

**Open Lecture**  
**Malta**  
*Saturday, 17 October 2009*  
**“Do Marriage and Family have a Future?”**

Your Eminence,  
Dear Dean,  
Dear Professors,  
Dear Participants,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

A very good morning to you. On my last morning of five beautiful days on this highly interesting island, with its rich history, culture and very hospitable people, I have the honor to exchange with you some ideas at your monthly event ....

My theme this morning will be **Do Marriage and Family have a Future?**

This straightforward title hides a deeper meaning ! Indeed, if one wants to talk about the future, should one not first look back into the past? Indeed, some weeks ago I came across an interesting quote by the famous German writer Reinhold Schneider, which I thought worthy of note. Unfortunately I could not retrieve its exact source, but it says: “History is nothing else than the continuously changing relationship between humankind (one could also say between marriage and family) and God”.

My conference this morning is divided in 3 parts:

**I The Status Quaestionis of Marriage Today.** *I have divided this section in 5 examples and this list could be much longer: I A different kind of living together, II. Why is marriage an item at all, III. Complex society, IV. A case study; V How the extraordinary development marriage has gone through over centuries until today.*

**II The Family, the cornerstone of society.** I will focus on 2 points: on the one hand the everlasting value of marriage and the family, and on the other hand the meaning of the family as the smallest nucleus and the cornerstone of society?

**III Growing into a good communication.** Why is communication between spouses and between parents and children of outmost importanceLet me tell you a little story. There once was a man, (it could have been also a women), who jumped from an airplane with a 2 parachute. The person in question landed in a grassy meadow, right on a top of a tree. There he/she was, not very comfortable, sitting quietly for a while, looking at the scenery, staring down at the tree, studying the sudden circumstances, examining the situation, watching from his tree all the other creatures above and below. Finally, at dusk, someone came along, and seeing this person on this bizarre tree with all the bits and pieces of the parachute, asked: “Hello, what on earth are you doing there?” The parachutist replied: “Looking at you”. Astonished of this reaction the other replied immediately: “With such an answer you must be a theologian!”

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, normally theologians are trained, through their courses in theology but also in philosophy, to question situations in order to find their deeper meaning, and to lead us on our path of thankfulness and gratitude to be called co-creator of God. Sometimes it also happens that theologians tend to give answers to problems other people do not even question. And then there are those who simply prefer to avoid any problems, for whatever reason, like an ostrich who hides its head in the sand. But the core business of being a theologian is to listen first and to ask questions, before proposing a solution, even if it is not always very convenient.

## I The Status Quaestionis of Marriage Today

*I have divided this section in 5 examples and this list could be much longer: I A different kind of living together, II. Why is marriage a subject at all, III. Complex society, IV. A case study; V How the extraordinary development marriage has gone through over centuries until today.*

- Let me share with you some points concerning the **status quaestionis** of marriage: how do I understand this concept? What have others to say about this particular subject? There are also people who indeed question the meaning of marriage, who welcome new alternative lifestyles and eagerly dismiss traditional practices.
- For example, there is an increasing number of unmarried couples, just living together, without a desire for children;
- There are also marriages between a man and a women who first want to live together for a number of years before thinking of children;
- Or couples who prefer to live together and bring children into the world, while getting married upon the baptism of their first child;
- But in the whole there are more marriages between a man and a women who want to stay together for life with their spouse and prefer to found a family right from the start of their marriage;
- There are couples who are in favor of marriage as a matter of principle, but their lived reality shows a broken unity;
- Finally there are same sex unions of couples who desire to live in a kind of unity, and who like to call this a “marriage”, although I am not convinced this is the right word for it.

This list of different ways of living together at first hand gives the impression that marriage is not highly prized in the minds of many. Indeed, the search for reasons to marry is difficult, because the problems are complex.

But fortunately the majority of people embark upon marriage with the idea of living together forever, for better and for worse, with, or (sometimes unwillingly) without children.

I. Why is marriage nowadays such a hot issue, in political and social areas, and why do more and more people --married or not-- question the meaning or the sense of marriage, why does it raise so many doubts? Indeed, since the 1960's the number of divorces is soaring in many countries, and “reconstituted” or “patchwork” families are no longer an exception. Because of this, many countries now have a special Minister for family issues. The Netherlands, for example, have had a Ministry for Youth and Families since 2007; Germany and Great Britain introduced this already 10 years ago.

II. The opposite goes for the Churches. Of all churches, the Catholic Church has the longest tradition (see the councils, Synods and pastoral care) and for centuries has built up a great tradition, thorough competences and disposes of a huge documentation.

