

## 100409 A HARD TEACHING BUT RIGHT ON TARGET

(Jesus acted with compassion towards all especially the sinner. Those who struggled with marriage and their sexuality were included but his teaching on marriage remained clear and straightforward)

Marriage. Divorce. Remarriage. The Teachings of Jesus. The Teachings of His Church. The original design of God for marriage—from the beginning, before there was sin.

My dad was one of seven children. My mom one of five. Of those twelve one never married, the other eleven did. Of those marriages there was one divorce. One of eleven. Of those eleven marriages there have been thirty-six children. Of those thirty-six two did not marry. Of the remaining thirty-four, sixteen have divorced. Almost half of those marriages ended in divorce. Clearly something has happened in the space of a single generation. One of eleven. Sixteen of thirty-four. All were baptized and raised as Catholics.

I often remark that there is nothing I know of that is harder than marriage, than two becoming one. And yet, when it goes good there is nothing better in this life. Grace must always be factored in; sin must always be factored in. But where sin is present grace abounds. That is what the apostle says and that is what I believe. That remains true even when I do not see the abundant grace or feel the presence of God's power.

Recently, I was doing some research on the marriage vows. As you go back in time one of the things that emerges clearly is that the vows, while containing common elements, were not identical. What the man promised and what the woman promised were similar but not identical. For example, the man would promise to love, honor and provide for his wife. The woman would promise to love, honor and obey her husband. I remember when my mom and dad were going to renew their marriage vows on the occasion of their fortieth anniversary, my mom wagged her finger under my nose and said, "I'll promise to love your father and honor him but that's it—none of that obey stuff." As she wagged her finger I knew exactly what she meant and I think my dad knew exactly what she meant.

But that was then and for the entire thirty-six years of my priesthood the marriage vows exchanged by a man and woman in marriage are identical, exactly the same. Both promise the same thing in the same identical words. Equality. True equals. Each will live out the promise within their own uniqueness but both promises are identical.

Another change in my thirty-six years as a priest is that marriages take place much later in people's lives than before. Almost ten years later—late 20's or early to mid thirties. Before it was late teens to early to mid-20's. And then, there were no couples openly living together who presented themselves for marriage. Now it is more than 50% who do so. How do I know? These couples both give me the same address when I am taking down their information. If 50% are willing to admit they are living together there may still be a few couples who are but who don't want me to know that. Cohabiting has become the common sense default position in our society today. The reasons are varied. One apartment is less expensive than two. Both get to experience the adjustment before making the commitment. There is now a private place for sexual activity. In addition the entire culture of the United States explicitly supports cohabitation—from celebrities to sports stars to entertainers to ordinary folk, cohabitation has become very acceptable.

But is there nothing wrong with it? Well, actually there are a number of things wrong with it. There are now studies of cohabiting couples beginning to emerge both in Europe and here which indicate that cohabitation often is a relationship of persons who are not always on an equal footing in the relationship. Whichever of the two was the one to suggest the living together arrangement often stands to be in a little better position than the one responding to the request. Slight inequality—but not the same as marriage which is full equality. Cohabiting relationships do not all lead to marriage. Cohabiting relationships often break up and just as fiercely as do marriages. Often enough there may have been more than one cohabiting partner before a person decides to settle down. But having had serial live-in partners each of which relationship ended without commitment is hardly a good pattern to have in place before desiring to commit oneself. Serial cohabitations often doom marriages.

There is no promise given in cohabitation and none asked. But in marriage the promise is the heart of it. To hold your beloved's hands and look into your spouse's eyes and pledge the love that is in the heart and receive their pledge in turn is what makes marriage. It is the promise and the living out of the promise. No promise given is hardly the same as a genuine promise given.

I haven't even mentioned the most significant problem areas for cohabiting couples though. There is not generativity. Almost all cohabiting couples are contracepting. Consciously they hold back the possibility of having children. They will think and say that they will wait until they get married to have children. There is still a basic connection and understanding that marriage and children do go together. Even today's gospel where Jesus teaches about marriage and divorce is followed immediately by a section and Jesus reminding his disciples not to push children away but to let them come to the Lord. Marriage is about the choice to open myself completely to the other, in every aspect of my life, including my generativity. To hold back in this most significant of human areas in cohabitation and then to claim that this is preparation for marriage is not even close to being true.

Lastly, in marriage the couple brings their love before the altar of God, they entrust their love to God and ask humbly that God unite them together in the bond of marriage. That is very different from cohabitation. The presence and blessing of Christ in a committed relationship is not nothing! It is essential!

So when a young couple cohabits as a prelude to marriage I try gently to point out that the two realities really have very little in common. They are actually quite different. Inequality vs. equality. No promise vs. authentic promise from the heart. No generativity vs. full openness to new life. No blessing of unity vs. God's blessing of unity. No. Cohabitation and marriage are not the same, not even close. And cohabiting as a preparation for marriage is not good or helpful no matter how much common sense wisdom says it is.

My friends, we human beings did not invent marriage. We discovered it. It was given to us by God in the original creation. It is not something so completely under our control that we can decide its component parts although we often try to do so. It is about male and female in a committed relationship of intimacy, inseparable, exclusive of all others. No threesomes. It is for life. But that expression has several meanings. For life means for as long as both shall live. For life, also means for the kind of life they desire, its quality and virtue. For life also means for the possibility of their word of love

becoming flesh in a new person. And then the two who became one in marriage become three but the three are still one—a community of persons bound together by love. That is our definition of the very Trinity of God in whose image and likeness we are made. For life also means for eternal life. Couples are to help each other into the kingdom, to get to heaven. It is not enough that I make it if you do not. You must help me and I must help you. Husbands and wives must help each other.

The teaching of Jesus and the Church is not take it or leave it. It is the goal we strive to live, the ideal set before us by God and ratified in the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. Let us pray for married couples this morning. All married couples, the successful ones and the unsuccessful ones; the ones where spouses strive with all they have to be true and the ones where hands have been thrown up long ago in frustration; marriages where there is great fidelity and those where there has been abuse. Let us pray for faithful marriages in the years and ages to come.