

First International INTAMS Summer Seminar 2000

Lifelong Commitment in Fragmented Times? The Actual State of Marriage in Western Societies

Theme

Life in today's western societies is subjected to considerable inconsistencies and tensions. While desperately seeking for wholeness and integrity, people experience, in reality, that failure and break-up run through their lives leaving them with a fragmented identity whose parts can hardly be reintegrated into a whole. Marriage as a lifelong commitment is particularly affected by that situation which some refer to as the "postmodern condition". According to statistics most people value faithfulness over time very highly, but they are confronted with the difficulty of realizing a lifelong project in an environment in which quickly changing images and impressions require and impose constant reorientation. Furthermore, in intimate sexual relationships partners experience deep longing for emotional closeness with one another, while defending, at the same time, their autonomy and independence from each other. While on the one hand, there is a search for shelter and a home in which to find protection and security, on the other, the demands of public and professional life, with its stress on efficiency and flexibility, leave little room for personal and self flourishing.

The traditional Christian concept of marriage as an indissoluble covenant of life and love is particularly challenged. Marriage no longer seems to be the basis of the family and becomes one model of social living among others which one may step into or out of easily. What do these shifts and changes actually entail? Can the effort to come to a shared and fulfilling, though always fragile life project be regarded as an opportunity to look for a new and adequate meaning of marriage and its intrinsic spirituality?

Faculty

- **Mark Dooley** (*Philosophy*)

Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy, National University of Ireland, Dublin;
Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy, National University of Ireland, Maynooth

- **Michael Lawler** (*Theology*)

Professor of Catholic Theological Studies and Director of the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University, Omaha, USA

- **Enda McDonagh** (*Theology*)

Professor Emeritus of Moral Theology at the Pontifical University, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, Ireland

- **Corinna Onnen-Isemann** (*Sociology*)

Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at the Carl-von-Ossietzky-Universität Oldenburg, Germany

- **Donna Orsuto** (*Spirituality*)

Assistant Professor of lay spirituality at the Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Rome, Italy and

Director of the Lay Centre at Foyer Unitas Institute, Rome

• **Alfons Vansteenwegen** (*Psychology*)

Professor for systems and communication therapy and sexology and President of the Institute of Family and Sexuality Studies at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium

Report

In September 2000, INTAMS held its first Summer Course for Postgraduates. The subject was chosen to open up reflection on the changes which marriage as a form of lasting shared coexistence of man and woman is undergoing in the so-called postmodern era, when the quest for wholeness and intimacy in married togetherness is accompanied by concrete experiences of breakup and failure. Not least because of the increasing differentiation of the professional and the private arenas, there is a growing fragmentation of the identities both of individuals and of couples. How does this development affect an institution whose very foundation is lasting faithfulness and which is bound up with the hope of achieving personal development in company with the other? Where are we to look for a positive influence of these recent challenges on a contemporary Christian understanding of marriage and marital spirituality? Interest in these and other questions brought together a group of Postgraduate students from Australia, Brazil, Belgium, England, Italy, Rumania and the USA from the 3rd to the 16th of September 2000 near Brussels. All were doing research on the theme of marriage in different disciplines (psychology and Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox theology) in the context of higher studies. The Summer Course offered the students the opportunity to inform themselves about the current state of research, to enter into animated discussion with one another and with six lecturers from five disciplines, and to exchange views on their own research projects with other budding specialists from all over the world. The professors gave papers in their sessions from the perspective of their own disciplines, while discussions and colloquia served to make interdisciplinary connections, thereby placing individual content in a broader context.

Corinna Onnen-Isemann, Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, University of Oldenbourg in Germany, made the participants more sensitive to the methods and criteria for the approach to marriage as a sociologically comprehensible phenomenon. She revealed numerous prejudices about the state of marriage and the family, and explained that a nuanced sociological consideration of present-day developments constitutes a permanent challenge to all those who have to draw consequences from knowledge of the situation with respect to the weal of marriage and family. Her starting-point was a working sociological definition of marriage (mutual economic responsibility; sexual activity together; upbringing of children) and family (living together in at least two generations; responsibility for care; identification with the family unit) in western industrial societies. Among the erroneous myths which fail to respect the timebound and culturally conditioned character of marriage and family and which can lead to extreme demands are these: that families were happier before; that to marry and have children are natural; that love guarantees a lasting marriage; that the perfect family is possible. Over-idealisations of romantic love take no account of the complexity of the phenomenon of love. Here there is a discrepancy between love as the main motive for the decision to marry and a wealth of other individual and social factors. The speaker showed that the difference between

