



HLI EDUCATIONAL SERIES

Looking at life and family issues in the light of faith and reason.

PART IV: MARRIAGE: RISE, LET US BE ON OUR WAY!

*Challenges to
Marriage and
Family are an
Opportunity to
Evangelize.*



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Challenges to Marriage and Family are an Opportunity to Evangelize

At a moment of history in which the family is the object of numerous forces that seek to destroy it or in some way to deform it, and aware that the well-being of society and her own good are intimately tied to the good of the family, the Church perceives in a more urgent and compelling way her mission of proclaiming to all people the plan of God for marriage and the family, ensuring their full vitality and human and Christian development, and thus contributing to the renewal of society and of the People of God. (Familiaris Consortio, n. 12)

Though it is now more than three decades old, Pope Saint John Paul II's great apostolic exhortation *On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World* could have been written yesterday. Pope Francis also recognizes the grave situation with regard to marriage today:

The family is experiencing a profound cultural crisis, as are all communities and social bonds. In the case of the family, the weakening of these bonds is particularly serious because the family is the fundamental cell of society, where we learn to live with others despite our differences and to belong to one another; it is also the place where parents pass on the faith to their children. Marriage now tends to be viewed as a form of mere emotional satisfaction that can be constructed in any way or modified at will. But the indispensable contribution

of marriage to society transcends the feelings and momentary needs of the couple. (Evangelii Gaudium, n. 66)

From Understanding to Action

Marriage and the family certainly are under attack. Divorce rates are sky-high, even among Catholics. Polls reflect attitudes among Catholics that barely differ from the wider culture on contraception, abortion, cohabitation, and other serious moral problems. And with the July 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* ruling, the Supreme Court has for all legal purposes redefined the institution of marriage for the entire country, leading immediately to increased threats against the religious freedom of those who disagree.

Without a doubt, these are very difficult times for Catholics, as they are for anyone who upholds the true definition of marriage and the natural family as instituted by God. It is no time for despair, however, nor is a time for retreat. It is time to get serious about our faith and act accordingly. This action must include education on the reality of what marriage is, on what threatens it today, and on how these realities impact our role as citizens. In his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict reminds us of our responsibility with regard to family and the government:

It is thus becoming a social and even economic necessity once more to hold up to future generations the beauty of marriage and the family, and the fact that these institutions correspond to the deepest needs and dignity of the person. In view of this, States are called to enact policies promoting the centrality and the integrity of the family founded on marriage between a man and a woman, the primary vital cell of society, and to assume responsibility for its economic and fiscal needs, while respecting its essentially relational character. (n. 44. Emphasis in original)

Challenges to Marriage

We have a lot of ground to cover, so we will only briefly introduce these

subjects and invite you to further pursue your own study with the resources below.

(1) Contraception. Our society's sexual confusion is written into our popular language with terms like "hookup culture", "friends with benefits", "unintended pregnancy", "casual sex", and countless others. Indeed, these are just the ones that can be printed here, as what has become our obsession with sex grows even as our desire for children has nearly disappeared.

For reasons that the Catholic Church has long understood, the separation of the two aspects of marital and conjugal love – the unitive and the procreative aspects – has had massive and destructive consequences. One of the results has been what the Church calls the "contraceptive mentality", or the idea that with the right technology or drugs, sex can be consequence-free, giving us greater control over our reproductivity.

As the Church predicted, this false sense of freedom from responsibility led people to abandon a gift-perspective of love and responsibility for what might be called a "use-perspective": the idea that another person can be used for pleasure. As long as there is consent, all responsibility is the other person's problem. This is why the Church, when almost all other institutions seemed to embrace the false freedom, held her ground as the sexual revolution hit its stride in the late 1960s:

[A]n act of mutual love which impairs the capacity to transmit life which God the Creator, through specific laws, has built into it, frustrates His design which constitutes the norm of marriage, and contradicts the will of the Author of life. Hence to use this divine gift while depriving it, even if only partially, of its meaning and purpose, is equally repugnant to the nature of man and of woman, and is consequently in opposition to the plan of God and His holy will. (Humanae Vitae, n. 13)

We encourage you to read and discuss HLI's educational series on contraception for more on how the issues of contraception and abortion are related. You will also learn how married couples can lovingly follow the Church's wisdom in a spirit of prudence and generosity, by using one of

various natural fertility methods to achieve or postpone pregnancy. See the reference below for more information.

