
Marriage in Crisis?

By Rev. Cormac Burke

(Msgr. Cormac Burke was born in Sligo, Ireland, in 1927, and acquired the degrees of Master of Arts in Modern Languages at the National University of Ireland, and of Law at Kings Inn. After teaching at Trinity College of Dublin and the Catholic University of America, he studied Canon Law in Rome and was ordained a priest in 1955. He has exercised his priestly ministry in England, the United States, Spain, and Kenya, and is currently a member of the Rota, the Marriage Tribunal of the Holy See in Rome.)

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Marriage seems to have gone wrong for modern man. He seems uncertain about it, and even disillusioned. The growing frequency of divorce in countries where it is permitted, and the campaign for it where it is not yet legal, are proof of this unhappy situation. People, after all, can only regard the legalization of divorce as "progress" to the extent to which they feel that marriage is likely to break down—just as people tend to look for a money-back warranty only insofar as they feel they are unlikely to be satisfied with the goods they have bought. There is no getting away from the fact: a world that is beginning to believe in divorce is beginning to disbelieve in marriage.

Whatever way it is looked at, every divorce is a sign of failure. Plenty of people argue in favor of divorce. Practically no one argues that divorce is a good thing; only, at the most, that it is a lesser evil: that to get divorced is a lesser evil than to remain bound by a failed marriage.

Divorce is always a profession of failure and disillusionment. There can be few experiences more shattering to human nature than that of a couple who once felt they were made for each other and that each represented for the other a unique and wonderful person, and who now feel that they just cannot stand each other, that they cannot possibly get along together.

When all is said and done, divorce marks the final collapse for two people, and their final rejection, of an ideal and dream of happiness on which they had embarked 5, 10, or 20 years earlier. And that dream was the dream of a happy marriage.

Advice from bankrupts...

I would make a suggestion in passing to those who have just gotten married (or are about to do so) and who hope—as is natural—that their marriage will work out happily. The suggestion is that they don't seek or accept advice from those who believe in divorce. The reason should be pretty obvious: those who are in favor of divorce are not in favor of marriage, since marriage and divorce are opposed realities. Divorced persons or those who favor divorce would seem to be the last people on Earth to look to for advice about marriage. More accurately, you could expect them to have advice to give about the termination of marriage, for that is their field. It would be altogether

surprising if they were to set themselves up as advisers on how to run a marriage or how to be happy in it.

Nevertheless, this is exactly what you find happening in many cases today. A glance through many contemporary articles, books, or manuals about marriage is enough to bring home the fact that the author or authors believe in—and favor—divorce. It is a curious fact, but it is a fact. What is much more curious still is that if you investigate a little further (which is a very wise thing to do, even though far too few people do so), it often turns out that the author himself is a divorced person!

This point was brought home to me some ten years or so ago when Bertrand Russell, towards the end of his long and sadly disgruntled life, wrote a book on love and marriage. After its publication, a letter to the *Times* asked if there was not a certain presumption in the noble lord's concern to guide people on these precise subjects, adding that presumably the public would place the same confidence in the hints on how to succeed in marriage, given by the thrice divorced Russell, as would businessmen in a "How to Succeed in Business" work written by a man three times bankrupt. The matter speaks for itself. An advocate of divorce presenting himself as an expert in matrimonial happiness is about as logical as an advocate of abortion setting himself up as a child-care expert. There is something rather suspicious about such a combination of attitudes and specializations.

"Natural" for marriage to go wrong

But let us return to our central subject. Marriage is obviously one of the most natural things in human society; the tendency towards marriage is obviously one of the most natural things in human nature. But if one regards marriage as something natural to man, it seems hard to suppose that in any normal state of affairs, it is natural for marriage to go wrong for him. If marriage is going wrong so often today, perhaps we are not in a normal state of affairs about marriage. Could it not be that, rather than marriage going wrong for man, it is man who has gone wrong about marriage? Is it not possible that the fault does not lie with marriage but with modern man, and specifically with his approach to marriage? I am inclined to think so, because I see at least three major points where man's approach to marriage has gone wrong:

- a) his tendency to "deify" human love; to expect from human love what any believer knows that only God can give;
- b) his tendency to invert the order of priority in the ends or purposes of marriage, i.e., his tendency to think that marriage is primarily for the expression and enjoyment of love, and secondarily (if at all) for having children;¹
- c) his tendency to see opposition between these two ends, instead of seeing them as complementary to one another.

Let us examine each one of these points a little more closely.