arranged marriages and love marriages was relative in western societies, pointing out that there are strong social and cultural norms of the family of origin which determine mate-choice. Arranged marriages are made easier through integration into social networks, while marriages of choice, for all their higher degree of freedom, in no way manifest greater stability. The changed attitude to marriage today is reflected in the increasing tendency to choose alternatives to marriage. The detachment of sexuality from marriage and the increasing postponement of marriage are also important factors.

It was noted that according to the statistics an overwhelming majority of people still marry. Marriage presents itself to sociology today as an institution that is freely chosen and then again dissolved, if personal dissatisfaction outweighs the negative consequences of a divorce. Statistically measurable factors increase the probability of divorce: urban environment, low income, early marriage, an egalitarian attitude on the part of the wife to the allocation of domestic tasks, lack of religious ties etc In the first half of the 20th century many marriages ended through desertion without a divorce ever legally being granted, and this had the most grievous economic and social consequences for women. Some sociologists assess the drastic increase in divorces in the mid-sixties, which outstripped the high point of the Eighties, even as an advance. Grounds for the rise in the divorce rate are complex: the increase in divorces and the liberalisation of divorce legislation are certainly interconnected, but cause and effect cannot be determined unambiguously. This also applies to the question of the involvement of women in careers, considered by many researchers to have a stabilising effect on marriage. Socially, it is above all the historic shift in the significance of the family - from preindustrial small business to community of emotion - that is a reference point. Then there are the numerous possible interpersonal factors such as longer life expectancy, the greater significance of the quality of the couple's relationship, unrealistic models (the media) that awaken false expectations. Membership of the same faith community reduces the quota of divorces significantly, insofar as it enhances investment in shared traditions and values. The factors given in the most recent surveys as the most important grounds for divorce are problems over communication, unfaithfulness, constant conflict, emotional abuse and only in fifth place falling out of love.

Michael Lawler, Professor of Catholic Theological Studies and Director of the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University, Omaha, USA, gave a survey of the connection between the essence of marriage as community of love and the sacrament of marriage. Psychological models of love illustrated the fact that a balance had to be maintained between friendly intimacy (philia), desire (eros) and unconditional commitment (agape) if a partnership was to survive, with the decisive factor on all three levels being to want the best for the other. A study of the theological development of marriage teaching from the Bible and the Church Fathers up to the late reception of a sacrament of marriage at the end of the Middle Ages (evidently conditioned by the sexual factor) and the consequent juridification of the concept of marriage, and finally up to the personal understanding of marriage as a bond of life and love between persons (Vatican II), made clear the time-conditioned dimension of the Church understanding of marriage. Against the background of the postmodern deconstruction of this historical-theological development there emerge a few essential questions of detail for the

theology of marriage: how could the consummation of marriage, which secondarily joins the sacrament and makes marriage indissoluble, be shown to be appropriate in the context of today's social and anthropological developments, without a narrowing down of our understanding to the sexual act in isolation (see also M. Lawler's article in this number)? How does the procreative purpose or gift fit into an understanding of marriage according to which it is not limited to the production of offspring, but has more to do with the personal relationship of married couples and their connections with the social environment? Concluding observations with reflections on divorce and remarriage set out the lack of consistency in Church statements: with the Pauline and Petrine privilege the Catholic Church knows of two cases where validly concluded and consummated marriages may be dissolved, and thereby exceptions from the norm which cannot be based on the biblical word of Jesus. For Lawler all this means that the unity of Christ and his Church as appearing in marriage is to be understood as a metaphor rather than as a law. To persons whose marriages collapse the Church must offer the reconciling relationship with God. This gave rise to a discussion on the relationship between culture and Christendom: can culture serve as the natural basis for the adaptation of ecclesial language? What is the relative importance of the prophetic appeal of the Christian? Philosophy could potentially provide helpful distinctions here.

