

ARTICLE 2



The Lumen Fidei Institute

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Marriage a gift from God – The Church's Understanding through Scripture

Notion of Marriage Undermined

In the first article I noted that western civilisation has collapsed due in no small part to the ongoing collapse of marriage. The traditional understanding of marriage has been seriously undermined in our society to such an extent that most people in western society, including many if not most Catholics, now see marriage as a romantic sexual relationship where two people, regardless of sex, decide to publicly pool their resources in order to increase their chances of happiness. Marriage comes with the added benefit of tax relief, inheritance rights and other rights. Sometimes they may wish to start a family but this is no longer seen as a necessary object of marriage. If the couple grow tired of each other or have other difficulties living together then they can always divorce. After all, nobody should have to live a miserable life on account of a mistake they made in getting married. Should they then find a more desirable partner to live with, there is no reason why they cannot marry a second time or even a third. Third time lucky after all. Such is the modern reasoning and shallow understanding of marriage.

This understanding of marriage diminishes the richness of true marriage. It also diminishes our understanding of, and consequently our respect for, the roles of man and woman in society. It is also in direct conflict with the Catholic Church's understanding of marriage. The Church bases its teaching on marriage first and foremost on the revelations contained in sacred scripture. For the Catholic Church the words of Jesus Christ in the Gospels take precedence when coming to a correct understanding of marriage. The principal Gospel references of Christ to marriage are found in Matthew Chapter 5:31-32 and Chapter 19:3-9, Mark Chapter 10:2-12 and Luke Chapter 16 Verse 18. So let's have a look at what Christ says regarding marriage.

Christ re-states the Law as it was from the beginning

In Matthew 5:31-32 Christ abrogates the law of Moses and Luke 16:18 confirms this.

“And it hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a bill of divorce. But I say to you, that whosoever shall put away his wife, excepting for the cause of fornication, maketh her to commit adultery: and he that shall marry her that is put away, committeth adultery.” (Matt 5:31-32)

“Every one that putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and he that marrieth her that is put away from her husband, committeth adultery.” (Luke 16:18)

There are Catholics today who try to use the above passage of Matthew to say that Christ still allowed divorce in certain circumstances such as where the wife was unfaithful. However if we look at the words that are used in this Gospel passage it is plain that this is not the case. A married person who is unfaithful to their spouse is guilty of adultery not fornication. Both parties to the sin of fornication must be unmarried. The only way that someone who is apparently married could

commit the sin of fornication would be if the marriage itself were invalid and therefore the person is not in fact married at all. It is this situation that Christ refers to and for which the Church is willing to issue a decree of nullity or an annulment as it is known. This is not a divorce but a declaration that at the time the marriage vows were exchanged, some essential element for a valid marriage was missing and therefore the marriage did not in fact take place.

What constitutes Marriage

Consider the extreme case of a forced marriage whereby the husband's people kidnap the wife's mother at gunpoint and tell the woman that they will kill her mother if she does not consent to the marriage. The woman goes through with the marriage ceremony and exchanges marriage vows with the man in order to save her mother's life.

Is she now married?

To all external appearances she is married however, in this case, the consent made was not made freely, it was made under threat of death to the woman's mother and therefore one of the essential elements for marriage, namely free consent, was missing and the marriage never took place, the vows are invalid and therefore non binding and the woman is free to marry.

Other translations of the Bible, such as the RSV, use the Greek word “unchastity” in the above passage from Mathew. The notes from the RSV explain this as follows. “*Unchastity*: the Greek word used here appears to refer to marriages that were not legally marriages because they were either within the forbidden degrees of consanguinity or contracted with a Gentile. The phrase *except on the ground of unchastity* does not occur in the parallel passage in Luke”

Once again we are dealing with situations that have the external appearances of marriages but are not in fact marriages at all. It is also well to remember that one cannot pick out a particular Gospel passage and use it to back up a particular argument without reference to the rest of sacred scripture which confirms the intended meaning of the passage.

What the Church believes

That the Church believes that Christ abrogated the law of Moses and re-established the unconditional prohibition on divorce has been confirmed by both the Council of Florence in 1439;

“... The third is the indissolubility of marriage, since it signifies the indivisible union of Christ and the church. Although separation of bed is lawful on account of marital infidelity, it is not lawful to contract another marriage, since the bond of a legitimately contracted marriage is perpetual.”
(Council of Florence, *Pro Armeniis* 1439)

and at the Council of Trent in 1563.

“If anyone says that the Church errs in that she taught and teaches that in accordance with evangelical and apostolic doctrine the bond of matrimony cannot be dissolved by reason of adultery on the part of one of the parties, and that both, or even the innocent party who gave no occasion for adultery, cannot contract another marriage during the lifetime of the other, and that he is guilty of adultery who, having put away the adulteress, shall marry another, and she also who, having put away the adulterer, shall marry another, let him be anathema. (Council of Trent: Canon 7 on Matrimony 1563)

Pope Francis reaffirms the teachings of Trent

Pope Francis, writing to Cardinal Brandmuller of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences on 5th October 2013 to commemorate the 450th anniversary of the Council of Trent said of Trent,

“Since the 450th anniversary of the day on which the Council of Trent drew to its favourable end, it is fitting that the Church recall with readier and more attentive eagerness the most rich doctrine which came out of that Council held in the Tyrol. It is certainly not without good reason that the Church has for a long time given such great care to that Council’s decrees and canons which are to be recalled and heeded, seeing that, since extremely grave matters and questions sprang up in that period, the Council Fathers employed all their diligence so that the Catholic faith should come into clearer view and be better understood. Without a doubt as the Holy Spirit inspired and prompted them, it was the Fathers’ greatest concern not only that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine be defended, but also that mankind be more brightly illuminated, in order that the saving work of the Lord could be diffused throughout the entire globe and the Gospel be spread through the whole world.” (translation from the Latin by Fr John Zuhlsdorf).

These are important matters as they teach us a true understanding of Marriage. In the next article I will look at the other two Gospel passages cited above in order to expand the full and glorious design of Marriage as God intended it to be.

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