(2) Divorce and Cohabitation. Just as society has come to believe the error that the unitive and procreative aspects of sexuality can be separated without consequences, many are also under the false impression that a marriage can be ended by a declaration from a judge. We have covered in great depth in this series why this is impossible based on the clear teaching of Our Lord in the Gospel and the Church's supporting theology. *What God has joined, man cannot separate.*

Yet it is true that many go into marriage with an attitude of *Let's see what happens*. This attitude, however, may prevent a true marriage from taking place – there is in such a case no true intent to enter a total and lifelong union. Such an attitude also helps us understand why so many resort to cohabitation – seeing a sexual union with another as a temporary commitment of sorts that makes a formal wedding seem like a quaint artifact. For the one who is blind to the truth of marriage and the truth of the gift of sexuality, then why not? And if the real issue is the feelings of the adults, then neither theology nor all of the social science showing how harmful such arrangements are for children will make a difference.

Again, we refer you to sources presented below to learn more about the Church's teaching on this matter and for pastoral solutions for those who have gone through divorce.

(3) Pornography. A 2009 Family Research Council survey of scientific research by Dr. Patrick Fagan found that pornography use was highly correlated with infidelity and divorce, that it leads to a loss of interest in sexual intimacy and in good family relations, and leads to a decrease in husbands' emotional attachment for their wives.

Neuroscientists who have studied the effect of regular porn use have known for some time that it “rewires” the brain; deeply changing over time how its users see both sex and even other persons. Not only is porn highly addictive, it is common for regular users to become desensitized and seek more abnormal and aggressive kinds of porn.

We've already seen what social problems follow from the breakdown of marriage, but add to this malign influence a means for people to more

readily see one another as objects and you begin to see the urgency of directly confronting pornography. With the explosion of the pornographic plague on the internet and ubiquitous personal devices, not to mention the deluge of suggestive images and messages in popular media, it is getting harder to protect families and children from the effects of pornography. But protect them we must.

(4) Artificial Reproductive Technologies. Many see the availability of *in vitro* fertilization as a boon for those who want children but who are physically unable to have them. Some even see this as a pro-life option, particularly when they have not researched the harm that hyperovulation treatments do to women who undergo the procedure, or do not know that nine out of every ten embryos conceived in these procedures are never born. The Church condemns this practice not for the intent of the parents or even for the fact that many of the tiny human beings created are used for research; but for the fact that it commodifies human life by exploiting the same divorce between procreative and unitive love that the Church rightly holds up as the true and natural design for children as gifts of God, and not as products to be acquired. The many abuses that follow the choice to unnaturally create many tiny human beings are to be expected.

As always, with her basic teaching the Church “hopes that all will understand the incompatibility between recognition of the dignity of the human person and contempt for life and love, between faith in the living God and the claim to decide arbitrarily the origin and fate of a human being.” (*Donum Vitae*, n. 8)

(5) The Redefinition of Marriage. On June 26, 2015, the United States Supreme Court released its 5-4 ruling in favor of the redefinition of marriage to include unions between those of the same sex. In reply to the *Obergefell v. Hodges*, Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, president of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a strong reply from the heart of the Church, which read in part:

Regardless of what a narrow majority of the Supreme Court may declare at this moment in history, the nature of the human person and marriage remains unchanged and unchangeable. Just as Roe v. Wade did not settle the question

of abortion over forty years ago, Obergefell v. Hodges does not settle the question of marriage today. Neither decision is rooted in the truth, and as a result, both will eventually fail. Today the Court is wrong again. It is profoundly immoral and unjust for the government to declare that two people of the same sex can constitute a marriage.

The unique meaning of marriage as the union of one man and one woman is inscribed in our bodies as male and female. The protection of this meaning is a critical dimension of the “integral ecology” that Pope Francis has called us to promote. Mandating marriage redefinition across the country is a tragic error that harms the common good and most vulnerable among us, especially children. The law has a duty to support every child’s basic right to be raised, where possible, by his or her married mother and father in a stable home.

As we have been arguing throughout this series, marriage remains what God has ordained it to be, precisely as Our Lord defended it two millennia ago. It can be nothing else, regardless of social norms or the whims of judges. This may be the Church’s least popular teaching in our severely confused and hostile culture, but unlike other institutions, the Church cannot simply change her teaching to fit the world, because she can only proclaim the truth in love.

This decision will reverberate and will have huge consequences for the Church and those who agree with her on the true meaning of marriage. We will continue to hold up the truth with love, in season and out of season.

Evangelization from the Heart of the Domestic Church

*From the wedlock of Christians there comes the family, in which new citizens of human society are born, who by the grace of the Holy Spirit received in baptism are made children of God, thus perpetuating the people of God through the centuries. **The family is, so to speak, the domestic church.***

In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children; they should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each of them, fostering with special care vocation to a sacred state. (Lumen Gentium n. 11. Emphasis added.)