Mark Dooley, Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy at the National University of Ireland in Dublin, sketched out the postmodern context of marriage and surveyed the fundamental intentions of a philosophical approach whose awareness of global challenges makes it embrace a radical ethicism. Referring to Kierkegaard, Derrida, Levinas, etc Dooley showed that today's postmodern thinkers are untroubled by the destabilisation and fragmentation of traditions that have become fleeting and evanescent anyway, seeking instead to penetrate the interstices of history through methodological deconstruction and retrieve the histories of the marginalised, histories which have hitherto been submerged in the totality of the history of the victors. Dooley pointed to the global market as the current centralising totality against which postmodernism raises its voice for the poor and the losers. The experience of injustice is the crux for the evaluation of traditions over against which humanity must take up positions (e.g. for humanity and democracy against Fascism). Characteristic for postmodern philosophy is the integration of the religious into the ethical as sensitivity to one's neighbour, as subjection of the self to others. The family has an important role in society today, and this for the most part escaped the attention of traditional philosophy because it was always more concerned with the self-affirmation of the subject. A quick survey of the central concepts of postmodern philosophy made clear the following: the family is the paradigm of the giving/the gift that expects nothing for itself in return and so suspends the laws of the economy. All real human interaction ultimately rests on giving and receiving, but a total self-giving is logically contradictory, for a person who gives everything away is left in the end with nothing more to give. The family is the locus of forgiveness and justice which can only grow out of memory. Following the decline of the self-identity paradigm, the family offers the central place in which identity is fulfilled as being-from-others: we are what we are, not because we are transcendental subjects, but because we share with others memories and traditions and are placed in a chain that links forefathers and successors. For Dooley a murderer will not spare somebody on the grounds that he is "a child of God" or "a rational animal" but - hopefully - rather because he can imagine

his own mother or brother in the same place. The compassion for the needy and the overflowing generosity within the family make it the place of necessary preparation for the ethical risk - getting involved with the stranger, letting him in (to Europe) and not sacrificing him to the laws of the market and the settlement of debt. Marriage and family were seen as the key to the global utopia of the ethical. As a relationship where moral values are lived out and passed on to the children, marriage is a place of natural attentiveness to others, a place in which the ethical arises, which no state can produce.

Alfons Vansteenwegen, Professor of Systems and Communications Therapy and Sexology and President of the Institute of Family and Sexuality Studies at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, introduced the methods and aims of psychology and, drawing on his experiences as a couple therapist as well as his academic knowledge, surveyed the psychological development of marital relationships, from the phase of romantic love pressing towards union to the marital reality in which love goes together with experience of difference. Difference - which is ultimately rooted in the different biographical origin of the marriage partners and their differing value systems and ways of communication, etc - must be accepted and formed so as to make generally possible a real relationship in which the other is valued. Here the philosophical findings are confirmed by psychology: one must first have in order to be able to give. This shows itself in the principle of territoriality. In the intimate relationship of the couple the partners must each have a place for themselves which is free from the other. Certain feelings and thoughts, one's corporeality, one's own things and responsibilities must remain one's own. The open recognition and balancing out of these ownership relationships is the first prerequisite for successful communication, guaranteeing self-respect and respect of the other. The pressure to alienate these domains denies the person of the other. Too much giving - up to the point of the gift of the self - leads to hostility or depression or other pathological consequences. Here we need to rethink the Christian picture of humankind and the idea of self-sacrifice. The participants acted out a therapy situation in which couples talked over their own needs with each other and negotiated mutual concessions. This helped them to understand that we must give very concretely, but that we also get something if we make our own needs clear. The territorial model is a modification of the communication model which is employed by many therapists. It is in communication - verbal, bodily, in doing and letting do - that the apartness and the closeness of the partnership arises, and behind each (so banally expressed) piece of content there are always lurking unspoken messages to the partner. This applies equally to the avoidance of communication, for not to communicate is impossible. The task of couple therapy is to convert these hidden messages into articulated content and to trace their disparities, in order to help the partners understand that there are two stories in each partnership and to make them familiar with the fundamental rules of communication. Sexuality was represented as a very complex field of communicative interaction, calling for the learning of a language that lends meaning and not just mere techniques. The psychology of sex points up identifiable differences with respect to sexual experience and also identifies some myths: sex is not just tenderness, for it also involves moments of aggression and power. Time must consciously be made available for the sexual relationship, and endless waiting for the appearance of deep desire eventually puts an end to sexual encounters. There were additional observations on conflict management, including aspects of forgiveness, reconciliation, and new

beginnings. The experience of the practice of couple therapy shows that anxiety about difference and the tendency to promise more than can be fulfilled are foundational weaknesses in conflict management. Vansteenwegen called for realism here: the marital relationship is work in process and it requires the maintenance of differences in recognition of the value of the partner, but also of one's own person.

