“The Vocation of Marriage”

By Msgr. Cormac Burke

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Marriage is a vocation; it is the vocation to which the vast majority of people are called. It has two clear purposes or, as the Catechism says, a "twofold end...: the good of the spouses themselves and the transmission of life" (n. 2363). It is a call both to faithful love and to fruitful love.

1. The first purpose is that spouses grow together in goodness, and in that openness to goodness which prepares them for heaven. This means specifically that they are meant to grow in loving God (the first commandment) by means of growing in love for each other throughout their lifetime.

2. The second purpose is that they carry on God's loving work of creation. In other words that, as co-creators with God, they bring children into the world and rear them in the setting of family love, so as to prepare them for a life that can lead to Heaven.

These essentially linked purposes are clearly indicated in the scriptural accounts of the creation of the sexes and of the institution of marriage.

The First Purpose of Marriage

The first purpose of marriage is established in Genesis 2:18: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him". The "good" that God seeks for husband and wife is that their marriage takes each one out of self-centredness, teaches them to love (for love must be learnt) and so leads them to holiness [1].

Marriage is presented in the Bible as a covenant that shares in the very love of God: "The covenant between the spouses is integrated into God's covenant with man" (CCC 1639). A covenant is a specially firm expression of faithful love.

Just as God’s covenant of love with his people is unbreakable, so too God has designed the covenanted love of man and woman in marriage to be indissoluble (cf. Compendium, 340). So he declared in Matthew 19:5-6: "A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder".

It is easy - it should be easy - to understand his reasons. In the first place, so that the spouses learn to love. Marriage is not a haven of love, but a school of love. Indissolubility keeps the spouses at the life-business of learning to love each other - "with their defects", as St. Josemaria constantly put it. Enduring commitment to what is worthwhile, loyalty to others, generosity in self-forgetfulness, service
to some real ideal: there lies the witness the world needs from Christians today and especially from spouses. Lack of generosity, fear of commitment, lack of faithfulness are the scourges of modern society. Each putting self first, and not ready to be bound by any real ties of commitment to others, however noble. Come out of myself? Commit myself in a definitive fashion? No way! And so each one remains stuck in self, centered on self, imprisoned in self. Such an attitude, if it becomes definitive, is Hell.

To come out of self-love is not easy, and yet it is essential. If I retreat from the generous dedication demanded by a permanent and worthwhile commitment, I am falling back into that false self-love which always wants to put self - one's comfort or preference or sterile independence - at the centre of one's concerns. That is the lot not only of those who divorce but also, even if to a lesser extent, of those spouses who remain together but have given up on the effort to love.

The Second Purpose
The other end of marriage is no less evidently established in Genesis 1:27-28: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply..."

It was for this purpose also that God created man and woman: to multiply his image in the children born of their marital union. This means that he gave them a mission, an extraordinary and privileged mission, to carry on the work of creation. To be co-creators with Him; for while husband and wife together give rise to the body, each soul has to be created and infused by God.

To be amazed at this human power to procreate is not only supernatural, it is natural. What greater thing can someone do than to create life? We see scientists today, with quasi-divine pretensions, endeavoring to do this artificially. But spouses can already do it in a natural way.

And yet how little this sharing in the divine plan and power is appreciated today. Here there has been a submerging or silencing of some fundamental truths that need urgently to be recalled and reproclaimed. On the one hand, motherhood, along with virginity, is what has most inspired men with respect for women. On the other, women in general have always seen motherhood, despite what it demands of them, as the most fulfilling element of their lives. In the measure in which, over a few decades of radical and ever-more frustrated feminism, many women have lost the sense of the greatness and privilege of motherhood, they have lost the respect of men.

Disadvantaged Children
What a pity and impoverishment if parents forget this truly God-given mission and privilege: to endeavor that their children grow in an atmosphere of dedicated and generous love. The lack of experience of this in childhood is surely a significant contributory factor to selfishness and sadness in adulthood.

So many of today's children are disadvantaged, in the lack not so much of material things as of the experience of a family life that could turn them into mature, generous and responsible young persons.
Instead of that, what do we see? More and more young people who are turned in on themselves, mean or vain, prone to greed or jealousy, lacking self-control, inconstant. It is particularly in well-off families that one finds such underdeveloped children. The fault in large part lies with the parents; and that in two ways.

