

Considering matrimony

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This issue of our paper celebrates marriage and family from many angles. I will suggest some of my own. First, it helps to know that when two people marry, they also marry each other's stories on the way to making their own. Clueless about this fact, the characters in the movie "Best Friends" (1982) marry before meeting each other's parents. Depending on your own experience, the movie is instructive as either a comedy or a tragedy.

Second, personal stories and greater global awareness were part of what changed the Church's teaching on matrimony in the 1960s. Matrimony is understood as a public, sacramental union by the Church. Where the union legally used to be viewed as a contract that provided a safe structure for husbands and wives to have children (I simplify), it received a warmer definition.

The 1965 document *The Church in the Modern World* describes marriage as a union of life and love. Children remained properly the fruit of this union, and couples were encouraged to have the children they could raise and educate (paragraphs 47-52). Looking back at that decade, it seems that everyone was redefining marriage, a habit that now governments find hard to resist.

Gradual reflection on marriage in general helped the Church to explicitly recognize the holiness of marriages in other churches, and even civil marriages. Roman Catholic rules about marrying still applied to Catholics, but it was/is a mistake to think that weddings outside the Church "don't count." That is hardly respectful of the rest of the world.

Third, sacramental marriage is for the good of souls. Each spouse undertakes a mission to help the other live a good life now, with a view toward eternal life. It is good to remember this when things are going well, and it will be a help on days where forgiveness (and acceptance of forgiveness) is the only way forward. Fulton Sheen's book "Three to Get Married" includes faith in Christ as part of a Catholic awareness, a wisdom that stands the test of time.

Fourth, the Church's continuous teaching includes what may seem to be a peculiar element — that the love of husbands and wives is necessary not only for them individually, but for the healthy continuation of the human species. This may seem a bit arcane until you notice how many countries are at or below "replacement" birth rates. The numbers are telling. We can see that in the shortages of workers in industry, not to mention health and elder care. It is a problem that has happened before. By the year 200 AD, the Roman Empire had to require its young men to get married so that native educated classes would not die out. Scholar Peter Brown has recounted how some of the virgin martyrs in the early Church lost their lives because of a refusal to add to the number of children who would be conscripted as workers or soldiers of the empire.

So marriage, matrimony and families are not simply the property of couples. We all have a stake in properly appreciating and supporting these as natural institutions and, quite often, as effective signs of God's presence and love.