

Protecting Marriage

Part One

Common Myths About Wedlock and Divorce

by Father Juan Puigbó and Hilary Towers

As we await the U.S. Supreme Court to rule on two important cases involving rights for homosexual couples, it is difficult to overlook a particular irony: While legal recognition of same-sex "marriage" will indeed harm the institution itself, many proponents of traditional marriage are overlooking the real danger. In fact, most of us greatly overestimate the number of homosexual persons in the United States today, which is actually quite low.

Even if our laws recognize same-sex unions, marriage between heterosexual spouses will remain the foundation of our civilization. There is no greater predictor of the success of children as adults than whether they were raised by biological parents who stayed married to each other. But the institution of marriage has taken a beating over the past five decades.

The marriage rate is the lowest ever recorded. Unmarried cohabitation is rapidly becoming an acceptable forerunner and/or alternative to marriage. Among existing marriages, many are fragile and strained: Forty percent to 50% of all first marriages are still projected to end in divorce.

Among the many compelling reasons to focus our attention on strengthening marriages is the likelihood that this "tactic" may be the single most effective means of weakening the forces at work to change the nature of marriage itself. Now seems an opportune time to go back to the basics: to rebuild small communities of faithful, lifelong marriages in which families, friends, churches and communities hold spouses accountable for their marriage vows. Such support structures used to exist naturally at every level of society.

But today those sources of positive peer pressure to accept traditional standards of marital behavior have virtually disappeared. They have all too often been replaced by a message of encouragement to either forgo marriage altogether or to abandon marriage when it becomes challenging (as it usually does).

If we begin by protecting and strengthening our own marriages, we may then attend to struggling marriages in our families and our parishes. This two-part article is intended to provide ideas and practical tools to accomplish these two goals. Part one addresses four common myths about marriage and divorce, and helps to explain why many marriages are floundering. Part two provides practical ideas for strengthening marriages.

Myth No. 1: Marriage is simply a contract between two consenting adults. Divorce is an agreed breaking of the contract. Both are private matters and therefore not subject to outside interference.

This notion of privacy is grounded in the same flawed thinking that resulted in the national legalization of abortion. It is the basis of our current system of family law, a billion dollar industry that thrives on the dismantling of marriages. Our culture tells us that the sexual behavior of others is not only inconsequential to us, but off limits for discussion. Yet the sociological trends of the past five decades defy such logic. When Christians go to a wedding, they are witnesses to the marriage vow – to the contract, yes, but primarily to the covenant. The Catechism says the following about weddings: "Sacramental marriage is a liturgical act. It is therefore appropriate that it should be celebrated in the public liturgy of the Church. ... The public character of the consent protects the "I do" once given and helps the spouses remain faithful to it" (1631).

Note the use of the word "protect." Our witness of a marriage vow taken by our children, siblings, extended family, friends — can help defend that marriage from destruction. The forces at work to destroy marriages today are so strong. Let us put away modern notions of privacy, which allow us to simply look the other way when we see a couple struggling, and begin to take seriously our responsibility as Christians to help spouses remain faithful to their vows to honor, love, and protect until death.

Myth No. 2: Most divorces occur among marriages characterized by serious conflict or abuse of some kind.

Recent studies show that between one-half to two-thirds of all divorces in this country do not end marriages characterized by serious conflict (physical or emotional abuse, extreme unhappiness). One study found that a

majority of divorces (some 75%) occurred in marriages described by the spouses as happy only five years earlier. As one might imagine, children whose parents end what is a relatively stable, safe, and well-functioning marriage experience strong negative consequences even into adulthood, including poorer psychological well-being, lower marriage satisfaction, and weaker social connections with friends and relatives. It is also noteworthy that spouses who end low-conflict marriages report a decline in overall happiness.

Why would someone leave a marriage that is relatively normal and healthy? Social science data suggest this decision is a function of several factors operating at once: a spouse's perceptions of how rewarding the marriage is, barriers to leaving the marriage (e.g., moral values, social stigma, financial dependence, legal barriers), available alternatives to the marriage (e.g., a flirty woman at the workplace), expectations for the marriage (either reasonable or untenable), and finally level of commitment. Sadly, in the wake of the divorce revolution, many of these environmental-cultural factors are stacked against the paradigm of fidelity in a lifelong marriage.