What only God can give

Man's main hope is the hope of happiness. Man is made for happiness and must necessarily seek it. But he is only going to find frustration if he looks for happiness where it is not to be found...; or

if he looks for unlimited happiness where only limited happiness can be found...; or if he looks for happiness where it can be found, but not in the way in which it can be found there....

Happiness can be found in marriage, but not unlimited happiness; to ask perfect happiness of marriage is to ask too much. Nevertheless, man is made with a capacity and thirst for unlimited happiness. And that is why it has been so well said that "woman promises to man what only God can give." Any believer knows that the perfect happiness man seeks can only be found in God. He also knows that such perfect happiness is not possible in any real or lasting way here on Earth. It can only be found in Heaven. But the unbeliever, or the half-believer, forgets this. And when man begins to forget God and to lose the hope of eternal life, his heart centers on earthly things and tries to satisfy its thirst for happiness in them. It cannot: not even in marriage, which of all human things promises most happiness and should be capable of giving it. But it cannot give enough.

The person who remembers this will look for happiness in marriage, but will not look for perfect happiness, for he knows that is to look for what it cannot give. The person who forgets God will tend to "deify" human love,² and to do so is to practically guarantee the failure of human love. If one expects too much from love and marriage, one is bound to be disappointed. If one puts too much pressure on a boiler, it explodes. If one blows a bubble up too much, it bursts. If one asks too much of marriage, it collapses. So many modern divorces have their explanation right there.

Children as "optional extras"

A second reason why marriage often goes wrong for modern man is his tendency to invert the order of priority in the ends or purposes of marriage; his tendency to make mutual love the main purpose, or even the whole and all-sufficient purpose, of marriage, at the same time as he reduces the possibility of children—of one or two children—to a mere factor which most couples may well want as part of their self-fulfillment, though other couples, with equal legitimacy, will prefer perhaps one or two cars or one or two homes....

For many people today children are to marriage what certain accessories are to automobiles—"optional extras." Count them in if you like them or can afford them. If not, the marriage—like the car—can work well without them. To this the Church flatly says "No." Only in truly exceptional cases can marriage work well without children, without the children that God wants for each particular marriage.³ The deliberate exclusion of children, in whole or in part, is almost certain to make any marriage work badly.... This is a truth—a rule or law of life—which is in fact implicit in the Church's teaching about the ends of marriage and the relationship between them.

Since contemporary man has little evidence for thinking that modern philosophies are correct,⁴ he would do well to reexamine the Church's teaching—that having and rearing children is the primary purpose of marriage—and her claim that this teaching represents the really natural view of marriage. It might help if we pointed out, to begin with, that most of those who think the Church is wrong in this teaching have not properly understood what the Church is teaching in fact. The Church is not speaking about the motives of individuals in marrying, but about the ends of marriage as an institution. And a little reflection makes it clear that subjective and personal motives do not necessarily coincide with objective ends.

The main motive most people have for marrying is undoubtedly love: "Why do I want to marry this person, rather than anyone else? Because I'm in love with him or her." That is clear. If having children enters as a motive for marrying it normally enters as a secondary motive, and in certain cases today it may not even enter at all.

Now, with this order of motives for marrying—first, love; second (if at all), children—many people may easily conclude that a successful or happy marriage is dependent on the same factors and in the same order; i.e., that happiness in marriage depends mainly or even exclusively on their mutual love and secondarily or not at all on having children. But there is no special evidence to show that this conclusion is correct. One thing, after all, is your motives for marrying; and another is the way marriage gives happiness.

How marriage gives happiness

People are not wrong to marry for love. People are not wrong to hope for happiness from marriage. But people may be wrong if they stake all their hopes for happiness in marriage on just one factor—mutual love—then Nature has designed married happiness to result from the delicate and exacting interplay of two factors: love and children. In other words, people may be wrong or go wrong because they have not understood how marriage is meant to work, because they have not grasped the way marriage is meant to fulfill its possibilities, including its possibilities of happiness. And this is where the Church's teaching can set them right.

Only ignorance—or something worse than ignorance— could present the Church's traditional teaching on marriage as if it were the fruit of a medieval legalism; as if it were the attitude of a few die-hard clerical celibates wagging a reproving finger at modern man and saying: "You may be interested in happiness. But that is a modern fad, and you had better forget about it if you want to remain a dutiful subject of the Church; for the Church is not interested in whether marriage gives happiness or not. The Church's interest is simply in offspring—in numbers—and in the law: indissolubility"....

