

Life Matters: Love and Marriage

As Rosa and Manuel walked up the aisle at their Golden Jubilee Mass, all in the church were deeply moved. Watching this touching celebration of 50 years of married love caused many friends and family to ponder their own attitudes toward love and marriage. What did this couple have that was so attractive? And with all the challenges these days, why did so many young people in that church long for a happy and life-long marriage?

The desire to love and be loved “happily ever after” by that one special person is woven into our human nature. We long to be known, accepted, and cherished by another on the deepest levels of our being. Marriage is that safe place where love flowers and couples flourish.

According to many large studies, nearly all young people (93 to 96 percent) say they want to be married one day.¹ This may seem surprising, given the current high rates of cohabitation² and divorce³ in the United States. But while young people hope for a fulfilling, life-long marriage, most are not convinced that this is possible.⁴ And they are more willing to accept alternatives to marriage, such as cohabitation and non-marital childbearing.⁵ Research in this area offers solid evidence of the benefits of marriage over cohabitation for individuals, couples, and society.⁶

Young people may have trouble believing that a faithful, life-long marriage is realistic because of the poor example set by their cultural heroes and adults closer to home. Magazines are filled with gossip about the serial affairs of single and married celebrities from the worlds of sports, music, movies, and politics. Divorce and single-parenting may also occur in their own families or among friends—as these now affect more than half of America’s children: “Only 45% of U.S. teenagers have spent their entire childhood with an intact family, with both their birth mother and their biological father legally married.”⁷

Apart from deeply held religious beliefs, culture is one of the strongest forces influencing a person’s behavior. Today’s culture is dominated by myths and lies that undermine everyone’s interest in building strong loving relationships. Most especially, they undermine the life-long marriages so essential to raising future generations of healthy, well-adapted, and responsible adults.

Many Americans have rejected the belief that sexual intimacy belongs exclusively in marriage, due in part to the development and marketing of the birth control pill and other contraceptives. Drug companies and advocates of

recreational sex convinced many people that contraceptives eliminated the reason and the need to wait until marriage to be sexually active. A dating couple could now, in theory, enjoy the “bonding” part of sexual intimacy while avoiding the other natural outcome, a baby. Tens of millions of men and women have learned from personal experience that contraceptives very often fail to prevent pregnancy and with each new sexual partner the risks of acquiring sexually transmitted diseases grows dramatically. In addition, many have discovered that sexual encounters with serial partners—lacking the deep, unselfish, permanent commitment to a loved one—cause emotional and spiritual harm as fragile bonds of intimacy are repeatedly broken.

We all know how the use of steroidal hormones by athletes causes drastic changes to their personalities and over-all health. For this reason, such “performance-enhancing” substances are banned from sports. Yet it has become standard practice for doctors to hand out prescriptions for steroidal hormones to young women, without the knowledge of their parents. They falsely assume that girls will engage in sexual activity anyway, that a potential pregnancy is worse than the harm done to her body by artificial hormones and a sexually promiscuous lifestyle, and that contraceptives will actually prevent pregnancy. Especially among teenagers, contraceptives have a poor track record in preventing pregnancy or STDs. One in three teen girls will become pregnant at least once before age 20.⁸ If a teen “on the pill” is having sex frequently due to cohabiting, her risk of pregnancy is almost fifty percent in the first year alone.⁹

In addition to the physical risks, contraceptive use leads to a false understanding of fertility and distorts the meaning of sexual intercourse. Human fertility is seen as a nuisance that puts limits on spontaneity or as a “disease” that must be prevented through powerful drugs. The fruit of fertility—a baby—may come to be viewed as undesirable and expendable.

It is reasonable to attempt to space births in a marriage for serious reasons (e.g., health, finances, needs of other children, and extended family members). The modern science-based methods of natural family planning are well-suited to assist married couples. But human fertility is complex and involves more than biology. Human fertility involves the whole person—body, mind, and soul. The nature of sexual intercourse is relational: it exists to build from one man and one woman a “one-flesh” union, and to bring new people into the world.

Many young people may view Church teaching as a set of old-fashioned and unrealistic rules designed to stop all the “fun.” But Church teachings are all about relationships, the relationship between God and his people and among us human beings.

The Bible reveals that God is Love, that he created the world out of love (Gn 1:1-26), and that men and women were created in his image (Gn 1:27). The Church understands that people are, therefore, made to love each other as God loves us.