On the one hand is the fact that the parents are physically absent from the home for so much of the time. Parents can be so absorbed in being a success as professionals that they become a dismal failure as parents; or devote so much time to earning money, perhaps precisely so that their children can go to good schools, that they have no concern or energy left to create that type of family life which forms children more than any school, however good.

But there is also the absence of other brothers and sisters, not only sufficient in number (three or four or five) but also close enough in age (with a gap of no more than a couple of years down the line), so that they can grow up in the rough and tumble that should be an essential component of family life. Yes (the point needs to be emphasized), some brawling and fighting between the children may be bothersome for the parents (do they marry so as never to be bothered?), but it is an integral part of family education. How otherwise can children learn that it is selfishness to want always to have one's own way, meanness never to wish to share, and fatal to bear grudges (because God will not forgive those who do not learn to forgive). And how otherwise can parents fulfill that indispensable part of their role which, through their presence on the family playing field itself, is to be referees or arbiters of those natural sibling squabbles, gradually preparing their children to grow up into open, fair-minded and responsible members of adult society?

The Family Project
Marriage is approached more and more selfishly today. Far too many people look on it as simply a way that should be satisfying to me and, on balance, should make me happy, because it will bring me more satisfactions than burdens.

This whole approach is deeply flawed. It is not that people expect too much of marriage; they expect the wrong thing. Such an approach is too small, too self-centered. It looks on marriage for the companionship or security or ease or pleasure it seems to promise, not for the mission it entails. It reduces marriage to the comfortable and shared calculations of two people, when it is meant to be an open-ended adventure involving three to begin with: husband and wife and God...; and all that this can lead to.

Two phenomena in particular show how the approach to marriage has become more and more calculating and self-centered over the last century: divorce and contraception. Faithful unity - for as long as it suits me. Fruitful union - to the degree that suits me.

Easy annulments have been described as the 'Catholic equivalent' to divorce. However, our purpose here is not to consider divorce but rather to reflect on how the contraceptive mentality has spread also among Catholics. In other words, more and more Catholics have become infected with the mindset that regards children as "optional extras" in marriage, that is, as something that it might be nice to have (one
or two, that is) but would be a nuisance or a burden if had in any greater numbers. What is perhaps most significant here is not the number of Catholics who, in violation of the Church's clear teaching, make use of contraceptives, but the quasi-exaltation of family planning by natural means as if this represented some sort of ideal for Catholic married life, and not, as in fact it is, a recourse that the Church allows, because Nature itself allows it, when a couple have serious reasons for depriving themselves - and their present children - of the gift from God of a further child.

Natural Family Planning

In contrast to fifty years ago when Catholics marrying normally planned to have a large family and rejoiced at the prospect, many Catholic couples today regard such a plan with a certain fear, thinking it would hinder their self-fulfillment and bring them burdens rather than joy. Sadly, they seem to have lost the sense of the divine adventure in which they are involved and the privilege, integral to their vocation, of being co-creators with God.

The Church has always taught the greatness of generous family planning. It is a sign of the times - a sign of how much we are influenced by the times - that Natural Family Planning is practically always understood as a way of limiting the size of a family. Is that a truly 'natural' approach? Here we seem to have forgotten that the essential reason why Natural Family Planning is termed "natural" is to mark the borderline that distinguishes it from "unnatural" and immoral family planning through the use of contraceptives. In that sense, NFP marks a "moral minimum", a way of avoiding children without sin - when there are serious reasons to do so. Certainly these grave reasons can exist; but the clear teaching of the magisterium is that NFP is natural only when such reasons exist. Without those serious reasons Natural Family Planning would be "unnatural" and morally wrong [2].

If this sounds surprising, it is a sign of how the notion of marriage has been reduced and dehumanized. After all, what is natural for a married couple in love is to have children. To avoid having a child, without serious reason, is a sign that their mutual love is marred by calculation and self-centeredness; and at the same time implies a rejection or at least a limitation of their divinely-given mission. It is to show a lack of trust in God or a failure to respond to the greatness of the trust God wants to place in them. Perhaps one should add that, in some places at least, young people are let down by marriage preparation courses which fail to emphasize, in all its beauty, the call to generous co-creation inherent in the married vocation.

