

**Marriage and the Family Today: Pastoral Challenges and Hopes in Light of the
Extraordinary Synod on the Family
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We often hear these days from the mouth of bishops that church teaching in matters of sexuality and marriage can impossibly change. Should there be any need to bridge the gap between the moral teaching of the church and the moral insights of the faithful, this then has to be settled on the level of pastoral practice. Doctrine anyway has to be left untouched by such adaptations of the practice or of discipline.

I do not agree that the Bishops' Synods in 2014 and 2015 should discuss, and eventually modify, the applicability of the church's teaching but not its content. Such a divide between doctrine and practice, between teaching and ministry cannot be justified, neither on theological nor on pastoral grounds. I do not intend to substantiate my assertion in a general way by referring to its foundation in the tradition of the church. I will try, however, to provide some arguments drawn in particular from the church's theology of marriage. I will formulate my arguments in four short theses which follow from each other and then end with a brief conclusion.

1. Marriage is an earthly reality and as such has a sacramental value.

It seems to me that in some current debates we tend to forget or forsake this fundamental claim that has become so characteristic at least for the Latin tradition (the Oriental tradition has developed a different theological understanding of marriage). Some think e.g. that in the present context of "divorce mentality" many Catholic marriages are possibly invalid because the spouses lack insight into the characteristics of a Christian marriage, or fall short of interpersonal commitment or do not have a sufficient explicit Catholic faith in the marital sacramentality. They suggest then that the church should restrict and better control the conditions of admission to a sacramental marriage.

However, western church and theology have insisted that it is in the earthly and profane reality of two spouses committed to each other in mutual loving that God has chosen to manifest himself in graceful presence. Marriage is the only sacrament which does not need any other additional substance or element to render divine grace present and effective. It is not birth in itself which is the sacrament of baptism, but the outpouring of water in the name of the Trinity on the newborn. Yet, in marriage the mutual "I take you as my husband/wife" suffices to create a sacramental reality. There is much more to say on this of course, but I immediately turn from here to my second thesis:

2. The church's and theology's discourse on marriage is always a second(ary) discourse.

Because in marriage a human and earthly reality has become a saving mystery, any theological discourse about marriage has to start from the concrete reality of married life. It can't be otherwise. This implies that any theology of marriage has to listen first to what the human sciences and what married people's lived experience have to tell about human relationships and about committed love. The worldly knowledge and wisdom about marriage are of utmost importance for the theologian. And not just by way of more or less important prolegomena which may be thrown overboard once the lofty realm of theology has been reached. Any theological discourse will remain up in the air unless it has become familiar with the way humans in a particular context give shape to their lives in the field of sexual interpersonal relationships. A real risk for any theologian and magisterial pronouncement alike is that current or new insights from the human sciences are only referred to when they corroborate one's theological stance and are simply ignored or refused when they don't.

3. What marriage is in essence and ought to be according to God's plan, reveals itself in and through history or, put differently, evolves and thus changes over time.

In the more recent magisterial documents it is often referred to "God's plan with marriage and the family". God, however, has never revealed in a definitive way what the essence of marriage is. That is why we don't find in the bible any consistent teaching but only sporadic hints to different forms of marriage depending on diverging historical contexts (ranging from polygamy at the times of the patriarchs over the patriarchal type in which the wife is subjected to the husband, up to marriage symbolizing Christ's loving relationship with the church). The meaning of marriage itself is subject to history; historicity is inherent to marriage; its core features cannot be determined once and for all but develop in and over time. That does not mean that marriage is a pure product of social construction. But it does mean that, established by God in the beginning, marriage reveals its essence only in a dynamic and transitive way. We can't think of marriage as having a timeless identical core which is only wrapped in changing historical conditions which remain external and accidental to it. To use an image: marriage is not like a nut which remains the same whatever the shell may be like by which it is enclosed; it resembles much more an onion: the more skin you take off, the more its core disappears.

4. The central criterion for further developing our (secular and) theological concepts and practices of marriage must be its capacity to enhance humanity/humanness.

If our human understanding of marriage is evolving over time, the question arises of what drives humanity to advance and improve its understanding and practice. Seen from a

historical point of view, I would argue that humanity has discovered gradually but continuously the humanizing potential of marriage. There can be little doubt that our present model of love marriage is much more humane, i.e. contributes to the good and the human flourishing of the spouses much more than any ancient type of polygamous or patriarchal marriage has ever done. If, however, a growing insight into fuller human dignity has been achieved over time and thus the marriage ethos has progressively perfected itself, then we have also a sufficient criterion at hand for the way we want marriage to evolve in the future. All our theological but equally secular efforts to promote marriage should be guided by the idea that everything is good for marriage what enhances those who are living in and around it; and that everything is bad for marriage what is harmful for the spouses and those benefitting from their union. Seen from this perspective I do for example not see the humanizing potential of a concept such as that of an ontological bond that invisibly binds the partners together even if love and commitment have irreversibly gone from the spousal relationship.

Conclusion

It may have become clear from my four brief arguments, that the real treasure of the church's doctrine of marriage does not lie in any fixed dogmatic formulation but in the way generations of Christian couples have given shape to their intimate union and thus made manifest God's saving presence – and still do so today. Because the conjugal relationship has been handed over to humans' responsibility, its doctrinal conceptualization have constantly been adapted over time – and will be also now and in the future. Marriage is a lived reality the divine truth of which is revealed in human history to the extent that spouses, and the entire church together with them, discover its potential to model and partake in God's generous and faithful love for the whole of humanity.