Loving like God is generous and forever. It is creative, healing, and life-giving. As St. Paul says, “love is patient ... kind ... not jealous ... [or] rude, it does not seek its own interests. ... It bears all things ... hopes all things, endures all things” (I Cor 13:4-7).

Since God is a communion of three loving Persons, to be made in God’s image means that men and women are called to form relationships that are a communion of persons. God has given all his children a vocation to love like him—the universal call to holiness. These basic teachings take on a special meaning in marriage.

Marriage is a unique communion of persons because God designed it to bring together the whole man and woman—body, mind, and soul—in an enduring “one-flesh” union (Gn2:24; Mt 19:6ff). In creating man and woman for each other, God made marriage to be love-giving and life-giving. We call these two purposes of marriage the *unitive* and the *procreative*. They are ordered to each other and cannot be separated “without altering the couple’s spiritual life and compromising the goods of marriage and the future of the family” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2363).

As stewards of the gifts of love and life, spouses have a responsibility to nurture marital love and its life-giving potential. Therefore, each act of sexual intercourse must be oriented to life, because the whole meaning of marriage is present and signified in each marital act. Sex, then, is no frivolous game to play—it is made for real love, the kind of “till death do us part” love that mirrors God’s love.

Our faith tells us that marriage is not a human invention: “Marriage is not ... the effect of chance or the product of evolution of unconscious natural forces, it is the wise institution of the Creator to realize in mankind His design of love” (*Humanae Vitae*, no. 8). Marriage is a blessing that God gave men and women for the good of each other and

the good of humanity. So essential is this blessing that Christ redeemed and elevated it to become one of the seven sacraments. In doing so, Christ restored the original blessing of marriage in its fullness.

The wounds that the sexual revolution inflicted on our culture are deep. They emphasize selfishness and encourage indulgence that can never be satisfied. This encourages people to treat each other like objects that can be used and tossed away. Procreation and children are devalued. Divorce, broken hearts, and broken families are becoming the norm. The sexual revolution has brought no long-term happiness, just a cheap imitation, at a very high cost.

In contrast to this bleak situation, God’s gifts of human sexuality, marriage, and family are energizing, fulfilling, healing, and life-giving. This was the lesson that Manuel and Rosa taught their friends and family that day. God’s gifts call forth true love, the kind that is attainable and worth waiting for!

1 Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Pre-Marital Sex in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 169.

2 The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (“Add Health”) found that “nearly 60 percent of the study’s women had cohabited at least once before age 24,” quoted in Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America*, p. 199.

3 One in five adults overall and about 40 percent of adults aged 50-59 have ever been divorced. U.S. Census Bureau, *Number, Timing, and Duration of Marriages and Divorces: 2001* (issued February 2005).

4 The National Marriage Project, *The State of Our Unions, Marriage in America 2010. When Marriage Disappears: The New Middle America* (Charlottesville, VA: The National Marriage Project, 2010), pp. 104-106; www.virginia.edu/marriageproject/pdfs/Union_11_12_10.pdf (accessed June 9, 2011).

5 *Ibid.*

6 For a summary of research on the benefits of marriage to men and women, see Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage* (New York: Doubleday, 2000); see also The Witherspoon Institute, *Marriage and the Public Good: Ten Principles* (Princeton, NJ: The Witherspoon Institute, 2006), pp. 15-25. See also L. Waite and E. Lehrer, “The Benefits from Marriage and Religion in the U.S.: A Comparative Analysis,” *Population & Development Review* 29 (June 2003). See also David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know About Cohabitation Before Marriage*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, 2002).

7 Patrick Fagan, *The U.S. Index of Belonging and Rejection* www.frc.org/booklet/index-of-belonging-and-rejection (accessed June 9, 2011).

8 www.thenationalcampaign.org/tooyoung/too_young_fact_sheet.pdf.

9 Haishan Fu et al., “Contraceptive Failure Rates: New Estimates from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth,” *Family Planning Perspectives* 31:2 (1999): 56–63. Excerpts from *Catechism of the Catholic Church* second edition, copyright © 2000, Libreria Editrice Vaticana-United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C. Used with permission. All rights reserved. Excerpts from Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* (1967), used with permission of Libreria Editrice Vaticana. All rights reserved.