III. Today married couples live in a very complex society. Let me give you 4 examples:

- We all live in a post industrial society
- We are confronted with a new socio-economic environment

- Very often, marriage is not considered a stabilizing force anymore, nor for the children, nor for society (and I am sorry to say that mass media often have a baleful influence on this).

- We live in a society of increasing individualism and materialism, which also manifests itself in the marriages that undergo a process of growth and change

The challenge is tremendous and the discussion is a passionate one for everyone who is involved in marriage and family issues today, be it professionally, politically or socially. On the one hand divorces are increasing, but on the other hand we learn from a recent study on European Values that still today 98% of the young couples express their desire to live lifelong with the same partner.

IV. Interesting to learn, however, in a time when the number of non-married lifestyles is increasing and the number of marriages decreasing (and this development seems to be worldwide), that there is an American team of marriage and family scholars, who weigh in with their newest research, claiming that marriage has nothing to fear from today's different lifestyles. In *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher claim that married people in general live longer than single and divorced people or those simply living together. They also have more chances to enjoy better health, earn more money, and have a higher standard of living. Married people, because of being with two, profit from and see themselves as more successful and fulfilled. Children of non-divorced parents are generally better cared for and more successful. A study on youth and family by the company Shell in Germany in 2006 shows the same conclusions.

Of course this list of the benefits of marriage is impressive, but can these values really convince a couple to decide for or against marriage? Indeed, who would *not* want to have a comfortable, happy and secure life with a spouse and who would *not* wish to create the best situation for potential children?

V. To finish my Status Quaestionis of marriage today, I would like to call your attention to the extraordinary development marriage has gone through over centuries until today. I would like to do this by means of examples of real couples in history.

Indeed, through the ages, marriage has transformed from a rational unity into a lovable harmony. We see that in the past, matrimony was mainly "a way of forming alliances with other kin groups, acquiring influential in-laws, consolidating land or capital, expanding the family etc. Love and matrimonial harmony were *not* considered always a necessary precondition for marriage, and marrying for love was thought to be unwise and socially irresponsible". I cite here from the interesting books on marriage history by American author Stephanie Coontz. There were always some exceptions to prove the rule, of course, such as the love relationships between the Emperor Maximilian I and Mary of Burgundy 15thC, between the Archduchess Margaret of Austria and Philibert, Duke of Savoy 16thC, and finally between, Queen Victoria of England and Prins Albert (19thC).

There are examples of other important couples whom the Church especially wishes to remember because of their loving relationship. I'd like to mention only two out of many. First there is the saintly couple : Heinrich and Kunigunde from Bamberg, whom the Church beatified together for the first time *as a couple* in the 13th century. Indeed, in the past the Church sometimes overlooked the fact that several of the Saints were married, and "forgot" to beatify both instead of both of them together. For example the famous Swiss Saint Nicolas von der Flühe, better know Brother Klaus in 1417. And what about his beloved wife Dorothea, who did everything to bring up their 10 children in order for her Nicolas to follow his duty for the sake of the country. In 1965 during the Second Vatican council something important happened. It was

nearly a Copernican turnabout. Indeed, the Church stated in the document of GS 47-48 that marriage is in the first place a union of love and only secondly a union of procreation. This of course had a tremendous impact.

So what about the present reality of our third millennium ? We observe quite often that today marriage is about romantic love; it is a personal relationship between individual partners, not an alliance between kin groups. The film industry thrives on that; shops and the internet with all their dresses for the bride and bridegroom give us plenty of choice. Sometimes even the choice for a church wedding with its bells, organs, candles etc. is more prompted by the couple's desire to "mark the day" than by what it means to receive the sacrament of marriage. One may ask the question whether romantic love "does not provide cover for selfish, anti-social decisions in both the personal and the social spheres of life" (Stephanie Coontz), because it is hardly the strongest and most enduring basis upon which to found a life-long commitment and realizing the couple's aspiration.

Even so, today's longing for strong, successful, and lasting relationships manifests the true and sound confidence that close relationships such as marriage are not, and should not be, subject to a cost-benefit-analysis. A marriage is not a temporary lifestyle that can be chosen from among others for the sake of better prospects. If the past centuries give us testimony of discrepancy between a rational unity and a lovable harmony, then today's history is tempted to show us the difference between the selfish calculating benefits of "temporary marriages" and the sacred, definitive and lasting meaning of a marital bond, or better a marital covenant. For this we should be obliged to the Second Vatican Council and to those theologians who have drawn from it and developed it further!

*Please allow me a short digress. In this context I would like to bring to your attention the International Academy of Marital Spirituality (INTAMS). I recommend to you the INTAMS website that gives you detailed information on our activities, as well as the INTAMS Journal for the Study of Marriage & Spirituality. For more than 20 years we have been bringing together theologians, sociologists, psychologists, etc. to explore marriage. We try to show that stable marital partnerships are beneficial for children, families, and therefore for society and consequently worthy of support.*

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**II** Now I would like to move to the second part of my survey in which I intend to explore the meaning of the **Family, as the cornerstone of society**.

