



why get married? marriage: the basis of civilization

Where did you learn to be human?

That may sound like a ridiculous question. You ARE human. But the truth is that much of what you are, you learned—how to interact with others, to be polite, to obey the rules, to communicate, to love. We learn these human traits as we live.

Remember watching the Jungle Book when you were a kid? The animals raised Mowgli and taught him how to hunt like a panther and climb like a monkey. But they knew that Mowgli was a boy, so they sent him to the village to learn how to be a

human. Like Mowgli, we learn how to be human by watching humans, in the first place we encounter them: our families. From our families we learn love, courage, and perseverance. These first lessons are the building blocks for the people we become, and who we teach our children to be. This is why the family is called the “cradle of civilization”—one generation teaches the next how to be civilized, and how to build a civilization.

Families are built on marriage. When a man and woman make a formal commitment of love to remain

with each other for the rest of their lives and to raise their children together, they are building a family. Families require stability and structure to grow in civilization.



“Marriage is an act of will that signifies and involves a mutual gift, which unites the spouses and binds them to their eventual souls, with whom they make up a sole family – a domestic church.” –Saint John Paul II

“The family is the foundation of co-existence and a remedy against social fragmentation. Children have a right to grow up in a family with a father and a mother capable of creating a suitable environment for the child’s development and emotional maturity.”
–Pope Francis

Today’s society is in the midst of a “crisis of the family.” 40% of children are born to unmarried mothers, and an overwhelming amount of these children are born into lower-income families, where single mothers earn less than \$52,000 per year, which is significantly less than the average \$107,000 earned by married couples.

When children are born outside of marriage, the consequences lie disproportionately on women and children. 35% of households headed by a single woman are poor, compared to 17% of poor households headed by a single man. Only 7.5% of married households live in poverty.

On average, children in single-parent homes also have lower grades, and greater chances of behavioral and psychological problems that persist into adulthood. Children born to unmarried women are more likely to have a child out of marriage, to have lower income, and to have more troubled marriages and divorces than children born inside of marriage. Children from divorced homes face an increase in: teen suicide, juvenile crime and violence, declining school performance, depression rates, and avoidance of marriage later in life.

While many of these statistics can also be linked to growing up poor, the greater factor is the lack of stability and cognitive stimulation in divorced, cohabiting but unmarried, or single households.

Marriage doesn’t just benefit children. Married men report less depression. Married women have fewer problems with alcohol. Both are likely to live longer; they take fewer risks and live healthier lifestyles. Marriage and economic stability are linked. A recent study by the Journal of Financial Planning found that people who cohabit have significantly less wealth than people who marry.

When we see the great benefits marriage provides—people are happier, they live longer, they are financially better off, and their children do significantly better in life—we have to stop and wonder why so few people choose to get married? Don’t people want what is best for themselves, and for their children?

To understand why we’ve shifted away from marriage, we have to look at what society believes marriage is, and whether that definition has any value today.

In today’s culture, marriage is loosely defined as merely an agreement between two loving adults to live together and offer support to each other. We’ve lost the necessity of lifelong commitment, and the connection between marriage and children.

One look around will tell you that many people behave as if they’re married even when they aren’t, doing things that used to be restricted to marriage—living together, sharing sexual intimacy, having children. If we can have any of these things whenever we want them, what’s the point of getting married?

To answer that, we have to go back to Genesis, to the beginning:

“The man gave names to all the tame animals, all the birds of the air, and all the



wild animals; but none proved to be a helper suited to the man. So the Lord God cast a deep sleep on the man, and while he was asleep, he took out one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. The Lord God then built the rib that he had taken from the man into a woman. When he brought her to the man the man said: 'This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; This one shall be called 'woman,' for out of man this one has been taken.' That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body." (*Genesis 20-24*)

Man and woman were created to be helpmates to each other, not just in the way friends or co-workers help each other, but in the way that makes them become "one body," forming a union together. This union does two things: creates a new entity called marriage, and forms new life through the creation of children.



Sometimes the idea of a "helpmate" is misconstrued to say that Catholics think that a woman is somehow less than a man in marriage.

But, this could not be further from the truth. The help between man and woman is

not "one-sided but mutual" (*St John Paul II's Letter to Women*). And, the Hebrew word translated as "helpmate" is often used in the Bible to describe God, so it is really incredible that it is used as the original description of a woman!

