

CHALLENGES TO CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE IN ASIA TODAY

A Personal Reflection

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Introduction

The largest segment of human relationships in human society is constituted by marriage and family. Not only is marriage and the rearing of children the primary pre-occupation of the vast majority of the adult population of the world at any given point of time, but also the success of the enterprise has a critical impact both on personal happiness and social well-being. For this reason alone the well-being of marriage and family life should take high priority in the policies and plans of both Church and State.

What is true of the human community in general is also true, *mutatis mutandis* of the community of the Church. For the majority of the laity the way to spiritual development and fulfilment passes through marriage and family life. The Bible, in both Old and New Testaments, has no qualms about using the imagery of marriage to depict the sublime reality of the love between God and His people and between Christ and the Church. Fortunately, unlike the State, Churches have been, in general, concerned to ensure that marriages succeed and children are brought up and educated to be, at least minimally, useful members of the community. But in the context of the unprecedented changes taking place in society in our times, the

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traditional services provided by the Churches for family well-being seem to be very inadequate or often irrelevant.

If the human condition is not static so also will be its foundational institutions such as the family. The survival and spread of the human race requires that adult members of opposite sexes (man and woman) get together in some kind of permanent relationship which will ensure not only the birth but also the nurture of the children born to them. Catholic theology has insisted that not only procreation but also education, meaning nurture, is included in the primary purpose of marriage. But this skeletal structure dictated by Nature can be fleshed out in many different ways, as shown by both geography and history. The family has taken different shapes and forms in different parts of the world in different cultures. The lived expression of the basic structure of the family has been evolving in the course of history, often in tandem with the wider dimensions of social change. The evolution of the institution of marriage, of the structure of intra-familial relationships may be seen as a reflection of the macro-phenomenon of social evolution in general. Hence we can really understand the former only in the light of the latter.

From Tradition to Modernity and Post Modernity

Two phenomena, among others, which characterize the passage from tradition to modernity and post-modernity are complexification and the accelerating pace of socio-cultural change. Even just one hundred years ago, life, life-styles and relationship patterns were relatively simple and the rate of social change was barely perceptible. The evidence for that would be very clear if we go back to the pre-industrial era. But it is an entirely different story today, with more and more factors impacting on a person's life and relationships in a context of accelerating social change. Reading the signs of the times the difference between today and yesterday can be seen in the following:

(a) The ascendancy of the personal over the institutional; personal and small community relationships of choice taking precedence over social roles and institutional structures

(b) The expanding sphere of freedom and personal choice, implying a de-valuation of authority and hierarchical relationships

(c) A greater and more articulate vindication of human rights, of individuals, of individuals and of groups with a consequent eclipsing of obligations and duties

(d) A greater recognition of the equality of the sexes and the demand for a democratic relationship between them in all sectors – family, the professions, public office, religion, etc.

(e) An assertive individualism connected with democracy and human rights

(f) A revaluation of religion in terms of personal spiritual experience as against institutional, ritualistic and “churchy” practices

(g) The globalization of social consciousness as a result of the prevalence of rapid international transport and means of instant communication provided by modern technology

(h) The population explosion pressurizing the transition from a large to a small family.

More than Change, a Paradigm Shift

All the above have directly or indirectly impacted marriage and family life, resulting in far reaching changes which pose a challenge to the traditional understanding of the husband-wife and parent-child relationships. There has been, what I might call a *paradigm shift* in this regard. Here it is important to distinguish between “change” and “paradigm shift”. In “change” the connection between the old and the new might be called linear; the new was already contained in the old, or the new and the old can be understood within the same framework, for example, a flower opening out of the bud, or houses of brick, cement and tile replacing abodes of wattle, daub and cadjan. But in the case of a “paradigm shift” the change is non-linear – the new cannot be accommodated in the old framework. A clear example is the new understanding of space, time and gravitation given by Einstein. It did not arise from the previous theory of Newton; there was a change in the framework itself. The early history of our understanding of the physical world gives another good example, viz. the shift from the Ptolemaic earth-centred (geo-centric) worldview to the Copernican sun-centred (helio-centric) one. In psycho-social discourse a paradigm shift can be compared to a change of gestalt, a change of the ground figure which gives meaning to the items within it. I believe that a paradigm shift is taking place in

family relationships and behind it, in the understating of human sexuality. It is more than a mere change.