The Inferiority Complex about being 'Just' a Wife or Mother

Motherhood and home-making are looked down on today. They have no status... This opinion is profoundly un-Christian. It is one which Christians, especially Christian women, need not only to despise but to counter proudly and vigorously with their words and their deeds; i.e. because they have thought things out and instead of yielding to peer-pressure, are acting according to their own values. It is true that many women today (though not so many men) raise their eyebrows when they hear of or meet a married woman with five or six children. How should one interpret that? That they look down on her? Or that, though they don't admit it, they look up to her? Is it not rather the latter - that they envy her as someone more fulfilled, more generous than they are? That should be the conclusion of the more perceptive mother of a larger family; unless she gives way to the stupid embarrassment or the
groundless inferiority complex that her critics would like to induce in her. If they pretend to pity her it is because they don’t want to face up to the fact that they are the ones to be pitied, that she is more of a woman and has chosen the better part.

Here I would like to address the Christian working mother directly. When you are tempted to give way to the idea that motherhood has no status in today's world, ask yourself: what status does it have in God's eyes? Whose opinion matters most to you? And the same applies to the status of being a homemaker.

On what do people base their idea that running a home is inferior, humanly speaking, to exercising a profession or running an office - or being run about in an office?

Well, in a professional or office job one is more independent. Really? In which jobs? At home you are the boss in running things. What percentage of women are bosses in their job or office? What is their position towards their patients or clients: that of bosses or of servants?

But work at home is so boring compared with work in my office? Do you really think so? Make a list of the non-boring things, the really exciting things, you experience each day in your office. And reflect that where love is present, boredom disappears. You can put love for God into your professional work, but maybe you don’t feel quite so motivated to put into it love for your boss or your colleagues. But you can, you should, have plenty of motives to put not only love for God, but love for your husband and for each one of your children into your work at home.

But, for a consumer society, a mother or a homemaker does not earn anything, whereas in a job you earn your own money and so have more self-respect and also stand on terms of equality with your husband.

Do you want to be equal with your husband, or be loved by him? A good mother earns nothing?? Think of the respect that she earns from her husband or her children! [3]. The respect, indeed the envy, she earns from her neighbors - even if they won’t admit it.

But - in terms of money, she earns nothing. So what? You are deprived of what money can buy? Can money buy respect, or God’s good pleasure or the sense of true human fulfillment? Some take it as evident that motherhood or home-making are inferior jobs simply because they are not paid. Does this argument have much weight with you? If you measure the worth of a job by how much money it earns, if money is your standard of worth, then you do not have a Christian approach. Human work is worth what it is worth before God. Our Lord chose a job that was certainly not well paid. If we let ourselves measure the worth of jobs, or of our 'quality' of life, just in financial terms we have a materialistic outlook and not a Christian one. Christians value things differently and teach others, beginning with their children, to do the same. If you are not deeply convinced of that, you will never succeed in your vocation to be a good wife or mother.
The Career Woman
But surely - another may object - the Church today insists that the world needs to be evangelized by the witness of ordinary Christians in their professional work; and that is what I want to do. Indeed; but your objection seems to imply an opposition between your "professional work outside the home" and your work in the home, as if the latter were not work - which is obviously false - but also as if it were not professional - which it certainly is.

Raising a family is a job and a profession as much as any other; one with its challenges, satisfactions, disappointments... It is a profession in the most noble sense, and one that you should be especially proud of. In fact it has a dignity to it that cannot be rivaled by any other human calling. If you don't realize and rejoice in that, something is seriously missing in your human formation and outlook. In all societies until our own, motherhood, along with virginity, has been considered the special dignity and glory of woman. God wished that dignity to be supremely expressed in his own ideal woman, Mary, Virgin and Mother. Modern radical feminism despises this ideal [4]. The true feminist is proud of being a woman and seeks to develop a truly feminine identity. Women who are not proud of being women have indeed an identity problem on their hands. They need to ask themselves, Am I glad that I am a woman? Why? How feminine am I? Is the way of fulfillment that I have in mind a feminine way or a masculine way? Do I think of fulfillment or success mainly in terms of being higher on the professional or social ladder? Am I happy to serve or do I want to be the boss?

