

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY in *Gaudium et spes* and Today

Fr Raniero Cantalamessa ofmcap Fourth Lenten Sermon 2016

I am devoting this meditation to a spiritual reflection on *Gaudium et spes*, the pastoral constitution on the Church in the world. Of the various social problems treated in this document—culture, economy, social justice, peace—the most relevant and problematic one concerns marriage and family. The Church devoted the last two synods of bishops to it. The majority of us present here do not live in that state of life, but we all need to know its problems to understand and help the vast majority of God’s people who do live in the marital state, especially today now that it is at the center of attacks and threats from all sides.

Gaudium et spes treats the family at great length in the Second Part (nos. 46-53). There is no need to quote statements from it because it repeats the traditional Catholic doctrine that everyone knows, except for a new emphasis on the mutual love between the spouses that is openly recognized now as a primary good in marriage alongside procreation.

In regard to marriage and family, *Gaudium et spes*, in its well-known way of proceeding, focuses first on the positive achievements in the modern world (“the joys and the hopes”) and only secondly on the problems and dangers (“the griefs and anxieties”).[1] I plan to follow that same method, taking into account, however, the dramatic changes that have occurred in this area in the last half century since then. I will briefly recall God’s plan for marriage and family since, as believers, we always need to start from that point, and then see what biblical revelation can offer us as a solution to current problems in this area. I am intentionally refraining from commenting on some of the specific problems discussed in the Synod of Bishops regarding which only the pope now has the right to say the last word.

1. Marriage and family in the divine plan and in the gospel of Christ

The book of Genesis has two distinct accounts of the creation of the first human couple that go back to two different traditions: the Yahwist tradition (10th century BC) and the later one called “Priestly” (6th century BC). In the Priestly tradition (see Gen 1:26-28), the man and the woman are created simultaneously and not one from the other; male and female beings are linked to the image of God: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). The primary purpose for the union of the man and woman is seen as being fruitful and filling the earth.

In the Yahwist tradition, which is the most ancient (see Gen 2:18-25), the woman is taken out of the man. The creation of the two sexes is seen as a remedy for the loneliness of the man: “It is not good that the man should be alone: I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen 2:18). The unitive factor is emphasized here more than the procreative factor: “A man . . . clings to his wife and they become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). They are free and open about their own sexuality and that of the other: “The man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (Gen 2:25).

I found the most convincing explanation for this divine “invention” of the distinction between the sexes in a poet, Paul Claudel:

Man is so proud! There was no other way [except inventing the sexes] to get him to understand his neighbor, to pound it into him. There was no other way to get him to understand the dependence, the necessity, and the need of another besides himself except through the existence of this being [woman] who is different from him by the very fact of her separate existence.[2]

To open oneself to the opposite sex is the first step in opening oneself to the other who is a neighbor until we reach the Other, with a capital letter, God. Marriage begins with a mark of humility: it is the recognition of dependency and thus of one’s own condition as a creature. To fall in love with a woman or a man is to make the most radical act of humility. It is to make oneself a beggar and say to the other, “I am not enough in myself; I need you too.” If, as Friedrich Schleiermacher believed, the essence of religion consists in the sentiment of dependence on God (*Abhängigkeitsgefühl*),[3] then we can say that human sexuality is the first school of religion.

Up to this point I have described God’s plan. The rest of the Bible cannot, however, be understood if, along with the creation story, we do not take into account the fall, especially what is said to the woman: “I will

greatly multiply your pain in child-bearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen 3:16). The dominance of the man over the woman is part of the consequence of man’s sin, not part of God’s plan. With these words to Eve, God was announcing her predicament in advance, not endorsing it.

The Bible is a divine-human book not only because its authors are God and men but also because it describes the intertwining of the faithfulness of God with the unfaithfulness of human beings. This is clear especially when we compare God’s plan for marriage and family with its practical outworking in the history of the chosen people. Continuing in the book of Genesis, we see that the son of Cain, Lamech, violates the law of monogamy by taking two wives. Noah and his family appear to be an exception in the midst of the widespread corruption of his time. The patriarchs Abraham and Jacob have children by many wives. Moses sanctions the practice of divorce; David and Solomon maintain actual harems of women.