The Church and human happiness

That would be a vulgar and slanderous parody of the Church's attitude.⁵ The Church is fully conscious that the truth she is upholding—in the traditional teaching about marriage—is the truth entrusted to her by Christ, and therefore that it is not in her power to alter or fail to proclaim this truth. At the same time, however, she is equally conscious that her view of marriage takes all of its natural elements into account, including that promise of happiness which it seems to offer to man. When she joins her children together in matrimony, the Church is the first to rejoice at their love and happiness. The Divine Master is always a willing guest if he is invited to the marriage feast. With his presence he wishes to confirm the joy of Cana. But it is to him that a young couple must look if they want the wine of their present happiness to grow richer and flow more abundantly, and never to run out or sour into vinegar.⁶ When Our Lord speaks to them—in scripture—teaching that they are now "one flesh" and "shall not be separated",⁷ that they should "increase and multiply";⁸—or through his Church⁹—teaching them (in words of Vatican II) that "marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the begetting and educating of children",¹⁰ he also has their happiness in mind: not only their eternal happiness (though that is what essentially

matters) but also that relative but real happiness here on Earth that they can attain and that he wants them to attain.

Married love becomes family love

Perhaps we can put it this way. It seems evidently a part of the natural order that man should see a promise of happiness in marriage. Now if, as the Church teaches, it is also part of the natural order that procreation is the main end of marriage and mutual love only a secondary end, then—unless nature is lying or at best inconsistent—happiness in marriage is normally and in the long run more likely to depend on having and rearing children than on mutual love between husband and wife and its expressions. It undoubtedly depends on both factors, but the teaching of the Church would seem to suggest that, in the long run, children have a greater influence in determining the outcome of a happy marriage.

Now if someone jumps up to object that this is absurd, that it is tantamount to saying that something physiological (procreation) is more important than something spiritual (love), I would answer that it is tantamount to saying no such thing. It is to say something quite different: which is that love in marriage, which is certainly wider than mere physical love, is wider also than mere married love; i.e., love in marriage is not meant to remain (and is not likely to survive if it does remain) just the love of two people for each other. It is meant to broaden, to spread out, to include more. Married love is really designed to become family love. The love of husband and wife is meant to grow and, in growing, to extend to and embrace others, who will be precisely the fruit of that love. "True mutual love transcends the community of husband and wife, and reaches out to its natural fruit, the children."¹¹ And this already brings us to the third point of our consideration.

Calculated happiness

An age that does not see children as a natural consequence of married love may be on its way towards seeing them as its natural enemy. That is why I have suggested that a third main reason why so many marriages do not work out today is the growing modern tendency not only to put mutual love before children, but to see actual opposition between these two ends of marriage instead of seeing them as complementary.

Under the influence of birth-control thinking and propaganda many people today have fallen into the idea I have just been outlining: that human happiness in marriage depends essentially on love and much less so, if at all, on paternity.¹² I wonder how many are aware that this idea can be just the first in a series of steps by which a person may be carried forward—much farther than he had originally anticipated or wanted—by a philosophy which has its own powerful momentum and direction.

Let us analyze a little more deeply this first step in the birth-control philosophy, and see how easily it leads people on—down a path of calculation, rather than up one of love.

The first principle of this modern "philosophy" of marriage then is that love is the essential and all-sufficient constituent of married happiness, and children therefore are to be regarded as a possible help—but also as a possible hindrance—to that love. For children make demands, and

there is being popularized today a concept of love that does not want to have demands made from it. With this mentality, when love is thought of above all in terms of personal satisfaction (and not of rising towards an ideal, or of self-giving, with all this implies of struggle and sacrifice), then a vague hankering after paternity may not be enough to outweigh the "disadvantages" of children. This is becoming especially true in the case of women, among whom there is a growing tendency to feel that the burdens of pregnancy and childrearing are just too high a price to pay for the possible satisfactions that may derive from them.

Happiness is a result of a generous dedication to someone or something worthwhile. It is a result of giving yourself without counting the cost. Happiness is not something that can be bought for money, or obtained through calculation. Yet the whole of this modern philosophy of marriage is becoming replete with calculations, practically all of them cold, and many of them quite selfish and quite mistaken.

The first calculation is—as we have seen—that two people suffice to make each other happy.¹³ The second calculation is that a certain number of children—one or two—may be a help to that happiness, or may be a hindrance. The third calculation—which is beginning to have the force of a dogma for many today—is that more than a certain number of children (two or three at a maximum) will certainly run counter to married love and happiness. Now, evidently, once you conclude that a particular number of children—four, for instance—is bound to be inimical to love, you can easily end up regarding any number—even one—as an enemy. This is simply the logic of birth-control marriage.