I will focus on 2 points: on the one hand the everlasting value of marriage and the family, and on the other hand the importance of the family as the cornerstone of society .

### **1. The everlasting value of marriage and family**

On the whole human beings strive generally for a high quality of life. With quality I do not mean only money, housing, lifestyle, free time or in a broader sense material matters but rather non material values such as: truth, goodness, and beauty as well as freedom, justice, love, trust, and mercy. If we take these values as our deeper focus of life, then we discover quickly that the matrimony is the preferential place where couples can practice to be the custodians of values that ensure a real, everlasting quality of life and spirit (although these should always be in balance, of course, with the material matters as well !).

These values lie at the foundation of any civilization and shape human dignity. They are timeless because they apply to all people, in all places, and at all times. Hence the family is a school of human learning and development through these values. The child can find in its family acceptance, reciprocal forgiveness, the cultivation of individual talents, respectful and faithful friendships. Here a person is also introduced to, gets acquainted with, and can truly grow in

faith. Consequently a family is a unique place in which civilization is developed and handed on by the parents. Here the child learns the important dimensions of culture from them and so the culture is entrusted to the next generation.

Unfortunately, the young generation is faced with increasingly high economical, professional and social requirements, in which the role of marriage and the family as a cornerstone of society gets in a rather tight corner ! Perhaps not yet here on this beautiful island, but I can assure you that in our industrialized Europe we have to be very careful not to lose from sight the values I mentioned above, and thus the importance of the presence of both the father *and* the mother in the family.

Fortunately, more and more businesses are recognizing the value of their employees having a healthy marriages with happy families in their business rather than unhappy ones. Some companies are even investing in marital counselling for employees. Indeed, being successful in marriage means being successful in the marketplace, while divorce is costly not only to the couple but to our society as a whole.

We should be more concerned about this, we should rediscover the value of community life and through our marriages we should try to help each other to build a strong community. For this reason, I learned to appreciate the Cana Movement, because they give much attention to community building.

## ***2. Family as the smallest community and hence the cornerstone of society.***

The family is actually the smallest nucleus in which we can practice this communal life. Spouses have the task of working within civil society to clarify what is true and what is false, to distinguish what is truly valuable from what is worthless, to delineate the exercise of power from the exercise of service, and to separate good from evil. The world of schools and politics, the world of economics and science and those entrusted with responsibility for the civil order have no monopoly on civilization. Married fathers and mothers, who attentively exercise their professional skills and talents in schools, in politics, in economics and science, as well as in community with other people, are the custodians of the authentic and timeless values and family culture in which the art of living is taught, practised, and passed on.

Let me be clear, our culture still continues to mishandle and sexually abuse its children, to denigrate people and their bodies through pornography, to demean women, and to destroy new human life at its very beginning by blinding itself to the dignity of the embryo made in the image and likeness of God. Our civilization continues in the direction of duplicating humans by cloning and of destroying classic marital and family life through legal restructuring and change and through economic policies that place greater and greater strain on family life. Such a scenario will only change once married people, in positions of authority and responsibility, engage their colleagues in becoming alert and committed to living and respecting those aspects of their cultural heritage that are deeply rooted in unchanging values. Pope John Paul II, in *Fides et ratio*, 6 wrote: "Those whose vocation it is to give cultural expression to their thinking no longer look to truth, preferring quick success instead of patient enquiry into what makes life worth living".

## **III Growing into a good communication**

Within this smallest nucleus, this cornerstone of society that is the family, communication between spouses and between parents and children is of outmost importance!

*(Incidentally, I was pleased to notice at the inauguration of the new MA in Family Ministry at this Faculty of Theology last Thursday evening, that there is a real communication between the different disciplines. This interaction between philosophy, sociology, psychology and theology that allows the different disciplines to listen and to understand each other in order to prepare*

*young students for their future work in assisting families or for their own married life, is a very important exercise! In our professional lives we constantly seek possibilities for interaction, for contact, for an exchange of ideas. But it is important on every level that we learn to listen to each other and try to understand the other.*

*Is this different in marriage?*

Let me end my speech by referring to a poem by Herman Hesse called "Stufe um Stufe" (Step by step). I would like to take this as a constructive example of what it means to have a good communication between the spouses, and how one can grow into it.

We all know that listening to someone or something is an art in itself. Moreover, listening operates differently depending on whether we listen to a CD, the radio or television, with their rapid-fire sequence of disconnected words and responses. Unfortunately, many people from all classes of society today regard the media as a model and pattern for shocking communication. Communication in marriage, however, operates in developmental stages. It is an art to find the right measure of communication between spouses, the right level of honesty and truth, to learn what we need and to share what we know between man and wife. This demands a lot of patience and perseverance from the spouses.