Beyond these examples of individual transgressions, the departure from the original ideal is visible in the basic concept that Israel had of marriage. Deviation from the ideal involves two pivotal points. The first is that marriage becomes a means and not an end. The Old Testament, on the whole, considers marriage a structure of patriarchal authority oriented primarily to the perpetuation of the clan. It is in this context that the institutions of levirate marriage (see Deut 25:5-10), of concubinage (see Gen 16), and of provisional polygamy can be understood. The ideal of a shared life between a man and a woman based on a personal and reciprocal relationship is not forgotten, but it moves into second place after the good of offspring. The second serious deviation from the ideal concerns the status of the woman: from being a companion for the man endowed with the same dignity, she appears increasingly more subordinate to the man and existing for his sake.

An important role in keeping God’s original plan for marriage alive is played by the prophets—in particular Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah—and by the Song of Songs. Adopting the union of man and woman as a symbol or reflection of the covenant between God and his people, they restore to first place the value of mutual love, faithfulness, and indissolubility that characterize God’s attitude toward Israel.

Jesus, come to “sum up” human history in himself, accomplishes this recapitulation in regard to marriage as well.

And the Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female [Gen 1:27] and said ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one’? So they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.” (Matt 19:3-6)

His adversaries were operating in the narrow sphere of hypothetical casuistry (asking if it were lawful to repudiate the wife for any reason or if there needed to be a specific and serious reason). Jesus answered them by going to the heart of the issue and returning to the beginning. In his citations, Jesus refers to both accounts of the institution of marriage, taking elements from each of them, but, as we see, he emphasizes above all the communion of persons.

What comes next in Matthew’s text, the issue of divorce, also follows along the same line: he reaffirms faithfulness and the indissolubility of the marriage bond even above the good of offspring, which people had used in the past to justify polygamy, levirate marriage, and divorce.

They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to put her away?” He said to them, “For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery; and he who marries a divorced woman, commits adultery” (Matt 19:7-9)

The parallel text in Mark shows that even in the case of divorce men and women, according to Jesus, are placed on a level of absolute equality: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery” (Mk 10:11-12).

With the words “What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder,” Jesus affirms that there is divine intervention by God in every matrimonial union. The elevation of marriage to the status of a “sacrament,” that is, a sign of God’s action, does not then need to be founded only on the weak argument of Jesus’ presence at the wedding at Cana and on the text in Ephesians that speaks of marriage as a reflection

of the union of Christ and the Church (see Eph 5:32). It begins explicitly with Jesus' teaching during his earthly ministry and is also part of his reference to how things were from the beginning. John Paul II was correct when he defined marriage as "the primordial sacrament."^[4]

2. What the biblical teaching says to us today

This, in brief, is the doctrine of the Bible, but we cannot stop there. "Scripture," said Gregory the Great, "grows with those who read it" (*cum legentibus crescit*).^[5] It reveals new implications little by little that come to light because of new questions. And today new questions, or challenges, about marriage and family abound.

We find ourselves facing a firestorm that is apparently global about the biblical plan for sexuality, marriage, and family. How are we to act in relation to this disturbing phenomenon? The Council initiated a new approach that involves dialogue rather than confrontation with the world and even includes self-criticism. I believe we need to apply this very approach to the discussion about marriage and family. Applying this method of dialogue means trying to see if, behind even the most radical challenges, there is something we can receive.

