

## **UNDERLYING DYNAMICS OF MARRIAGE**

### **Reflections by Bishop Mario Grech**

When diagnosing a patient, one needs to take into account the symptoms of the illness, as well as the cause! It would be a useless exercise to simply cure the wounds of the diabetic patient, while failing to address the illness!

This is analogous to our effort to strengthen marriage and the family. It is essential to shed light on the dangers of newly-emerging forms of the family, on the horror of family breakdown, divorce, co-habitation, sexual permissiveness, etc. Rather than addressing these symptoms we should focus on the cause of the disease. These marital and family problems have a wider and more profound existential origin. Society needs to take urgent action in order to identify the stem which is constantly producing deceiving shoots.

Such constructive reflection is necessary so as to strengthen the motivations behind the choices man needs to make, even in the area of family life more so when such choices are against the mainstream of today's society! Frequently, it is not enough for a doctor to prescribe medicine or an alternative lifestyle, because unless that patient is convinced that that these are vital to his well being, life goes on as before!

Whereas Samuel Huntington states, that, the cause of conflict in the world today is the clash of civilizations, James Hurth specifies that the real tension lies not so much between the great civilizations of the world (the West, the Islamic world, and Confucianism in the East), but rather in the friction and conflicts

which are rife in the Western world – between those who embrace a Jewish-Christian vision of life and those who have strayed from this vision in order to assimilate several schools of thought, such as feminism, multi-culturalism, liberalism – all these diversities go by the name of what we refer to as “secular orthodoxy” or “secularism”.

One may conclude that this tension is also between reason and faith! But Christian moral vision, as enlightened by the Word of God and the Tradition of the Church to help men arrive at the truth, is not opposed to reason. Robert P George, a professor of jurisprudence, who formed part of the team which published the Declaration of Manhattan (Nov. 2009), reiterates that “*Christian moral teaching can be shown to be rationally superior to orthodox secular moral beliefs*”.

Those of secularist belief hold that it is not through reason that man discovers the good. He uses reason to procure the means to achieve the objects of his desire! – the objects of his passions! This is confirmed by David Hume, philosopher and father of modern secularism, who states that “*Reason is and ought only to be slave of the passions, and may never pretend to any office other than to serve and to obey them*”. According to the secularists, the function of reason is purely instrumental: reason does not dictate to us what it is that we should do, rather we use it only as a means of achieving that which our heart desires!

According to the secularists, marriage is merely a legal contract to safe-guard the emotional well being of the parties, be they of the same gender or of different sexual orientation! Permanence, exclusivity, openness to life do not belong to this type of marriage where everything is negotiable. Everything depends upon the will and consent of the parties involved in this experience. Some secularists are even ready to admit control over

sexual activity outside marriage. The motive is not any high moral principle but only prudent reasoning: promiscuity spreads disease!

In the light of this premise, it is not very difficult to determine the major cause of the present situation of marriage and the family in our country. This secularist philosophy with a utilitarian moral code has kindled the cry for the right of abortion, the right to divorce, the right to marriage between two persons of the same sex, the right of a person to live his or her life without any interference, least of all from the State!

A secularist culture is a culture which in effect promotes moral subjectivism and relativism. Unless we are careful, even talk about the primacy of the conscience, can at times lean towards pure subjectivism. Pope Benedict XVI, is not alone in his frequent exhortations against the dangers of moral relativism whose hold he compares to a dictatorship. Other exponents of secularism, admit that ultimately relativism is not consistent with many of its own moral claims, such as the right to abortion, the right to sexual autonomy, the right to die.

One can give the example of the claim that divorce laws are a fundamental human right. By deduction therefore those who are in favour of a permanent relationship have the same fundamental human right to a law which safe-guards the indissolubility of marriage! A well-known liberal philosopher, Joel Freinburg, warns that "*Liberals must be aware of relativism, or at least, of a sweeping relativism, lest they be hoist on their own petard*". Therefore, the relativistic position, which has dismissed strong moral principles, is faced with a grave philosophical problem. As Alasdair MacIntyre observes, moral schools of thought enter a crisis when they are unable to answer questions they themselves have raised! True secularists are in a crisis, as is their entire philosophy! This philosophy with its many expectations have led and is leading our society into a crisis!

In his book *After Virtue*, MacIntyre, highlights the failure of the Enlightenment and Liberalism project to build a moral system based on “secular reason”. He then goes on to compare the modern European and American civilization with the “dark ages” of the Roman Empire era. He writes that during this epoch, there were persons who “*turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman imperium and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that imperium. What they set themselves to achieve instead .... was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness*”.

MacIntyre further states that “*for some time now we, too, have reached that turning point. What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope*”.

We are used to identify the Barbarians as those who burned down cities, villages and homes! Today barbarianism is an overpowering trend of thought which is bringing down institutions and huge political structures. Its force is disrupting people’s lives and families! MacIntyre observes that nowadays, “*the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament*”.

Therefore, if we are to seriously address this wave of marriage and family breakdown, we urgently need to promote the “ministry of thought” to help people use their brains. This does not exclude action that addresses particular family issues. It is positive to note that we have among us several intellectuals who because

they believe that Christian philosophy is a valid key to give the right interpretation to reality, have contributed and are still contributing in the formulation of sound principles. We need, even as a Church, to allow them more space, so that their sound ideas can deeply permeate contemporary thought.

Secondly it is important that we enter into a dialogue with opinion makers and decision makers; with intellectuals, with people in the areas of education, culture, politics and the media. In a sincere spirit of search we can face the fallacy of certain beliefs. Together we can draw a plan of action to protect the natural institution of marriage based on strong ethical principles and values.

Pope Benedict XVI encouraged such a dialogue, in the interview he gave to journalists during the flight from Rome to Portugal: *“In these centuries of a dialectic between enlightenment, secularism and faith, there were always individuals who sought to build bridges and create a dialogue, but unfortunately the prevailing tendency was one of opposition and mutual exclusion. Today we see that this very dialectic represents an opportunity and that we need to develop a synthesis and a forward-looking and profound dialogue. In the multicultural situation in which we all find ourselves, we see that if European culture were merely rationalist, it would lack a transcendent religious dimension, and not be able to enter into dialogue with the great cultures of humanity all of which have this transcendent religious dimension – which is a dimension of man himself. So to think that there exists a pure, anti-historical reason, solely self-existent, which is “reason” itself, is a mistake; we are finding more and more that it affects only part of man, it expresses a certain historical situation but it is not reason as such. Reason as such is open to transcendence and only in the encounter between transcendent reality and faith and reason does man find himself. So I think that the precise task and mission of Europe in this situation is to create this dialogue, to*

*integrate faith and modern rationality in a single anthropological vision which approaches the human being as a whole and thus also makes human cultures communicable”.*

Every vision, choice or action about marriage and the family has at its source a thought or a belief. Since thought is incarnated within a particular cultural context, I feel it would be wise for all those who wish to safe-guard marriage and the family to seriously address the “educational emergency”.

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