Once two people have begun to believe that they are "made for one another," they may end up believing that they are not made for anyone else, and have no need for anyone else; that anyone else—even their child, and even especially their child—may be a rival to their love. One or other, or both, may anticipate—and refuse to accept—the possibility of the child's absorbing part of the love which their partner has hitherto given exclusively to them. It is, of course, a fact that most husbands and wives, on becoming parents, feel some reactions of jealousy at sensing themselves no longer the exclusive object of their partner's affections. It is natural to experience some passing motions of jealousy in this sense, just as it is natural to overcome them.¹⁴ What is not natural, when you have anticipated this new possible polarization or broadening out of your partner's love, is to want to avoid having the child that will cause it. This is simply possessiveness and selfish grasping: the very antithesis of love.

Sexual love and procreation are joined in God's plans, to form a strong natural support for marriage and happiness. Man can certainly set apart what God has joined together. But this unnatural separation may leave married love without support. And marriage without its natural support logically collapses.

Those who believe that the birth-control philosophy favors marriage and love would do well therefore to look to its possible ultimate consequences. These have been well parodied in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, that satire of a soulless future society which now looks much less impossible and remote than when Huxley conceived it 70 years ago. That brave and liberated vision of planned things to come—love and sex identified (or rather, love smothered and lost in uncontrolled animal instinct); marriage excluded and abolished; children (repopulating) reduced

to laboratory processes in the safe and exclusive hands of the State—is just the fantastic (but ultimate) projection of the birth-control philosophy.

Opposition between ends?

When the Church teaches that mutual love is a secondary purpose of marriage related and subordinated to procreation, it would be a crass error to interpret this sub-ordering of mutual love to procreation as if it implied a slighting attitude on the Church's part towards love. The Church is not opposing one end of marriage to another. It is modern man who is doing that. The Church sees the intimate harmony between all the natural aspects of marriage—its objective purposes as well as its subjective motives.¹⁵ To indicate that one thing is ordained to another is to give the key to its true nature. And so the Church, in teaching that mutual love in marriage is a subordinate end to procreation, far from slighting human love, is giving us the key to Nature's plan for the fulfillment, within marriage, of the great expectations of human love.

Love's greatest project—children

Nature has designed married love to be fruitful.¹⁶ Fruitfulness, in other words, is natural to love. It is something that love naturally longs for, so much so that love feels frustrated if it cannot bear fruit.

Love always inspires. It dreams of great things even when it is unrequited. Requited love—love that has been answered by love—no longer just dreams of great things; it yearns with the ambition, and feels the strength, to carry them out.

Love enables a young couple to find a thrill of happiness in situations where those not in love experience no more than boredom and routine. To thrill them, it is enough that they can do or choose something—almost anything—together, and that what they do or choose represents the fruit of a loving decision: the meeting point of two wills in love. As they await their wedding day, an engaged couple work happily on so many projects—minor and even trivial projects in themselves—that will help to make up their new life together. They enthusiastically plan and choose the apartment they are going to live in, the type of furniture they will have, the very color of carpets or curtains....

Is it possible, then, for them not to thrill together with enthusiasm at the major project that Nature has reserved for them, children.... Other couples may live in houses identical to theirs, or may choose the same model car, or television set, or much more expensive ones.... No one but they can have their children.

How could a couple not look on the project of their children as the greatest and most precious of all their projects, since they can see that it alone—among them all—is the direct fruit of their most intimate married union, fruit of the union not only of their wills but also of their bodies? And as they reflect on all of this, is it possible that they should fail to understand the greatness and sacredness of God's plan for marriage?

"The only true Christian marriage is that of two people—normally two young people, on the threshold of life and possessed of all the vitality of youth—who surrender themselves unreservedly to one another, to as to undertake the greatest enterprise open to man on the level of natural values: the enterprise of their mutual perfection and the enterprise of the family whose summit is the child, in whom the parents meet each other anew, in whom they find their continuity, and who, in the unity of his being expresses their union."¹⁷ "The spouses who love each other, love everything that brings them together and unites them. They hold nothing in common so much as their own child. They may share their fortune and unite their possessions in one; they may bear the same name; they may bring their characters into harmony; they may be united by the most heartfelt understanding. Nevertheless, nothing is so common to them and nothing unites them like their child.... United couples continue to love each other in their child. In him they discover not only themselves, but their very union, the oneness that they have made it their life-task to achieve. Each of them recognizes his beloved in the child in whom he sees a new being that owes him everything and that he also loves with a love that is inseparable from his partner's love which has equally been the source of this new life. And so in fatherhood and motherhood a marriage finds its perfect flourishing. The child uniquely expresses the enrichment of being that husband and wife seek in their union."¹⁸

That is why a young couple in love—if they understand love as meaning something more than the gratification of instinct—are not satisfied with a barren union. If children are the natural fruit of married love, the married love that does not bear that fruit—when it can do so—frustrates itself and may soon wither and die. Its danger is self-suffocation, for it must try to survive in a closed and unnatural atmosphere where it has deprived itself of the breath of life.