The criticism of the traditional model of marriage and family that has brought us to today's unacceptable proposals for their deconstruction began with the Enlightenment and Romanticism. For different reasons, these two movements expressed their opposition to the traditional view of marriage, understood exclusively in its objective "ends"—offspring, society, and the Church—and viewed too little in its subjective and interpersonal value. Everything was required of future spouses except that they love each other and freely choose each other. Even today, in many parts of the world there are spouses who meet and see each other for the first time on their wedding day. In contrast to that kind of model, the Enlightenment saw marriage as a pact between married people and Romanticism saw it as a communion of love between spouses.

But this criticism is in agreement with the original meaning of marriage in the Bible, not against it! The Second Vatican Council already accepted this perspective when, as I said, it recognized the mutual love and assistance between the spouses as an equally primary good of marriage. In line with *Gaudium et spes*, St. John Paul II said in one of his Wednesday teachings,

The human body, with its sex, and its masculinity and femininity . . . is not only a source of fruitfulness and procreation, as in the whole natural order. It includes right from the beginning the nuptial attribute, that is, the capacity of expressing love, that love in which the person becomes a gift and—by means of this gift—fulfills the meaning of his being and existence.^[6]

In his encyclical *Deus caritas est*, Pope Benedict XVI went even further, writing profound new things regarding eros in marriage and in the relationship between God and human beings. He wrote, "This close connection between eros and marriage in the Bible has practically no equivalent in extra-biblical literature."^[7] One of the most serious wrongs we do to God is to end up making everything that concerns love and sex be an area saturated with wickedness in which God should not enter and is unwanted. It is as if Satan, and not God, were the creator of the sexes and the specialist in love.

We believers, and many non-believers as well, are far from accepting the conclusions that some people draw from these premises today, for example, that any kind of eros is enough to constitute a marriage, including between people of the same sex. However, our rejection of this acquires greater strength and credibility if it is combined with a recognition of the fundamental goodness of sexuality together with a healthy self-criticism.

We cannot omit the mention of what Christians have contributed to forming the negative vision of marriage that modern western culture has rejected so vehemently. The authority of Augustine, reinforced on this point by Thomas Aquinas, ended up casting a negative light on the physical union of spouses, which was considered as the means through which original sin was transmitted and was not even free itself of "at least venial" sin. According to the Doctor of Hippo, spouses should make use of the sexual act for begetting children but should do so "with regret" (*cum dolore*) and only because there is no other way to provide citizens for the state and members for the Church.^[8]

Another modern position that we can also accept concerns the equal dignity of the woman in marriage. As we have seen, it is at the very heart of God's original plan and in the thinking of Christ, but it has often been disregarded over the centuries. God's word to Eve, "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule

over you,” has had a tragic fulfillment in history.

Among the representatives of the so-called “Gender Revolution,” their call for the equality of women has led to crazy proposals like abolishing the distinction between the sexes and replacing it with the more flexible and subjective distinction of “genders” (masculine, feminine, variable) or like freeing women from “the slavery of maternity” by arranging for newly invented ways to give birth to children. In recent months there has been a succession of news reports about men who will very soon be able to become pregnant and give birth to a child. “Adam gives birth to Eve,” they write with a smile, but this is something we should weep about. The ancients would have defined all this with the word *Hubris*, the arrogance of human beings before God.

Our choice of dialogue and self-criticism gives us the right to denounce these plans as “inhuman”: they are contrary not only to God’s will but also to the good of humanity. Putting them into practice on a large scale would lead to unforeseeable human and social catastrophes. Our only hope is that people’s common sense, combined with the natural “desire” for the other sex and the instinct for motherhood and fatherhood that God has inscribed in human nature, will resist these attempts to substitute ourselves for God. They are dictated more by a belated sense of guilt on the part of men than by genuine respect and love for woman herself.

3. An ideal to rediscover

Not less important than the duty of defending the biblical ideal of marriage and family is the duty for Christians to rediscover and live that ideal fully in such a way as to reintroduce it into the world by deeds more than by words. Early Christians changed the laws of the state about the family by their practices. We cannot consider doing the opposite and change people’s practices through the laws of the state, even though as citizens we have a duty to contribute to the state’s enactment of just laws.