In the second half of the course Enda McDonagh, Professor Emeritus of Moral Theology at the Pontifical University, St. Patrick's College at Maynooth, Ireland, sought to place what had been studied from the viewpoint of different disciplines in an overall theological perspective. He began his remarks with a look at the genuinely interdisciplinary and creative essence of theology, which allows entry to the poetic, the narrative and the imaginative. A conversation that does not reduce everything to a factual concern with data must be created so that we can decenter our own selves and bid welcome to the stranger. Mere data on cohabitation do not give us any information on how we are to go about this. A Christian answer involves encountering the other person benevolently, it involves an overall mutual acceptance which makes constructive dialogue possible. McDonagh sees marriage as fundamentally rooted in the creation-dimension; thus it is also rooted in our relation to the Creator, who is concerned from the beginning with human community, in which marriage plays a constitutive role. According to the Bible, humanity lives by relationship (to the Creator and to our fellow-creatures). This must be the beginning, if juridical limitations on the personal and sacramental view of marriage are to be overcome and a link reestablished back to the patristic and scholastic traditions: we are persons only in community. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition human beings are seen as created in the image of God in the duality of man and woman. Marriage is a paradigmatic relation for human community and it is the way that human beings respond to the creation task together. Marriage is truly the coming together of two strangers, whose lasting remaining-strangers-to-each-other at the same time makes possible a special deeper bond. This paradox of unity and difference is the reason that we can be as much gift and enrichment for each other as destruction and downfall. The encounter with the other calls on our moral resources, challenges us to recognise others in their otherness, not to manipulate them but to respond to their needs. Moreover it is Judaeo-Christian to celebrate the other and to welcome the other hospitably and to form community. Respect for the irreducibility of the other is a real element in marriage and this exposes the fallaciousness of talk about the other as part of the one. That we always have to do with an unknown other to whom we can only bring trust is again clear in marriage as faith in the potential of the other and as hope that the secret of the other goes further than our understanding. The other refers here to the person whom the Old Testament calls the saint, so ultimately every human encounter is sacramental. In marriage this is shown in privileged form, since it is a relationality which has the particular mark of union in time. In the creation God created his other and in human beings this other came into dialogue. But salvation history shows that the communicative relationship is constantly being disturbed and suffering crises, so that it can only be restored through God's radical initiative. This happens in the Incarnation of God, in which God abandons himself to otherness and enters into a relationship with us which is the relationship of men with one another. On the hill of Calvary this relationship is redeemed as total surrender. Easter means the shining out of a new community, which however can only come through to us in fragments of the experience of the

disciples. So we live a Holy Saturday existence between Calvary and Easter, for which marriage is exemplary as real bodily sign of a community which is yet still to be fulfilled. Marriage is thus to be understood as the risk of God.

Donna Orsuto, Assistant Professor of Lay Spirituality at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, invited the participants to investigate aspects of a contemporary marital spirituality. To this end, she introduced the concept of Christian spirituality as praxis and as discipline, whose genuinely interdisciplinary orientation is founded in the incarnational dimension of the Christian. She argued that affirmations about a responsible spirituality of marriage are only possible today if they take seriously the realities of fragmented marital projects and questions about the institution of marriage as currently expressed by the different disciplines. In dialogue with the other disciplines during the Summer Course Orsuto worked through a range of elements of Christian marital spirituality: the experience of relatedness; union with the other as act of trust; hospitable openness to the partner and to a third; readiness to live with breaks, with the incomplete which is still awaiting fulfilment (Holy Saturday existence); the disposition to dialogue; giving and taking in justice; vocation to holiness in the everyday things of life; authentic friendship; embedding of marital spirituality in family, church, and society; self-giving as not-total-abandonment; a broad understanding of being open to life; an openness of spirituality to psychology without the desire to resolve psychological problems by means of spirituality (see also the article by D. Orsuto in this number).

The encouraging experience of this first Summer Course is seen by INTAMS as a call to progress the international interdisciplinary dialogue about marriage and marital spirituality between specialists and young researchers.