

COLUMNISTS

Church's view of marriage has changed

There are many aspects of Catholic life and thought that have been positively affected by the Second Vatican Council. One readily thinks of the increased participation of the laity in the celebration of the Eucharist, the enhanced role of the laity in the governance of the church through parish councils and the like, the broadening of ecumenical and interfaith contacts with other Christians, and with non-Christians, the church's expanded engagement in the social apostolate, and the more biblically and experientially oriented approach to religious education.

Other elements of Catholicism seem to have been little affected by the council, such as the belief in Jesus Christ as our redeemer, in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, in the reconciling power of the Holy Spirit, in the communion of saints and in eternal life.

On which of the two lists would the sacrament of marriage belong? Some would place it unhesitatingly on the second, among those elements left essentially unchanged by the council.

Catholic couples who fall in love and wish to live together for the rest of their lives with the hope of raising a family still ratify and sanctify their union in this sacrament. Millions of Catholics have been doing so for centuries and — Vatican II or no Vatican II — they will continue to do so for as long as this fragile world of ours lasts.



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

Others, however, recognize that the sacrament of marriage, too, has undergone significant change because of the council and, therefore, belongs on the first list. Such Catholics are aware, for example, of the large numbers of sacramental marriages that have been annulled by the church since Vatican II — so many, in fact, that annulments are regarded by some as a form of "Catholic divorce."

The new canonical approach to annulments may indeed be an indication of change in the church's thinking about the sacrament of marriage, but it is by no means the only one, or even the most important one.

Before the council marriage was regarded primarily as a contract between a man and a woman. The contract was centrally concerned with the exchange of mutual rights over one another's bodies for the sake of the procreation of children.

The theological language commonly used before the council even referred to the marital act of sexual union as the "rendering of the marriage debt."

Since most marriages before the modern age were arranged marriages, one can understand why the church itself, beginning in the Middle Ages, adopted an increasingly legalistic approach to the sacrament.

It is a thoroughly modern development that most (though by no means all) couples today marry freely and for love. That revolutionary social change has had a profound impact on the development of the Catholic theology of marriage and on the Second Vatican Council's teaching on the sacrament in its "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et spes*).

Marriage is now understood and portrayed as a covenant rather than as a contract. And it is a covenant that is sealed by an "irrevocable personal consent" (n. 48).

Indeed, the highest honor paid to marriage in the Old Testament was the application to it of the symbol of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel (Hosea 2; Isaiah 54:4-5; Jeremiah 2:2; 3:20).

The prophet Hosea interpreted his own marriage to Gomer as a representation of the covenantal union between God and Israel. Gomer left Hosea for other lovers just as Israel had abandoned

its God for other gods.

As Hosea waited faithfully and patiently for Gomer's return and took her back without recrimination, so God faithfully and patiently waited for Israel to repent of her own sins and then readily welcomed her back.

The council also abandoned the medieval distinction between the primary and secondary ends of marriage in which the primary end, the begetting of children, was always regarded as superior to the secondary end, the full expression of the mutual love of husband and wife (n. 50).

Today the sacrament of marriage is more widely recognized as an option not only for the youthful couple eager to start a family, but also for the older couple long past their child-bearing years and for the physically impaired.

According to the council, the expression of mutual love that is at the heart of the sacrament consists of more than biological union. "It involves the good of the whole person. It therefore it can enrich the expressions of body and mind with a unique dignity, ennobling these expressions as special ingredients and signs of friendship distinctive of marriage. ... Such love pervades the whole of their lives" (n. 49).

That's the ideal, of course. The living of it is the challenge.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Jesus comes to us in times of fear

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 14:22-33. (R1) 1 Kings 19:9, 11-13. (R2) Romans 9:1-5.

Gen. George Patton's soldiers were in awe of him. A member of Gen. Marshall's staff once asked a second lieutenant under Patton's command if he believed that Gen. Patton could walk on water.