Since Christ, we correctly read the account of the creation of the man and woman in light of the revelation of the Trinity. In this light the statement that “God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them” finally reveals a significance that was enigmatic and unclear before Christ. What connection can there be between being “in the image of God” and being “male and female”? The biblical God does not have sexual attributes; he is neither male nor female.

The similarity consists in this. God is love, and love requires communion and interpersonal communication. It requires an “I” and a “you.” There is no love that is not love for someone; if there is only one subject there cannot be love, just egotism and narcissism. Whenever God is conceived of only as Law or as Absolute Power, there is no need for a plurality of persons. (Power can be exercised by one person alone!) The God revealed by Jesus Christ, being love, is unique and one, but he is not solitary: he is one and triune. Unity and distinction coexist in him: unity of nature, will, and intentions, and distinction of characteristics and persons.

When two people love each other—and the strongest example is the love of a man and a woman in marriage—they reproduce something of what occurs in the Trinity. In the Trinity two persons, the Father and the Son, in loving each other produce (“breathe”) the Spirit who is the love that unites them. Someone has defined the Holy Spirit as the divine “We,” that is, not as “the third person of the Trinity” but as the first person plural.[9] It is precisely in this way that the human couple is the image of God. Husband and wife are in fact one flesh, one heart, one soul but are diverse in sex and personality. Unity and diversity are thus reconciled in the couple.

In this light we discover the profound meaning of the prophets’ message about human marriage: it is a symbol and a reflection of another love, that of God for his people. This symbolism was not meant to overload a purely earthly reality with a mystical significance. On the other hand, it is not merely symbolic but instead reveals the true face and ultimate purpose of the creation of man as male and female.

What is the reason for the sense of incompleteness and lack of fulfillment that sexual union leaves both inside and outside of marriage? Why does this impulse always fall back on itself, and why does this promise of the infinite and eternal always fall short? People try to find a remedy for this frustration, but they only increase it. Instead of changing the quality of the act, they increase its quantity, going from one partner to the next. This leads to the ruin of God’s gift of sexuality currently taking place in today’s society and culture.

Do we as Christians want to find an explanation for this devastating dysfunction once and for all? The explanation is that the sexual union is not occurring in the way and with the purpose intended by God. Its purpose was that, through this ecstasy and joining together in love, the man and the woman would be raised to desire and to obtain a certain foretaste of infinite love; they would be reminded of where they came from and where they are headed.

Sin, beginning with that of the biblical Adam and Eve, has damaged this plan. It has “profaned” the sexual act, that is, it has stripped it of its religious value. Sin has made it an act that is an end in itself, that is closed in on itself, so it is therefore “unsatisfying.” The symbol has been disconnected from the reality behind the symbol and deprived it of its intrinsic dynamism, thus crippling it. Never so much as in this case do we experience the truth of Augustine’s saying: “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”[10] We were not created to live in an eternal relationship as a couple but to live in an eternal relationship with God, with the Absolute. Even Goethe’s Faust finally discovers this at the end of his long period of wandering. Thinking back to his love for Margaret, he exclaims at the end of the poetic drama, “All that is transitory / is only a symbol; / what seems unachievable / here is seen done [in heaven].”[11]

In the testimony of some couples who have experienced renewal in the Holy Spirit and live a charismatic Christian life, we find something of the original significance of the conjugal act. That can hardly be a surprise to us. Marriage is the sacrament of a reciprocal gift that spouses make to one another, and the Holy Spirit is the “gift” within the Trinity, or better, the reciprocal “self-gifting” of the Father and Son, not as a fleeting act but as a permanent state. Wherever the Holy Spirit comes, the capacity to make a gift of oneself is born or rekindled. This is how the “grace of the married state” operates.