What is the remedy? It is perhaps a too well-kept secret of our Christian faith: that the mystery of lifelong matrimony is a direct reference to Christ giving of himself on the cross. Christ died to save his bride, the Church. Following this model of self-sacrifice, spouses are called to completely empty themselves until they have nothing more to give. What a beautiful and paradoxical mystery. A spouse sanctifies himself or herself by giving everything to the spouse, thereby experiencing a bit of heaven every day of their lives on this earth.

Myth No. 3: When one spouse has an extramarital affair and abandons the marriage, some attribute of the other spouse must have played a role. In other words: it necessarily takes two people to destroy a marriage.

Dr. Shirley Glass, a psychologist and marriage therapist who studied marital infidelity, called this "The Prevention Myth." That is, most people believe an affair can be prevented by being a loving and dedicated spouse. Glass conducted a study that found 56% of men and 34% of women who had extramarital affairs reported being in happy marriages.

Sometimes our assumption is that when someone cheats, or when someone files for divorce, both spouses have contributed to the demise of the marriage in some form or another. Sometimes that is the case, but frequently it is not. In fact, research suggests that roughly 80% of all divorces are situations in which only one spouse breaks his or her vow and/or refuses to continue to work on the marriage. These may be more aptly described as cases of spousal abandonment than "divorce," a term that has come to imply a mutual parting of ways.

It's helpful to make a distinction between what are really the norms of married life, and the decision to stop working on a marriage altogether. A proper, realistic view of marriage is that it is a common vocation of two imperfect people whom Christ has dignified with his presence in the wedding at Cana, where He raised the human love between a man and a woman to a supernatural dimension. To claim that a spouse's personality caused infidelity or divorce is to fail to acknowledge this spiritual reality.

Perhaps a wife is the controlling type who yells during fights, or a husband is the silent type who avoids conflict at all costs. A spouse may claim he or she "no longer feels in love." These problems fall within the range of normal — very normal! And yet these are most often seen as legitimate excuses for having an affair or filing for divorce. Every marriage will encounter difficulties relating to undesirable characteristics of both spouses. The question for each couple, ultimately, is whether they are committed to working on their own defects of character, while honoring their vows of fidelity and unconditional love. Sometimes this will mean having the humility and emotional maturity to seek help for the marriage in the form of marriage mentors, a trusted clergy member, or a well-researched Christian marriage counselor.

Myth No. 4: To speak publicly about the devastation caused by spousal abandonment (or infidelity) is uncharitable because it makes divorced people feel uncomfortable.

The task of debunking this myth falls perhaps to priests as much as to laypeople, because the clergy are regularly in a position to speak publicly on the harder social issues — and so many do. But the reality is that most parishioners hear very little from the pulpit about the difficulties marriages face today, or about the devastation caused by spousal abandonment.

Perhaps it is surprising that one of the most piercing admonitions on this subject came from a tiny Albanian nun — a woman known for her charity perhaps more than any other attribute. Here is some of what Blessed Mother Teresa had to say to the Irish people as they pondered the legalization of divorce:

Divorce breaks, destroys and causes terrible temptations. And it also causes suffering and pain to the heart, to the children and to the whole family. Divorce is one of the biggest killers of family, love and unity. ... I also know that there are great problems in the world, that many spouses do not love each other enough to be faithful until death. We cannot solve all the problems in the world but let us never bring in the worst problem of all and that is to destroy love. And that is what we are doing when we tell married people they can divorce each other and go with someone else.

And note her insight on the generational nature of divorce:

Besides, a country that accepts divorce will soon have more and more broken families that lead to more disunity... and to more divisions in other families. This is not only because divorce is a destroyer of love, unity and peace but also because the divorced feel lonely and often find friends of their own age who are usually married. This kind of friendship breaks up other marriages and this just goes on and on.