Personal and Role Relationships

In the traditional type of family which prevails, by and large, in Asian countries, all intra-familial relationships were in the main, role-relationships, the roles being determined by the ambient social culture, and so structured that one beautifully dove-tailed into the other—husband to wife and vice versa, (and parents to children and vice versa). The husband was the head, the authority figure, the bread-winner and the agent of social transactions; the wife's role was largely domestic in character; she was the mothering and nurturing person closely associated with the children, standing behind rather than beside the husband, as help-mate, sexual partner and domestic worker. *The roles, rather than the persons related to, and inter-acted with, each other.* The same role-matching is clear in the parent-child relationship. The parents exercised total authority over the children up to adulthood and marriage; the children on the other hand, had the duty of obedience to, and respect for the parents, who were their *de-guru*, the two life-teachers, educators in the art of living;; the children, particularly the younger ones were “to be seen and not heard”; even older children were not admitted into the process of family decision-making. Girls were more protected (by chaperoning) than boys and enjoyed much less freedom. At the same time children were the treasure and wealth of the family. Parents considered no sacrifice too great for the well-being of their children from whom they derived their own *raison d'être*.

The “coming-into-being” of this type of marriage was naturally of a piece with the whole system. Mate selection was more the business of the parents (and related elders) than of the two young people concerned. And the selection was made on considerations of caste, social status, job/profession (of the bridegroom), economic standing and character reputation. The dowry (from the bride to the groom) was matter of serious discussion between the parents — a dispute could lead to a cancellation of the proposal. The Sunday papers in Sri Lanka are full of “Marriage Proposals”, really advertisements, parents seeking partners for their son/daughter of marriageable age. So there was neither need nor opportunity for the prospective marriage partners to get personally acquainted or “fall in love”. That would be unnecessary and irrelevant. Personal feelings could not

stand in the way of social goals. Usually the young people acquiesced unquestioningly, barring rare exceptions, with this parental *modus operandi*. All this combined and “conspired” to generate a great deal of stability and harmony within the family. The roles were neatly matched and meshed like inter-locking gear wheels. Personal feelings, likes, dislikes, etc. were not allowed to raise their head, or were kept within the confines of the role. The young husband and wife had been socialized from childhood to accept and step into their respective roles as the most natural thing in the world, a pair of gloves worn on each hand. The partners found fulfilment, by and large, playing these respective roles. What mattered in the marriage was not the personal happiness of the two partners (that could be a by-product) but the social goal of reproduction and child rearing — the main purpose of the institution of marriage. Consequently, divorce had no social approval; a divorcee was a disgrace to the family.

Impact of Modernity & Post-Modernity

The modern and post-modern phenomena mentioned above obviously undermine the traditional vision of marriage and family. The new vision of marriage which has emerged out of them, now largely prevalent in the West, is almost the polar opposite of the traditional one, so much so that the definition of marriage itself is being questioned. The husband-wife relationship has taken a wholly personal turn. The sexual dimension may be from nature (even that is being doubted), but marriage is a personal decision of the two partners. The pattern of the relationship between them will not be dictated to by society; they will fashion it as they please. The slogan of personal freedom is “do your own thing”. The primary purpose of their relationship is not procreation and rearing of children but personal happiness and fulfilment; children (or one child) may be a by-product. The marriage comes into being through a personal decision of the two people, consequent to “falling in love” and hence can also be terminated in the same way. The marriage bond, if such exists, should not be allowed to hinder the freedom of the partners to pursue their careers, personal interests, etc. *The persons relate to each other not the roles*. It does not require much imagination to realize the vulnerability of this type of marriage, dependent on the vagaries of personal emotions, expectations, idiosyncrasies, etc. without anchor of a social role. It is an entirely new ball game. No wonder almost

50% of marriages in some western countries terminate in divorce, which by the way, enjoys unquestioned social respectability.

The parent-child relationship too is caught up in this personalistic/individualistic understanding of marriage. The children, particularly the older ones, are considered persons in their right; they have not only to be seen but also heard, that is, participate in the making of family decisions, with the right to disagree and even walk away. And it is understood that they will be “let loose” from parental authority as early as possible to develop independently by themselves.