In his poem "Stufe" Herman Hesse describes in a wonderful way how each stage of life has its own moment of flowering. Aging means growing from childhood to adulthood, from middle age to old age. In each stage, we need to focus on succeeding at the critical tasks, challenges, and opportunities while avoiding the pitfalls so we can take leave of one stage before smoothly transiting into the next stage.

*(By the way, the theme of marriage and aging has become a favourite theme of mine over the years, but let's leave this for another lecture and move on!).*

Not only do the stages in our lives move on and change, but so do the wisdom and the virtues we acquire while aging. They must constantly be renewed in each new phase of life. Thus each new beginning has its own special charm. Our heart must remain willing to move forward cheerfully from stage to stage, and not wear itself out through paralysing habits. We must not allow our views to be narrowed down, but we must strive to rise nobly stage by stage and grow broader in outlook. That will protect us and help us *to live*. This is the constant challenge in every marriage. One can say that this is exactly the art of living the marriage.

Likewise it is this with the conversation between husband and wife. Marital communication should be a process in which husband and wife constantly learn to understand each other afresh, at whatever stage in life they are. I believe that generally men experience more difficulty in reaching a deeper level of communication than women (therefore a good communication between parents sets the example for their offspring). Communication means allowing the other to enter your personal space, to be ready to accept the other's word. This is the first and foremost prevention for every misunderstanding in marriage which can so easily cumulate into a process towards a divorce. If the communication between marriage partners has this goal of giving meaning to each other's words, and thus each other's life, then they enrich one another, and with each stage of life each partner becomes more *the other*. Little by little and at the deepest level husband and wife draw closer to each and hold each other tighter. Communication in marriage and in the family also has to do with remembering, which helps each partner to understand one another better. It makes people thankful and fosters love. As G.K. Chesterton once said: "the test of happiness is gratitude".

If truth and transparency are a daily practice in marital communication, then a deeper form of communication still is the dialogue with God. Once we have experienced this form of life, commonly called "prayer", because we know that He loves us, new perspectives open for us to enter into conversation afresh with our partner, our children, with neighbours and strangers.

Once we understand this, then our own marital and family life becomes a request, a prayer to grow from an “I” to a “We”-relatedness. This strengthens us and gives us companionship on our spiritual journey from birth till death, from the beginning until the end.

## Conclusion

I like to conclude my lecture with a story from Henri Nouwen's *Clowning in Rome* (New York: Doubleday, 1979). The story tells of a little boy who was watching a sculptor hard at work with his hammer and chisel on a large block of marble. He grew tired of the slow work and left the shop. After a while the boy returned to find to his great surprise a large, powerful lion in the place where the marble block had stood. With excitement, he ran to the sculptor, saying, “Sir, tell me, how did you know that there was a lion in that marble?”

The story illustrates two aspects: the meaning of beauty and loveliness and the meaning of the true values and how marriage and society interplay with each other.

The task of the spouses is to take up the art of the sculptor and apply it to daily life. Between all the challenges marriage has to cope with in the day to day ordinary patterns, that they have to care for and to develop in each other the beauty of life lying hidden. Through their own vocation to the married state, to become a better women/mother and a better man/father by slowly taking away all that what does not belong, they allow this work of art to emerge. To be able to identify and actively draw out the lion in the marble is the skill required of couples who must draw out of daily existence the values of a shared human life today, in the twenty-first century. The large, powerful lion emerges and continually reminds couples of the noble ideal and enthusiasm with which they embraced this art, keeping the excitement from fading away after 25/30 years of marriage. They uncover an art of living, discovering values that allow the extraordinary dimensions of human life to break through the ordinary.

Justice, freedom, equality, peace, truth, goodness, etc. are values that have been passed down from generation to generation. They are learned foremost in the family: to recognize the goodness; to recognize what is good in life; they hone the ability to evaluate the claims of public opinion, politicians, and the media; they learn that a quantity of things is not equal to a quality life and that “the best” is not equal to “the most”. The home of a true father and a enchanting mother is the training ground for society. This suggests that it is important to cultivate and promote the school of values that is the family, and marriage, which is the foundation of the family.

The members of the governments must therefore continually be concerned with supporting marriage. In the first place because they are married themselves. What I am saying is not new, but must be continually revived. The child's question, “Sir, tell me, how did you know that there was a lion in the marble?” becomes our question for the civil society, for politicians and for movements, and the answer of the whole community will become imbedded in the fabric of society and will be encouraged to show how marriage family life draws this lion out.

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La Valetta, September 2009*