4. Married and consecrated people in the Church

Even though we consecrated religious do not live in the married state, I said at the beginning that we need to understand marriage to help those who do live in that state. I will now add now a further reason: we need to understand marriage to be helped by it ourselves! Speaking of marriage and virginity the apostle says, “Each has his own spiritual gift [charisma] from God, one of one kind and one of another” (1 Cor 7:7). Married people have their charism and those who are “single for the Lord” have their charism.

Each charism, the same apostle says, is “a particular manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (see 1 Cor 12:7). Applied to the relationship between married and consecrated people in the Church, this means that the charism of celibacy and virginity is for the advantage also of married people and that the charism of marriage is also for the advantage of consecrated people. That is the intrinsic nature of a charism that is seemingly contradictory: something that is individual (“a particular manifestation of the Spirit”) is nevertheless meant for all (“for the common good”).

In the Christian community, consecrated people and married people are able to “edify one another.” Spouses are reminded by consecrated people of the primacy of God and of what is eternal; they are introduced to love for the word of God by those who can better deepen and “break it open” for lay people. But consecrated people can also learn something from married people as well. They can learn generosity, self-forgetfulness, service to life, and often a certain “humaneness” that comes from their difficult engagement with the realities of life.

I am speaking from experience here. I belong to a religious order in which, until a few decades ago, we would get up at night to recite the office of Matins that would last about an hour. Then there came a great turning point in religious life after the Council. It seemed that the rhythm of modern life—studies for the younger monks and apostolic ministry for the priests—no longer allowed for this nightly rising that interrupted sleep, and little by little the practice was abandoned except in a few houses of formation.

When later the Lord had me come to know various young families well through my ministry, I discovered something that startled me but in a good way. These fathers and mothers had to get up not once but two or three times a night to feed a baby, or give it medicine, or rock it if it was crying, or check it for a fever. And in the morning one or both of the parents had to rush off to work at the same time after taking the baby girl or boy to the grandparents or to day-care. There was a time card to punch whether the weather was good or bad and whether their health was good or bad.

Then I said to myself, if we do not take remedial action we are in grave danger. Our religious way of life, if

it is not supported by a genuine observance of the Rule and a certain rigor in our schedule and habits, is in danger of becoming a comfortable life and of leading to hardness of heart. What good parents are capable of doing for their biological children—the level of self-forgetfulness that they are capable of to provide for their children’s well-being, their studies, their happiness—must be the standard of what we should do for our children or spiritual brothers. The example we have for this is set by the apostle Paul himself who said, “I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls” (2 Cor 12:15).

May the Holy Spirit, the giver of charisms, help all of us, consecrated and married, to put into practice the exhortation of the apostle Peter: “As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace . . . in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen!” (1 Pet 4:10-11).

[1] *Gaudium et spes*, n.1. Quotations from Church and papal documents are from the Vatican website.

[2] Paul Claudel, *The Satin Slipper*, Act 3, sc. 8; see *Le soulier de satin: Édition critique*, ed. Antoinette Weber-Cafilisch (Besançon: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Compté, 1987), p. 227.

[3] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, vol. 1, trans. H. R. MacKintosh and James S. Stewart (New York: T & T Clark, 1999), p. 12ff.

[4] See John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael M. Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), pp. 503-507.

[5] See Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, 20, 1, 1, in *Gregory the Great*, trans. John Moorhead (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 49.

[6] John Paul II, “The Human Person Becomes a Gift in the Freedom of Love,” General Audience, January 16, 1980.

[7] Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, n. 11.

[8] Augustine, “Sermon 51,” 25, in *Sermons (51-94) on the New Testament*, Part 3, vol. 1, trans. Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. John E. Rotelle (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), p. 36.

[9] Heribert Mühlen, *Der Heilige Geist als Person: Ich-Du-Wir [The Holy Spirit as Person: I-You-We]* (Munich: Aschendorf, 1963).

[10] Augustine, *Confessions*, 1, 1, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1960), p. 43.

[11] Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust*, part 2, Act 5, in *Goethe: The Collected Works*, trans. Stuart Atkins (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 305.