Mother Teresa's letter reminds us that our duty to act in Christian charity is not to mitigate destructive behavior with nice words that make people feel comfortable; it is to lead people toward the truth. It is the clarity of Mother's message, to include the discomfort it may cause some who have abandoned their vows, which is so loving! Let us begin to challenge our culture's definition of charity, which is to seek and encourage temporal satisfaction for ourselves and those around us, at all costs. Let us reclaim the meaning of true Christian love for the sake of every marriage.

Part Two

Creating Communities Centered on Marriage

When a baptized couple gets married, they assume a common commitment: to help one another to become saints. That is the goal of Christian life, given at baptism — and solidified in a particular way in the sacrament of matrimony. In this sense, spouses must develop a concrete spirituality, one through which they can relate to God and invite him to be a fundamental part of their marital relationship. Tertullian says in his Letter to the Bride that Christian marriage "is truly two in one flesh, and where the flesh is one, one is the spirit. Together they pray, prostrate and fast, each pointing to, supporting and honoring the other."

Catholics have some of the most beautiful writings on marriage in existence, but they aren't always accessible in ways the faithful can use them to fortify their own marriages, let alone marriages around them. The following are intended to be some practical tools to aid in creating marriage-centered communities:

Power of Parish Priests

In a recent survey, "*What Catholic Women Think About Faith, Conscience and Contraception*," 72% of women reported that homilies given by the priest during Sunday Mass are their main source of knowledge about the faith. However, only 15% reported fully accepting Church teachings on contraception. These findings underscore two realities: the tremendous power of the priest to influence Catholics from every walk of life and the necessity of careful study and adherence to the magisterium of the Church by parish priests. This is perhaps most urgent regarding matters of sexuality, about which the faithful need (and long) to hear straightforward, practical advice on how to live out their Catholic faith.

The vocation to the priesthood, after all, is not unrelated to that of married life. Priests have a vested interest in educating the faithful not only on the beauty of marriage and the sacredness of marital intimacy, but also on the destruction that comes from the abandonment of one's wedding vows and from living together outside those vows. Priests have seen this destruction firsthand in their parishes. They can speak to the devastation caused by spousal abandonment and cohabitation with authority and credibility.

Father Puigbó currently gets an average of five to six phone calls a week from spouses asking for help for their marriages, and he is not alone. Every Sunday, parish priests have a new opportunity to address in prudent yet plainspoken ways the threats to marriage today: pornography, cohabitation, the "hook-up" culture that characterizes many of our high schools and colleges, unchecked social media and workplace friendships with those of the

opposite gender, an inability to communicate, lack of commitment, etc. These issues can no longer be relegated to "marriage therapists" — the need is too vast and the risk of ill-informed advice too great.

Father Puigbó celebrated 39 marriages in our parish last year. Only one of those couples was not cohabiting. When asked why they wanted to get married in the Church, the majority responded, "Because we want to do things the right way." It didn't matter whether they lived together for five months or for 20 years — they all had the same answer.

Cohabiting couples, engaged couples, married couples and some percentage of singles in the pews are ready and waiting to hear the unadorned truth from their spiritual shepherds about what it means to get married and what it takes to stay married.

Public Prayer

Catholics pray for so many important and necessary things in the Mass — for an end to abortion, for our military families, for peace in the world, for the poor and the sick. But very rarely do we pray for faithful and permanent marriages. Rarely do we hear prayers for an end to what Pope John Paul II called the "scourge of divorce."

When we pray the Prayers of the Faithful, we show our belief in the power of intercessory prayer. We also show where our values lie as a Church. What if we began to pray publicly and consistently for faithfulness in marriages and an end to spousal abandonment? Imagine the impact it might have on both individual marriages and on our culture's perception of marriage over time.

Private Prayer

The permanent union of man and woman is vulnerable to a vast array of temptations, which is one reason Christ raised it to a sacrament. The sacrament gives spouses the necessary grace to achieve the fidelity they promised to each other on their wedding day. Widespread, serious struggles in marriage are bound to occur in a society where traditional values are on the decline, "conservative" political leaders carry on with their mistresses without consequence to their careers and a radical individualism justifies the disordered desires of man. This is why spouses must pray together. To live out their vow of fidelity, they must let God into their lives and entrust themselves continuously to him. They must always be honest with each other and utilize the sacraments, especially confession and the Eucharist.