If Nature has designed married love to be fruitful, we can say that it has also designed that growth in love will normally be a function of growth in fruitfulness. The couple that expects their love to grow while at the same time they neglect or frustrate its fruitfulness are denaturalizing their marriage. They have not understood the way that marriage can normally give happiness, and are not likely to find the happiness that their marriage could have given them. Their love, without the protection and strength it is meant to draw from children, can easily give way before the pressures of life.

Every marriage has its crisis

I do not think it is hard to follow Nature's plan which has designed children to be not only the fruit but also the safeguard of mutual love between the spouses, and the mainstay of their married happiness.

Each marriage comes to a critical period, a turning point towards a fuller and more definitive good or towards bad. That moment can come quite early on—as soon as easy romance fades, which may often be no more than a couple of years after marriage. If a couple does not negotiate that critical moment properly, their marriage will begin to go downhill. Mutual understanding and respect will lessen; rows will become more frequent. They will have begun the gradual process of drifting apart that can end in final estrangement 10 or 15 years later.

I would say that a double need must be satisfied if a marriage is to survive this period of crisis. When that testing time arrives, each spouse needs, in the first place, a major motive to help them to be loyal to the other person despite his or her defects, a motive sufficient to keep them working at the task of learning to love the other person.

And each one needs, in the second place, a powerful motive to improve personally: to become a less self-centered, a more lovable person. It is easy to see in children Nature's special way of providing both motives.¹⁹

When love becomes difficult

Let us consider the first point: the need to keep loving when love begins to be hard. In Heaven, God and the saints love without effort. But Earth is not Heaven. Love on Earth is seldom easy; and if it is easy for a time, the easiness tends not to last. It is true that there must indeed be a great depth of goodness in each human person, for God loves each of us with an immense love and God only loves what is good. But we are not God, and at times we find it hard to discover the good points in other people. In fact we often seem to have a greater facility for seeing people's defects than their virtues. This especially happens when two people share life as closely and constantly as in marriage. And it happens above all if, in their shared life, they have remained alone. Two people constantly face to face are going to see far more defects in each other than two people who are looking together at their children.

When little difficulties in getting along begin to crop up, the thought of their children—if there are children—should easily and naturally enter as a main motive in determining husband or wife to be faithful to their marriage vows. "For better or for worse," they promised years ago... It will clearly be worse, for their children, if their parents don't learn to get along. "For richer or for poorer..."; the children will clearly be poorer if they live in a disunited or broken home. Can any stronger motive exist for a couple—than the responsibility and love they have towards their children—to push and encourage and compel them to be faithful, whatever the cost, whatever their feelings, whatever the state of their nerves, whatever efforts—however extraordinary—they may have to make? It may certainly be tough on them to make those efforts, but a moment's reflection should tell them that if they are not prepared to make them, it is going to be much tougher on their children.

There is the first motive, and Nature's way of supplying it. "For our children's sake, we must learn to get along. And therefore I will fight with all my strength to keep loving my partner. And, with God's grace, I will succeed."

Becoming lovable through sacrifice

The husband or wife who reacts so is already improving as a person. And this brings us directly to the second point. If love is to survive in marriage, each spouse must learn to love the other, with his or her defects. But if love is not just to survive but to grow, then each spouse must be able to discover virtues—new virtues or increased virtues—in the other.

If love is to grow in marriage, the other person must appear as more and more lovable. And he (or she) will not unless he is improving, unless he is actually turning into a better person.

On the natural level, generosity and self-giving are what make a person better and more lovable. And it is selfishness that kills love both in the selfish person himself as well as in those who have contact with him or her.

The person in love needs to be able to sacrifice himself for the loved one, if he himself is to become more lovable. The person incapable of sacrifice is incapable of giving or receiving (or retaining) much love.

It is good that each spouse sacrifices himself for the other. But it is doubtful, on a natural level, if any husband or wife can, alone, inspire their partner indefinitely to generosity and self-sacrifice.