"Colonel," the lieutenant replied, "I know General Patton! If he had to walk on water, he would figure out a way and within 24 hours he would have me doing it as well!"

At one time or another superstar coaches such as Bobby Knight of Indiana and the late Bear Bryant of Alabama have had this ability of being able to "walk on water" attributed to them. Various Washington politicians reputed to have big egos — such as Henry Kissinger and Lyndon Johnson — have also been described this way. Where was the president last night? He was out taking a stroll on the Potomac.

Such stories are all told in fun. Nobody takes them seriously, because people can't walk on water — at least not ordinary people.

And that is exactly the point of the Gospel story: Jesus was no ordinary man, and the effect he can have on the lives of those who trust him is dramatic.

The disciples are out in a boat. A storm comes up rather suddenly and unexpectedly and the disciples are afraid.



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

This is a critical element in the story: They are afraid. Jesus comes to us in times of fear, when we are troubled and feeling helpless. Fear is a terrible thing. And if statistics compiled by the American Kennel Club are any indication, fear is becoming more pervasive all the time. According to the records of the American Kennel Club in 1975, cuddly poodles were the most popular purebred dog in America, with 199,750 registered. There were only 952 registered Rottweilers, a fierce breed often used as a watchdog.

By 1994, the poodle population had been cut in half to 61,775, while Rottweilers had increased 100 times, to 102,596. We might say that America is not only going to the dogs — but to mean dogs at that! All because of growing fear.

Aren't we becoming a fearful people — afraid of crime, afraid of losing our jobs, afraid of illegal aliens, afraid of AIDS? We certainly need the reassurance that comes from knowing that it is at those

times when our hearts are troubled and we feel most helpless that Christ comes to us. Christ comes across the troubled water and says to us, "Don't be afraid, it is I." And he bids us leave the security of the boat and walk on water. What powerful imagery!

I remember when I was a kid. Our cellar was deep and dark and fearsome. If we had to go to the cellar to fetch a jar of pickled pears, we would object fiercely: We were afraid to go into the dark alone. But if mother said she would go with us or send an older brother or sister with us, there was no problem. We weren't alone.

So no matter the darkness of the problems of life, they can easily be faced if we realize that we are not alone, that Jesus is with us. "Do not be afraid. It is I."

Elizabeth Blackwell wanted to become a doctor in the 1840s. At the time, medical schools were only for men. Elizabeth Blackwell had to fight just to get in. Finally, one school, Geneva College of Medicine, let her in as a joke.

When she got there, the students made fun of her. They refused to share their notes with her. Some professors tried to keep her out of their classes. She refused to give up. In 1849, she graduated at the head of her class. When no hospital would allow her to practice, she opened her own hospital. Then she opened a medical school to train women. Elizabeth Blackwell got out of

the boat and walked on the water.

I don't know what walking on the water would be for you. Forgiving someone who has hurt you? Being kind to a person you do not like? Visiting a needy neighbor? Whatever it is — don't let fear defeat you. You have a friend who comes to you in your hour of greatest need and says, "Don't be afraid, you can do it. Step out of the boat and walk on the water toward me."

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming, N.Y.

Daily Readings

Monday, August 12
Ezekiel 1:2-5, 24-28; Matthew 17:22-27

Tuesday, August 13
Ezekiel 2:8-3:4;
Matthew 18:1-5, 10, 12-14

Wednesday, August 14
Ezekiel 9:1-7; 10:18-22;
Matthew 18:15-20

Thursday, August 15
Revelation 11:19; 12:1-6, 10;
Corinthians 15:20-27; Luke 1:39-56

Friday, August 16
Ezekiel 16:1-15, 60, 63 or 16:59-63;
Matthew 19:3-12

Saturday, August 17
Ezekiel 18:1-10, 13, 30-32;
Matthew 19:13-15

Kids' Answers
from page 12

Abel
Abraham
Enoch
Noah
Jacob
Moses

"IF YOU'VE MADE A WILL,
THERE'S ONE MORE
THING TO DO..."

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