There are practical, concrete ways to build a spiritual fortress of protection around a marriage: to make the Sign of the Cross on each other's foreheads when waking up and before going to sleep; to pray aloud to God for the needs of their marriage and for their children; to practice lectio divina with scriptural texts that refer to marriage; to teach children to pray for their parents and for all the marriages in the world; and to make sacrifices as a family for marriages.

Pornography's Threat

If there is one threat to marriage that stands out among many today, it is this one. For this reason, pornography use should be addressed explicitly and regularly at the parish level. An addiction to pornography, when unchecked (and particularly when begun in adolescence), is enough to overpower all the faith, goodwill and hard work either spouse brings to a marriage.

Pornography use increases the risk of separation and divorce. It glamorizes casual, perverse sex and increases the risk of infidelity. It decreases the desire for normal, healthy sex: Married men who use porn feel less satisfied with sex with their wives and feel less emotional attachment to them.

Pornography use causes marital discord: People who report being happy in their marriages are much less likely to report using porn than those who are unhappy. Women report that they see their husbands' regular use of porn as a form of infidelity, which causes them to feel depressed and betrayed.

Pornography use discourages the formation of normal values regarding intimate relationships: Young men who use pornography regularly view sex before marriage, casual sex and extramarital sex as acceptable. They also have a higher number of sexual partners over their lifetime.

Regular viewers of pornography are more likely to view premarital courtship as unnecessary and deviant sexual practices and promiscuous behavior (e.g., masturbation, multiple partners) as more commonly occurring than they really are. (For a complete reference list of the above findings, contact the authors at: harrymacs@verizon.net.) The good news is that if you, your spouse or someone you care about is addicted to pornography, there is hope.

Marriage Mentoring

Being surrounded by friends and family who are unconditionally supportive of a couple's marriage is a significant predictor of both marital stability and proneness to divorce. But there are many couples today who are geographically and socially isolated. They live far from family (or are estranged from them) and are unconnected in their parishes. Some are adult children of divorce and are, therefore, at higher risk of divorce themselves.

When one or both spouses experience struggles in their marriage, their perception may be that they are alone and that the best option is to end the marriage. Where immediate and extended family might have reassured such couples of their normalcy and provided support to improve and sustain the marriage in the past, all too often, the availability of a mentor is lacking for such couples today.

In a recent Pew Research Center survey, 52% of young adults said that being a good parent is "one of the most important things" in life. Just 30% said the same about having a successful marriage. What these young adults need but are lacking is context: a realistic expectation of marriage and family life through the example of mature, committed married couples. They need to see with their own eyes that the best gift one can give his or her children isn't a great athletic ability, a laptop or the latest Xbox or iPhone. And it certainly isn't an attempt at good "co-parenting" following a divorce. It is the gift of a permanent, faithful marriage. Further, our young people need to hear that marriage is not simply a response to the need to satisfy sexual-emotional desires, nor is it an "out" for those who do not want to remain single. A couple should not marry just because they want to have children. Marriage is a commitment without conditions that encompasses all of the above and does not exclude the fundamental: the sanctification of the spouses.

This is where marriage mentoring comes in. The idea is that more experienced, mature couples make themselves available to couples who are struggling. Everyone benefits — parish priests who are overwhelmed with struggling couples, couples in need and mentor couples whose own marriages are strengthened as a result of helping others. Even the children of both sets of couples benefit, as they see firsthand the real work involved in keeping a marriage healthy and strong. This is "marriage prep" in its most natural and effective form. At our parish in northern Virginia, All Saints Catholic Church, we are building a marriage-mentoring program based on Greg and Julie Alexander's very successful Covenant of Love ministry. Consider approaching your pastor about the possibility of starting one in your parish.

The time is right to act decisively to strengthen and protect marriages. Let's work toward a day when Catholic communities around the country, including clergy and an army of strong, committed married couples, form a safety net for marriages that so desperately need our support.

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