The union of man and woman is the only way to make new human life. This is how God designed the world, and because of that, the sexual relationship between man and woman is protected in every civilization across the world. When two people become one body, it is an extraordinarily powerful act, with the potential to create an entirely new being—a child who has never existed before, and who will live forever in the world, and in eternity.

This reality of marriage is built into the very meaning of who we are. We can pretend it's not important, or try to define it as something else, but ignoring the true meaning of marriage only creates chaos. God created the world so that marriage would be the foundation of family, and family would be the foundation of civilization.

"I urge you to lift up yet another truth about marriage: that permanent commitment to solidarity, fidelity, and fruitful love responds to the deepest longings of the human heart." – Pope Francis

Marriage creates a bond that cannot be forged in any other relationship. When two people get married, they vow to love each other in sickness and health, for better or worse, until death do them part. As Christians, we know marriage is a sacrament, and the grace that flows from that sacrament makes the bonds of marriage strong enough to endure any hardship.



Grace isn't something that is "added on" to our human nature or that somehow violates our human nature—it raises us beyond our limitations and allows us to participate in the restoration of creation that Jesus brought about in his death and resurrection. This means that the sacrament of marriage is neither a commitment that makes us less free nor even just an "extra" benefit that is nice to have. It means that the grace from this sacrament completely transforms our human nature (the sexual union) and restores it to God's original plan for men and women before sin entered the world.

The sacrament of marriage allows men and women to live lives of self-giving, committed love that never would have been possible for them on their own. Marriage is an icon of the love of Jesus and his Church. St Paul explains in the Letter to the Ephesians that husbands are meant to love their wives "as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25).

Marriage is far from an arbitrary institution imposed upon humanity; it is an opportunity to enter into a relationship that reflects the mystery of the creation and redemption of the world!

In the stability of a sacramental marriage and the promise of exclusivity, two things can happen: a couple can love each other entirely, without reservation or fear of rejection, and children can be created with respect to their true dignity.

It can be hard to tell another person you love them. What if they don't love you back? What if they say they love you, but then they stop? The nature of love is the basis of every romance novel and teen drama ever written. But in marriage, the insecurity and uncertainty of love is erased.

Once a couple vows to love each other in marriage, they never have to worry whether that love still exists. This doesn't mean marriage is easy, or that people don't mess up. But once two people have given each other every bit of their love in marriage, their bond can never be broken.

This is why the Catholic Church does not recognize divorce. Once given away, the complete self-gift of love can never be taken back and given to another. (Annulment can be obtained if at least one of the elements needed for a valid marriage was missing from the beginning. If one of the spouses did not really mean "until death do us part", for instance. Or, one spouse felt coerced into getting married.)

Because a husband and wife share a sexual bond as well, they are likely to want and have children. All children have the right to be raised by their married parents, if possible. Marriage enables a couple to be prepared to welcome a child. Because they have vowed to love each other, they have also made a commitment to love and raise any children they may have, either naturally or through adoption. Marriage provides children the stability to thrive, and to become civilized, and it creates a family that provides protection, support, and love.

Because our society is misinformed about the nature and benefits of marriage, more and more people are failing to get married. We are called to share the joys of marriage with the rest of the

world. Whether you grew up with married parents or not, you can still know the reality of marriage, and realize that it speaks to the deepest longings of your heart.

Living the reality of marriage is counter-cultural. Not everyone agrees with us. As Christians, we are called to share the good news of the world as God made it. It can be intimidating, but God is on our side, and he will give us the strength we need to live the lives he has planned for us.

"Have no fear of moving into the unknown. Simply step out fearlessly knowing that I am with you, therefore no harm can befall you; all is very, very well. Do this in complete faith and confidence."
-Saint John Paul II

Questions for Discussion:

- What is the sociological purpose for the family in cultures? Upon what is family based?
- What makes marriage sacramental?
- Based on the evidence that children of married parents fare better socially, economically, and educationally, do you believe the state has a compelling interest in promoting marriage? Why or why not?
- Is marriage external to our human condition or something that speaks to our human nature?
- As you discern your vocation, why might you look forward to marriage?