The Theological Dilemma

From the above it is clear to what extent Catholic theology finds itself at loggerheads with the emerging shape and form of marriage and family life of a-borning future. Obviously the traditional Catholic/Christian *Weltanschauung*, inspired by the Bible arose and developed in the rural, sparsely-populated, socio-cultural milieu of the ancient world. If we find ourselves in an entirely different milieu, in a complex, fast-changing, technologised world, it is incumbent on us that we rethink that which directly emerged from the old. New wine cannot be put into old wine-skins. This was the entire *raison d'être* of the 2nd Vatican Council. However, engaging the emerging, and already established novelty of the modern world, particularly in the area of marriage and family life is a daunting challenge. On the one hand, that God is also the Lord of History, whose hand is behind all the vicissitudes of historical evolution; the emerging new, however outrageous it may seem, does not fall outside his purview. On the other, human freedom is also a constituent operator, and a fallible one at that, leaving room for aberrations. How do we separate the chaff from the wheat? Or do we allow both to co-exist? Should the new be rejected as an unacceptable deviation from the traditional understanding taken as the only true and right one; or are there elements of truth in the modern view which can and should be “baptized”?

The Asian Context

As stated above, the march of social globalization has ensured that the above-mentioned developments of recent times have impacted, one way or another, our own part of the world – Asia. But some specific features are particularly relevant to us. First, from a sociological point of view, the poor, largely illiterate marginalized

masses of Asia have still to be touched by the currents of modernity despite limited access to mass media (Radio and TV). Their energies are exhausted by the demands of bare survival; their patterns of relationships and life-styles show a strong continuity with the past in rural Sri Lanka and neighbouring Asian countries; practically nothing has changed in their small, micro- world, despite the revolutionary changes in the macro-world. It is only the middle and upper classes of Asian societies that have been impacted by the novelty of modernity, but there too differentiations are clearly noticeable. Under a veneer of the modern, many of them remain traditional in their soul and psyche. When, for example, even “westernized” young men and women fall in love and intend to get married they would want very much the blessing and approval of the parents, revealing a very traditional mind-set. Is this a kind of cultural schizophrenia? If they still remained rooted in the native culture what are the psycho-spiritual consequences of the veneer of modernity? Which part of their psyche determines what aspects of their thinking and behaviour? Or have they achieved a new configuration of the couple relationship which combines elements of both East and West? On the other hand, there would be others, perhaps a minority, who would be dyed-in-the-wool western, even looking down on the native culture. In that case, did that cultural uprooting inflict any wounds in the psyche? Is a total cultural de-racination possible for an adult? Though these questions have a direct bearing on the type of *pastorale* the Church will have to offer to married people and those preparing for marriage, I am afraid they have not been studied and reflected upon with the seriousness they deserve.

We cannot also ignore the impact of the capitalist bent of the economic order which has generated strong consumerist tendencies particularly in the middle and upper social strata. Social status is being defined, more and more, by the quantum of wealth and its opulent manifestations in luxury living. It is too obvious that such life styles are inimical to strong, permanent relationships of fidelity demanded by Christian marriage.

Pastoral Challenges

The spiritual life is nurtured or hindered by the socio-cultural, socio-economic and cultural milieu of the person; no man is an island. It goes without saying that the pastoral care of marriage and family life, namely providing support for the development of strong and

healthy relationships between husband and wife, parents and children, will have to take into account this socio-cultural and socio-economic order of the day. This is not going to be an easy task. When the Worldwide Marriage Encounter Movement was introduced to Sri Lanka by India, with its cultural trappings of Western origin, it resonated positively in the first place with English-speaking middle-class couples who felt culturally at home in it. Its slow penetration into some sectors of the more native, lower middle and working classes was primarily due to its deeply Christian character, even in the face of some violence to cultural sensitivities. I wonder whether the Marriage Encounter weekend could be introduced just as it is to deeply Buddhist, Hindu or Moslem couples even if the Christian God is taken out of the picture. (But that would suck the blood out of the Movement). This raises a hornet's nest of questions about the indigenization of cult, worship and pastoral practices especially in a pluralistic society of diverse religions and cultures. Unlike in bygone days, the Christian community will encompass a mix of couples, diverse in respect of social status, education, economic standing, political ideology and spiritual orientation, against the over-arching background of the institutional Church. There is plenty of room for polarizations with regard to any of the above which cannot be overcome by a mere appeal to goodwill and Christian charity. Can the Church rest content at the level of the devotional when there is a hunger at least on the part of some (and that number is growing with increase in the cadre of educated laity) for a deeper *fides quaerens intellectum*?

