

ARTICLE 4



The Lumen Fidei Institute

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

We have seen how Christ dispensed with the concession permitting divorce which was given by Moses. We also know that Moses gave this concession on account of the hardness of men's hearts. Does this mean that with the arrival of Christ men became softer of heart? The crucifixion clearly shows that men were still very much hard of heart but interestingly, the reaction of the disciples to Christ's re-establishment of the indissoluble bond of marriage is recorded in Matthew's Gospel.

It is not expedient to marry!

“His disciples say unto him: If the case of a man with his wife be so, it is not expedient to marry.”
(Matt 19:10)

The disciples reaction is, that if one is going to have to stay with the same woman for the rest of your life, regardless of how she turns out and what the future brings, then it is better not to get married in the first place. Their reaction once again clearly shows that Jesus did not allow any exception to the rule against divorce for validly married couples.

Christ's teaching on marriage is very difficult for us because, since the fall, we are naturally hard of heart. Christ however, with the founding of the Catholic Church, has instituted a new order of sacramental grace. It is by means of this grace, and only through the help that this grace affords us, that we can live out our vocations in harmony with the Will of God.

The silent witness of Married Couples

Christ in revoking the divorce allowed by Moses assures us that it is possible, with His help and through submission to the Will of God the Father, to live out the vocation to married love. There are countless witnesses to this truth despite the growing divorce rate. Many of these witnesses are just silently going about their married lives. They are not the subject of books or films because of the ordinariness of their lives. Others live a heroic witness to the bond of marriage, such as those who despite being betrayed by their spouses continue and remain always true to their own wedding vows in the hope of attaining salvation not only for themselves and their children but for their errant spouse as well. Such is an example of true sacrificial love that seeks nothing for itself.

Consecrated Virginity

Jesus uses the disciples incredulity concerning the prohibition on divorce to further expand His teaching and He also introduces the disciples to the concept of consecrated virginity for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

“Who said to them: All men take not this word, but they to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs, who were born so from their mother's womb: and there are eunuchs, who were made so by men: and there are eunuchs, who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. He that can

take, let him take it.” (Matt 19:11-12)

The term Eunuch refers to men who were servants of the King's wives and who were either naturally impotent or else they were physically castrated in order to make sure that there would be no danger of the Queen or of any of the King's other wives bearing an illegitimate child through the servants actions. The distinguishing characteristic of the Eunuch was that he was physically unable to produce children of his own. Christ first notes that some men are naturally eunuchs and some are made so by men but he then goes on to explain, in a figurative way, that some men renounce the gift of marriage and the joy of having children in order to serve the kingdom of heaven in a closer imitation of Christ.

We also see that like marriage this vocation must be freely chosen “He that can take, let him take it.”

Consecrated Virginity a Higher Calling than Marriage

The Catholic Church regards the celibate religious vocation as a higher calling than marriage. I have to admit that I was quite disappointed when I first discovered this teaching of the Church. Like St Martha I felt that I had chosen the lesser part and that because of my vocation I was in some way inferior to those who had chosen the religious life. But Christ shows us that not all are called to religious life when he says “He that can take, let him take it”, even though it is a higher calling. When I look back over my own life I can never point to a time when I ever seriously entertained the thoughts of living the religious life. Marriage was the natural choice for me and I had the desire to get married and raise a family from my middle teenage years.

That the religious life is a higher calling than marriage does not in any way denigrate the vocation to marriage. The Catechism of the Catholic Church quotes St John Chrysostom in this regard,

“Both the sacrament of Matrimony and virginity for the Kingdom of God come from the Lord himself. It is he who gives them meaning and grants them the grace which is indispensable for living them out in conformity with his will. Esteem of virginity for the sake of the kingdom and the Christian understanding of marriage are inseparable, and they reinforce each other:” (CCC 1620)

“Whoever denigrates marriage also diminishes the glory of virginity. Whoever praises it makes virginity more admirable and resplendent. What appears good only in comparison with evil would not be truly good. The most excellent good is something even better than what is admitted to be good.” (St John Chrysostom, De virg)

Both Vocations are Necessary

It is clear that both the vocation to marriage and the vocation to religious life are necessary for the building up of Christ's Church here on earth. Some are called to live their lives in celibacy for the building up of God's Kingdom. Some in particular are called through the Sacred Priesthood to administer the new order of sacramental grace established by Christ to the faithful. Most however, are called upon to build up the kingdom of God through the sacrament of matrimony thereby accepting God's invitation to increase and multiply and fill the earth.

Before leaving the Gospels and looking at the writings of St Paul and St Peter concerning marriage it is interesting to note that in both Matthew 19 and Mark 10 the story of the little children being brought to Jesus by their parents for a blessing is presented right after the prohibition on divorce thus confirming that children are indeed a blessing on marriage.

“And they brought to him young children, that he might touch them. And the disciples rebuked them that brought them. Whom when Jesus saw, he was much displeased, and saith to them: Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God. Amen I say to you, whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, shall not enter into it. And embracing them, and laying his hands upon them, he blessed them.” (Mark 10:13-16)

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