We have said that the person in love needs to be able to sacrifice himself for the loved one, if he himself is to become more lovable. We should add that the loved one, in Nature's plan for marriage, includes children. Children can and do draw from parents a degree of sacrifice to which neither parent, alone, could probably inspire the other. "A man most easily rises above himself for the sake of his children. Parental love is the most naturally disinterested kind of love."²⁰ In this way, as they sacrifice themselves for their children, each parent actually improves and becomes—in their partner's eyes also—truly a more lovable person. "For the sake of their children, spouses rise above themselves, and above a limited view of their own happiness. Moral stature is only acquired if one rises above oneself. Children, above all, are what spur a couple on to moral greatness."²¹

On the other hand, if a couple leave untapped the capacity for sacrifice stored in their paternal or maternal instincts, they are likely to end up, at best, as half-developed persons, half-lovable persons. And that may not be good enough for the survival of their marriage.

The fact is that sacrifice is a positive need for married life. In particular all the sacrifice that children demand of their parents from their earliest years is a major factor designed by Nature to mature and develop and unite the parents. It is good that the husband and wife sacrifice themselves for each other. But it is even better that both together make sacrifices for their children. Shared sacrifice is one of the best bonds of love.

It seems to me that one of the most obvious, frequent and saddest mistakes of many young couples embarking on marriage today is the decision to postpone having children for a number of years—two or three or five—after getting married. The result is that precisely at that moment when romance starts to fade, when their love begins to run into difficulties and needs support, the main support which Nature had thought of (had "planned," I would say) for that moment—their children—does not exist.²²

Shared selfishness

I know that many young couples want to enjoy themselves for a number of years. They feel too young for settling down to family life, and prefer to combine what they consider the advantages of

married life with the continued attractions of the social life to which they have become accustomed. Can this be seriously regarded as a natural approach to marriage? Does it not look too much to what marriage offers in the way of enjoyment and too little to what it implies in the way of commitment? May there not be as much of shared selfishness as of shared love in such an approach? When all is said and done, "to have a good time together" is not much of an ideal for two people to share, and is certainly not capable of holding them together, in love, for a lifetime.

At times we get the impression today that many young couples are planning for a marriage where the need for sacrifice will be reduced to minimum and, if possible, absolutely eliminated. The saddest thing about this is that a couple who want a marriage without sacrifice want a marriage where they will eventually lose respect for each other.

Not mature enough?

Others argue that a few years of married life together will help them mature more and so be better prepared for starting and rearing a family. But what, it may be asked, is there in such a shared life together—with its minimum of burdens—that is really maturing them? The moment when a couple is best prepared for starting a family is the moment when they have just gotten married. The romance that still accompanies those early years of married life will help them face up more readily and cheerfully to the sacrifices that children demand. This romantic and more idealistic love is actually designed by Nature to facilitate the process by which a couple matures in sacrifice. Later on, it will not be so easy and may not work. If they put off having their first child for later on—when romantic love perhaps no longer accompanies them—the dedication and sacrifice children require may prove too much—precisely because they have not matured enough. If two young people in love don't want to start a family, they would be wise not to try to start a marriage. It's too likely to fail. You might compare it to starting a car, while leaving its generator belt somehow stuck and motionless. The car may run all right for a while, but in the end its motor is bound to freeze up....

The best family planner

It would be a funny world if Nature were not in fact the best and wisest family planner. She is certainly the planner with the longest experience. The results of modern—artificial and anti-natural—family planning are beginning to be abundantly clear: more and more crumbling marriages, more and more broken homes, more and more isolated people.... Those young couples who are tempted to trust the demographers, or the politicians, or the sociologists, rather than Nature, those who are tempted to bend to social pressures or to the simple desire for an easy life rather than heed their instincts of paternity, would do well to ask themselves if they really believe—on the evidence—that modern family planning seems to be making happier marriages, or whether the plan of Nature is not more farseeing and more likely to provide support for strong and lasting married life and married love.

Self-enrichment in marriage

Those who maintain that the main purpose of marriage is the enrichment of the spouses' personalities, their self-fulfillment as they complement each other through their mutual love,

should also be prepared to say what in fact personal fulfillment implies. Their meaning, presumably, is that marriage is meant to make a fuller human person of each spouse: to make a fuller man or a fuller woman of husband or wife.²³ But it would help if they went on to say what this fuller humanity consists in: a greater capacity of understanding? a more developed self-control? Or (I am assuming that they would not maintain that it consists in a greater dependence on physical sex) would they suggest that it consists in a greater concern precisely with self, accompanied by a growing indifference towards others?

Pope Paul's words are worth reflecting on. A married love that is fully human, he insists, is "a compound of sense and spirit. It is not, then, merely a question of natural instinct or emotional drive. It is also, and above all, an act of free will, whose dynamism ensures not only that it endure through the joys and sorrows of daily life, but also that it grow, so that husband and wife become in a way one heart and one soul, and together attain their human fulfillment."²⁴

Dictatorial pressures

We would return to the suggestion with which we began: that it is not marriage that has gone wrong for modern man; it is modern man who has gone wrong about marriage. He has abused it, and it no longer works in his service.