Service, love for the spirit of service, is the key to solving the problems implied here. Only the person - man or woman - whose approach to life is one of service can live an admirable and fulfilled life. This is elementary for a Christian. Mary, the greatest woman and human person ever, is proud to see herself as ancilla Domini, handmaid of the Lord. Jesus comes as one who serves and says that if anyone wants to be great, he or she must serve. Most people are far from thinking in these terms today, and so are far from any true greatness and perhaps indeed of salvation. As Christians, service has to be the ideal of our life. If it is not, then we are not following the way of Christ; and whatever hopes we may have for our salvation, sanctity in this life is clearly out of the question for us.

Joint Enterprise between Husband and Wife
It often happens that two friends decide to set up a joint enterprise because they realize they are well suited to work together in something that interests both of them. That very seldom means that both want to do exactly the same job. On the contrary, usually they realize they somehow complement each other. One can be a good manager of accountant, the other a good advertiser or salesman. And, if they trust one other, I doubt they will squabble too much over what each one gets paid. As long as each enjoys his or her job, as long as they appreciate the result of their joint efforts and remain good friends, money matter will work themselves out.

Suppose it is a husband and wife who set up as partners or managers in a wholesaling or retailing business. Do they first sit down to calculate how much each one will be paid? Or do they not rather think that as a joint venture the profit will accrue to both, even though each will no doubt be assigned
different responsibilities? Well, that is exactly what a couple, if they are normal, set about when they marry: to engage together in the joint venture of setting up a family.

The problem today is that in that marvelous shared family venture, parents have let themselves be brainwashed into thinking that their roles must be equal, not complementary, that they can measure each one’s performance by the amount of money each earns, that the bread-winner is more important than the home-maker. But this is simply senseless. It shows that they have not thought for themselves or that they do not know what marriage is really about or why in this case they have married. It is no exaggeration to say that the family is the crisis area in society. The health of any society depends on the health of the family, and in general today the family is very, very weak. It is the mission of parents to make it strong. It is a God-given task that was never so urgent and that God must bless and reward as never before.

NOTES
[1] Some writers, especially among canonists, have taken the *bonum* or “good” of the spouses to mean essentially their human fulfillment or a satisfying marital life. This is groundless, both theologically and canonically. "Good" in this expression has much the same meaning as in "common good" or "good of the people". Taxes or traffic laws are meant to be for the good of the people, including those who find them burdensome.

[2] Suggestions that Church magisterium no longer teaches that serious reasons are required for practicing NFP have no foundation. *Humanae vitae* says, “those are considered to exercise responsible parenthood who prudently and generously decide to have a large family, or who, for serious reasons and with due respect to the moral law, choose to have no more children for the time being or even for an indeterminate period” (no. 10; cf. no. 16). Pope John Paul was emphatic in teaching that "[t]he use of the infertile periods for conjugal union can be an abuse if the couple, for unworthy reasons, seeks in this way to avoid having children, thus lowering the number of births in their family below the morally correct level. This morally correct level must be established by taking into account not only the good of one's own family, and even the state of health and the means of the couple themselves, but also the good of the society to which they belong, of the Church, and even of the whole of mankind. *Humanae Vitae* presents responsible parenthood as an expression of a high ethical value. In no way is it exclusively directed to limiting, much less excluding, children. It means also the willingness to accept a larger family" (General Audience, Sept 5, 1984). In his 1995 encyclical, *Evangelium vitae*, he taught: "In its true meaning, responsible procreation requires couples to be obedient to the Lord's call and to act as faithful interpreters of his plan. This happens when the family is generously open to new lives, and when couples maintain an attitude of openness and service to life, even if, for serious reasons and in respect for the moral law, they choose to avoid a new birth for the time being or indefinitely" (no. 97; emphasis added). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) says, "For just reasons, spouses may wish to space the births of their children..." The *Compendium of the Catechism* of 2005, in answer to the question, "When is it moral to regulate births?", replies: "The regulation of births, which is an aspect of responsible fatherhood and motherhood, is objectively morally acceptable when it is pursued by the spouses without external pressure; when it is practiced not out of selfishness but for serious reasons; and with methods that conform to the objective criteria of morality, that is, periodic continence and use of the infertile periods" (no. 497).

[3] Men admire motherhood. More than women do today. Nothing makes a husband look up more to his wife than the fact that she is the mother, the dedicated mother, of his children.
[4] What it proposes instead is a masculinization of women, who are then left with no feminine identity and are even ashamed of being considered "feminine". A feminism that despises what is feminine is a contradiction in terms.

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