

INTAMS Symposium 1997

What Makes Marriage Succeed? Contributions of Human Sciences to Marital Spirituality

In January 1997, INTAMS organized a second symposium in Brussels on the theme "What makes marriage succeed? Contributions of human sciences to marital spirituality". In all religions and cultures human beings seek happiness and desire a meaningful life. Similarly married couples, whether entering marriage or already married, are in search of a happy marriage. People value marriage very highly despite unrealised aspirations and consequent suffering. Fulfilment in marriage involves hard work and requires community support. But in what does happiness consist? And what makes a happy and fulfilling marriage?

Prof. Margarete Zimmerman, literary historian from Berlin, focused in her introductory lecture on some implicit and explicit reflections on marriage in the French literary from the 14th to the 20th century. She concentrated in particular on images of marriage in which the yearning for freedom and self-fulfillment of (female) intellectuals leads to misogamy and misogyny. The presumed incompatibility between personal freedom and marital ties in this literary reflection obviously questions the seemingly fixed notions of marital happiness and success.

Ms. Penny Mansfield, Director of One plus One, a Marriage and Partnership Research Charity in London, showed from a sociological viewpoint how in the contemporary culture "quality" instead of "stability" has become the predictor of marital success. She emphasized two main elements essential for successful marriages in nowadays society: the relationship and the partnership. The partnership understood as an organized structure of permanent commitment and shared goals provides an anchor for the relationship, while the emotional attachment of the relationship sustains the partnership. In this respect, the capacity to understand and manage change in marriage appears to be crucial in making a marriage succeed.

A person who experiences profound happiness mostly finds his life also deeply meaningful. However, Prof. Heinrich Schmidinger, lecturer of christian philosophy at the university in Salzburg, demonstrated that especially today, in a postmodern society, fragmentation and individualism make it difficult to understand happiness in a broader sense than mere subjective feelings of satisfaction. And nihilism and relativism often prevent a widely unified agreement on meaning as a concept of orientation. A multiplicity of meanings goes together with a multiplicity of languages which in turn makes it hard for people to meet together and to understand one another, and this has a fundamental influence on attaining happiness and successful living also in marital relationship.

Also from a psychological point of view, the mutual emotional attachment and sexual attraction between two unique individuals are important characteristics for a successful marriage in nowadays' society. Antoon Vergote, psychoanalyst and professor-emeritus showed that these indispensable factors also entail the possibility of failure. The promotion of love matches in the Western culture, often leads to an exacerbation of expectations and to idealisation of the partner and of sexual love.

In the Christian religion, love defines the being of God himself. But the equal treatment of agapè and human love puts an inappropriate model on sexual love and often gives a bad conscience in advance because most people are unable to live out this ideal in their real lives.

Two theologians, Prof. Christiaan Depoortere and Prof. Gisbert Greshake, undertook at the end of the meeting to face the challenging question how the contributions of the human sciences could deepen the understanding and the living of marital spirituality. Both emphasized unanimously the importance of the ongoing journey in marital spiritual life and love.

In this INTAMS' symposium the many participants coming from very different European countries and various academic and professional backgrounds had been invited to reflect in an interdisciplinary perspective how marriages can succeed. Throughout lectures, workshops, testimonies from films and round-table discussions they could experience that marriage is an ongoing task to be completed.

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