For too long some people have been crying, "We have the right to be happy in marriage without being dictated to by the Church." We begin to note a hollow tone of despair in the cry, for the very people who pay least heed to the laws of the Church are those who are finding least happiness in marriage.

There is dictation today—and dictatorial pressure—about marriage. But it is not coming from the Church. It is coming from the State, from the social planners, from the economic experts, or from the philosophers of a pervasive hedonism or an aimless libertarianism.

It is no wonder if these man-imposed plans for marriage end in failure; for marriage is not man's idea but God's, and it can work—and give happiness—only if it is lived according to God's plans.²⁵

People indeed have a right to expect happiness from marriage, but only from the type of marriage that Nature instituted, and only when it is lived with God's grace in accordance with its natural designs and its natural laws. Not to respect that design or those laws is to denaturalize what was made to help man towards his happiness and salvation, and to turn it, sooner or later, into a source of misery and frustration.²⁶

Marriage is in crisis, and seems to be in decline in many modern societies. Nevertheless, we meet with so many exceptions, so many cases of happy marriages that are happy homes, because the parents have not frustrated the noble instincts of parenthood that Nature has given them. They have, on the contrary, fulfilled those instincts, and fulfilled them generously,²⁷ in the conviction that "a truly noble married love aspires, with a courageous heart, to the glory of fruitfulness. But there is no glory in a strained and calculated fruitfulness. Glory lies in an abundant fruitfulness, in the longing for that abundance. If it feels the need for reasons, it is not in order to have children, but in order to limit their number."²⁸

There is a constantly growing number of married couples who understand the greatness of the divine plan, which God has given them a share in by calling them to marriage. And so, strengthened by grace, they have been able to face up to the sacrifices—sacrifices of love—that love itself needs for its survival.²⁹

¹ The Church has always taught that the primary end of marriage is offspring: the procreation and education of children. And she indicates, as secondary ends: "mutual help, the fostering of reciprocal love, and the abatement of concupiscence" (Pius XI, Encyclical *Casti Connubii*, n. 59).

² Or he will tend to deify other things still less capable of yielding happiness: money, success, sex, drink, drugs...

³ It is of course possible that God may not want any children for a particular marriage, even though husband and wife were anxious to have family. These (materially) sterile unions can be happy if they accept God's will. They receive special graces from him to learn to love one another more and more as each day passes. And they can—and indeed should—achieve a spiritual fruitfulness, by devoting the time and energy that would have gone to their children to formative and apostolic activities in favor of others. "Of course, there are couples to whom our Lord does not grant any children. If this happens, it is a sign that he is asking them to go on loving each other with the same affection and to put their efforts, if they can, into serving and working for the good of other souls" (Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer: *Christ is Passing By*, Veritas, n. 25). And another author comments *a propos* of these barren marriages: "They should make up what is lacking to their union by directing into other activities that desire for fruitfulness which alone permits man to achieve his full development" (Jacques Leclercq, *Le mariage chretien*, Casterman, Ch. VI).

⁴ The most striking evidence, i.e., the growing number of divorces, suggests just the opposite.

⁵ "The Church's attitude towards marriage is very clear. She is in favor of love and has never ceased to use all her influence in order to center marriage on love, resisting those tendencies that separate them. The ideal is that marriage be centered on love and love on marriage to such an extent that there should be no marriage without love nor (sexual) love outside marriage. In the Church's view, love is for marriage and marriage for love, and one and the other for the family" (Leclercq, Ch. II).

⁶ "Man cannot attain that true happiness which he yearns for with the strength of his spirit, unless he keeps the laws which the Most High God has engraved in his nature. These laws must be wisely and lovingly observed." Pope Paul VI, Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, n. 31.

⁷ Mt. 19:6.

⁸ Gen 1:28.

⁹ It is always Christ whom, in the voice of the Church, we listen to, or not. He has told us so: "Whoever listens to you, listens to me; and whoever rejects you, rejects me" (Lk:10:16).

¹⁰ Constitution on the Church in the World of Today, n. 50. Cf. Code of Canon Law, Canon 1013.

¹¹ Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, *Conversations*, Scepter, n. 94.

¹² In its most extreme expression this trend leads to the thesis that man is fulfilled by sex but not by paternity, which is pretty much the opposite of the truth. Sex—taken as the simple satisfaction of sensual appetite—does not fulfill man. Paternity does. A man or woman can "realize" themselves—unfrustratedly—without physical sex; many of the least frustrated people I know are among those who have dedicated themselves to God in a celibate life. They have denied themselves physical sex, but they are aware of a real spiritual paternity. And some of the most frustrated people I know have led an active—but barren—sex life.