Towards a Solution

It is obvious that growth in the spiritual life for the married, religious or laity cannot wait for clear and distinct answers to all these questions; such answers may not be forthcoming at all; and there may be in the future more questions than answers. Fortunately spirituality is not in the first place a matter of the head, but of the heart. But unfortunately, religious education in the Church has been largely a matter of the head. Real religion has been confused with knowledge of religion, or study of religion – a conceptual exercise of the head supplemented by devotional practices. Children, for example, were judged to be religious to the extent they excelled in religious knowledge (tested by examinations) and fidelity to devotional practices such as saying the rosary, morning and night

prayers, visits to the Bl. Sacrament, etc. Today, however, alongside the decline in Church growing and observance of religious practices, particularly in the West, there appears to be a growing search for spiritual experience. People seem to be making, practically if not theoretically, a distinction between religion (specially in its organized forms) and spirituality. Meditation is growing in popularity; ashrams and meditation centres, which were at one time almost the exclusive preserve of Asia and the East, are proliferating in the West. Though there maybe some aberrations in this phenomenon, in principle it seems to be moving in the right direction, towards the recovery of true religion. In respect of marriage, in days gone by we were happy if a couple stayed together without separating and divorcing whatever the inner status of their relationship; what mattered was the law of indissolubility of marriage; it had to be upheld at all costs. The spiritualist view with regard to marriage today is the other way round; the marriage should be permanent and lasting because of the strength of the love relationship between the couple. Love takes precedence over the law. But this is not as revolutionary as it appears to be at first sight although there is a great difference of perspective. St Augustine said long ago that for the Christian there is no law, except the "law" of love. What matters even in the most rationalist understanding of marriage is the deep love of husband wife, their total, unconditional self-giving love for each other, mirroring the bond between Christ and the Church. The primacy now being accorded to spirituality in the Christian life, can therefore serve very effectively to transform "from within" the traditional role of an institutional/contractual marriage to a "love marriage" even if its cultural trapping remain largely unchanged.

But the kind of religious education (Catechesis) generally given to children and youth is hardly conducive to "birthing" mature, deeply spiritual adults. As stated above, it will, if done effectively, generate knowledgeable Christians; but knowledge pertaining to the intellect, does not automatically translate into love, a matter of the will. *Religion is not just knowledge and doctrine, but praxis and life.* Every religion is a vision of life and a way of life. Catechesis or religious education must result in both enlightenment and energisation, leading to love and service.

It is here the role of the family assumes critical importance. *The school of love is primarily the family.* The loved child, in the bosom of

the family will become a loving adult (barring exceptions). Only the family can provide the foundational experience of, and the environment for, love. Hence the remote, primordial preparation for marriage takes place, largely unconsciously, in the matrix of family relationships, starting from birth. Its major component is emotional maturity which is the key to successful relationships.

So, paradoxically, it seems that *the best preparation for marriage, in the long run, is the education of parents* to become effective nurturers of mind and heart of their children. This is easier said than done because parents themselves, specially the less educated and marginalized ones, do not realize how important they are to their children in this regard. Those at the bottom of the social-economic ladder exhaust all their energy on the struggle for mere survival; even those on higher rungs consider their primary, and only serious, duty to be providers of the physical needs of their children – food, clothing shelter – and perhaps schooling. Nary a thought on how they relate to their children, what example they set, etc. all of which are directly formative of the psycho-spiritual dimension. It is difficult to understand why the Church (and Churches in general) have paid scant attention to parent education for the fruitful rearing of children, as an indispensable element of ensuring the nurture and well-being of marriage and family life. Much of the energy and resources spent today on child-catechesis could be channeled to adult and parent catechesis with enormous benefit all round.