A friend and supporter of Human Life International told a story not too long ago. He and his wife both converted to the faith, leaving many in their families of origin unhappy with their decision.

Their daughter was recently married, and as all could see there was something about the couple – their joy, their clear love for each other, and importantly, their seriousness about the sacrament into which they were entering – that spoke in a language that everyone could hear, if not completely understand. Following their parents, the couple radiated a chaste and profound joy, which is something not heard or seen much in secular circles these days. Witnessing this sacramental marriage became for many in attendance an occasion to ask questions faith and marriage – and an opening for our friend and his wife to respond from the heart and mind of the Church.

Another friend of HLI tells of a recent event – a funeral of a beloved uncle. Though the uncle and his wife were Catholic and had eight children, the children had mostly abandoned the faith and lived basically secular lifestyles, none of them wanting a family near the size that their parents chose. Some had suffered difficulties in marriage that are too common in society, but they kept their parents' genuine affection for each other and generous dispositions, which was evident in their concern for one another at a difficult time.

When our friend, his wife and their six children showed up, heads turned. When the same rowdy crew of five boys and one very tough girl showed great respect and obedience at the memorial service, a message was sent. Later, the children's playfulness and mutual love reflected the love of their parents and the faith that the parents were passing along to them. One of the deceased's children, our friend's cousin, thanked him for bringing his whole family to honor the man who himself chose to have a large family. After several other unexpected moments of openness and heartfelt

conversation about important things, it was clear that the evangelization of joyful, loving presence was at work.

Evangelization does not begin with an advanced degree in theology or the ability to quote obscure papal proclamations and encyclicals. It begins with a heart that has been given to God and can joyfully reflect His love for anyone the beloved encounters. This acceptance of God's love seeks immersion in Scripture, the sacraments, and the teaching of the Church that was established by Our Savior – and it wants to share the Splendor of the Truth with others.

This same love has been revealed to us most intimately in the sacrament of marriage, which is ordered to the procreation and education of children. Our Loving Creator has given us everything we need to have flourishing vocations, families, communities and societies – and it is ours to actively receive these great gifts and act accordingly. The reason that so much research on the family confirms the Church's argument in support of true marriage and the natural family is that both are based on natural law – the law of nature and nature's God. The grace of the sacrament does not replace the natural structure of marriage and family, it strengthens and completes it.

To those in irregular situations or in relationships that are not based in love and truth, God continually extends his limitless mercy. It must be received with sincerity, which means with true contrition, a desire to seek forgiveness and amend one's life accordingly. Becoming reconciled with the gift of love can be a painful process, depending on our starting point, but it is worth it. Indeed, there is no time to lose for any of us – first in accepting God's love and living in accord with His holy will, then in sharing His truth in a culture that desperately needs it.

Rise, let us be on our way. (Mark 14:42)

Resources used in this article, which we recommend for further study:

- *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*: Contraception – 2366 – 2372; Divorce – 2382 – 2386; Artificial Reproductive

- Technologies – 2373 – 2379; Pornography – 2354
- *Humanae Vitae, On the Regulation of Birth*, an Encyclical Letter of Pope Paul VI, July 25, 1968
 - *Familiaris Consortio, On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*, an Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II, November 22, 1981
 - *Caritas in Veritate, On Integral Development in Charity and Truth*, an Encyclical Letter of Pope Benedict XVI, June 29, 2009
 - *Evangelii Gaudium, On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*, an Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis, November 24, 2013
 - *Bought with a Price: Every Man's Duty to Protect Himself and His Family from a Pornographic Culture*, a Pastoral Letter from His Excellency Paul S. Loverde, Bishop of Arlington, Virginia; March 19, 2014
 - “The Effects of Pornography on Individuals, Marriage, Family and Community,” Patrick F. Fagan, PhD, Family Research Council, December 2009.
 - *Supreme Court Decision on Marriage “A Tragic Error” Says President of Catholic Bishops’ Conference*, A Statement from His Excellency Joseph E. Kurtz, Archbishop of Louisville, Kentucky; June 26, 2015
 - For Your Marriage, an Initiative of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, www.foryourmarriage.org; this site has a wide variety of information on Natural Family Planning (NFP) methods and other resources for married and discerning couples
 - See HLI’s Education Series on Contraception at www.hli.org/contraception

Visit www.hli.org/marriageseries for the full HLI Educational Series on Marriage, as well as other helpful resources on marriage.



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BY FR. PAUL MARX, OSB

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4 Family Life Lane • Front Royal, VA 22630 • 540.635.7884 • www.hli.org