept of an “ex-husband” or an “ex-wife” has become common due to the mistaken idea that the relationship is merely legal and external.

The last point I wish to make is that the bond between two people created by marriage constitutes a new interpersonal reality, which is different from each previous reality. It is also a new entity as far as society is concerned. Miss Mary Thompson and Mr. Jim Smith are not the same as Mr. and Mrs. Mary and Jim Smith (we are referring to the intrinsic social dimension of marriage and family).

Marriage is built by the couple who marry, according to their natural inclinations; they are the protagonists in their marriage.

I make this point because it is common to think that a public authority marries a couple (civil or ecclesiastical authority) and that this same official has the power to “Unmarry” them. People’s consciences become dim and they forget the truth about marriage as an interpersonal reality, as a phenomenon in which the main players and authors are the individuals who in their great freedom choose to give themselves to each other in all dimensions of themselves.

Does this mean that the legal forms and formalities are not important for a marriage to be authentic? Absolutely not. The legal formalities are necessary because marriage has a social dimension. For a marriage to be an authentic conjugal commitment it must be celebrated in our community, and in society. This community must witness their consent and recognize it as an element of society, and as the source of primary social relationships (conjugal, paternal/maternal, and fraternal).

This legal and social celebration, held at a specific time and place, provides certainty to the existence of the marriage and authenticity to the marital commitment.

On the other hand, the external formalities and legalities lack meaning if they are predetermined without a true understanding of what marriage is. It is not the formalities that give marriage its meaning nor can legality change an intrinsic reality. The lawmaker oversteps his limits when he tries to redefine the content (essence) of marriage through laws. Laws, which fail to respect the fact that marriages are by nature formed by a man and a woman and are forever, substitute an objective truth for a simple legal situation.

When it is understood that healthy human development happens within the marriage-based family it is easy to understand that family is a fundamental element of society and is required in order to ensure the common good.

This common good is one that requires an adequate system of laws, which recognise the irreplaceable social role of the family based on marriage.

Conclusion

As mentioned previously, the aim of this introduction is to reflect on the meaning of marriage. Knowing what marriage means is important but it is not sufficient. It is also necessary to be able to carry out the implications of marriage in one's own life. We can find this ability in human nature but people must be educated within and by the family.

The challenge for families today is to discover how to educate future generations. By educate, we mean to bring up men and women of character, selfless people, honest people, people who are able to make commitments and form solid families that will contribute to creating a more humane society because they will be willing and able to care for and protect all human life.

It is no coincidence that the structure of this Postgraduate Degree in Marriage and Family Education is divided into this specific order: first understanding what marriage and family are in order to be able to reflect on how to educate within the family and what aspects of that education are important if we want our children to become well-rounded adults.

ⁱ F. D'AGOSTINO, *Linee per una filosofia della famiglia*, Giuffrè, Milano 1991, p. 153.