¹³ This leads inevitably to the divorce mentality! "I calculated that this person would make me perfectly happy. Now that I find myself deceived in my original calculations, I demand to be 'free' to look for someone else who will fit in better with fresh calculations I have made...." Can anyone seriously expect to find happiness that way?

¹⁴ This is simply part of the natural process mentioned earlier, by which married love—*entre deux*—should broaden out into a more generous family love.

¹⁵ "Marriage is far from being the effect of chance or the result of the blind evolution of natural forces. It is in reality the wise and provident institution of God the Creator, whose purpose was to establish in man his loving design. As a consequence, husband and wife, through that mutual gift of themselves, which is specific and exclusive to them alone, seek to develop that kind of personal union in which they complement one another in order to cooperate with God in the generation and education of new lives." Paul VI, Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, n. 8.

¹⁶ Cf. *Humanae Vitae*, n. 9.

¹⁷ Leclercq, Ch. II.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Ch. V.

¹⁹ It is worth repeating that barren marriages always constitute a case apart. God helps each married couple in a very special way through the sacramental grace of marriage. If it is particularly through the gift of children that he intends to communicate this grace to fruitful marriages (or to those that can be fruitful), he will communicate it in some other fashion in the case of barren marriages. God will help them and ask of them in other ways, for they too can count on the fullness of sacramental grace.

²⁰ Leclercq, Ch. V.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Ch. V.

²² "A married couple should build their life together on the foundation of a sincere and pure affection for each other, and on the joy that comes from having brought into the world the children God has enabled them to have. They should be capable of renouncing their personal comfort; and they should put their trust in the providence of God." Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer: *Christ is Passing By*, Veritas, n. 25.

²³ The Church has always explicitly taught that marriage should lead to the fulfillment and maturity of the spouses. As is logical, the maturity she has in mind is, above all, maturity in the life that definitively matters: the Christian life of grace and sanctity. Cf. Pope Pius XI's words in his encyclical *Casti Connubii*: "This mutual interior formation of husband and wife, this persevering endeavor to bring each other to the state of perfection, may in a true sense be called, as the Roman Catechism calls it (II, cap. viii, q. 13), the primary cause and reason of matrimony, as long as marriage is considered not in its stricter sense, as the institution destined for the procreation and education of children, but in the wider sense as a complete and intimate life-partnership and association" (n. 24).

²⁴ *Humanae Vitae*, n. 9.

²⁵ What has been called the Magna Carta of Christian marriage—Pius XI's encyclical *Casti Connubii*—introduces its teaching on marriage with these words: "Let us first recall this immutable, inviolable, and fundamental truth: matrimony was not instituted or reestablished by men but by God; not men, but God, the author of nature, and Christ our Lord, the restorer of nature, provided marriage with its laws, confirmed it, and elevated it; and consequently those laws can in no way be subject to human wills or to any contrary pact made even by the contracting parties themselves. This is the teaching of Sacred Scripture; it is the constant and universal Tradition of the Church...." (n. 5).

²⁶ Pope Leo XIII wrote, almost a century ago: "It is a law of divine providence that the institutions which have God as their author prove more useful and salutary according as they remain more true to their original and natural state, inviolate and unchanged. God, the Creator of all things, knew well what was best suited for the establishment and maintenance of each of his works, and by his will and understanding so ordained them that each might properly attain its purpose. But if men recklessly and maliciously set about altering or disturbing the order thus providentially established, then even the wisest and most beneficent institution begins to be harmful, or at least ceases to be useful, either because such change has deprived it of beneficent power, or else because God himself has willed in this way to punish men for their pride and audacity." Encyclical *Arcanum*, 10 February, 1880.

²⁷ Pope Paul, in *Humanae Vitae*, (n. 10) underlines that the concept of responsible parenthood includes especially the "generous decision to have a large family."

²⁸ Leclercq, Ch. V.

²⁹ "Let Christian husbands and wives be mindful of their vocation to Christian life, a vocation which, deriving from their baptism, has been confirmed anew and made more explicit by the sacrament of matrimony. For by this sacrament they are strengthened and, one might almost say, consecrated to the faithful fulfillment of their duties, to realizing to the full their vocation, and to bearing witness, as becomes them, to Christ before the world. For the Lord has entrusted to them the task of making visible to men and women the holiness, and the joy too, of the law which unites inseparable their love for one another and the cooperation they give to God's love, God who is the author of human life." *Humanae Vitae*, n. 25.