



Sacred Heart  
UNIVERSITY

Sacred Heart University Review

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Volume 20

Issue 1 *Sacred Heart University Review*, Volume XX,  
Numbers 1 & 2, Fall 1999/ Spring 2000

Article 3

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March 2010

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## Recommended Citation

Lawler, Michael G. (2010) "Christian Marriage and Family in the Postmodern World," *Sacred Heart University Review*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

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# Christian Marriage and Family in the Postmodern World

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Michael G. Lawler is Graff Distinguished Professor of Catholic Theology and Director of the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University, Omaha, Nebraska. This talk was delivered at Sacred Heart University February 2, 2001, at the Eighth Annual Benziger Convocation on Catechetics, sponsored by the Institute for Religious Education and Pastoral Studies (REAPS).

MICHAEL G. LAWLER

*Christian Marriage and Family  
in the Postmodern World*

Though it is not possible today to derive a complete theory of marriage only from Christian theology, that does not mean that theology has nothing to contribute. It has much to contribute, but only if it becomes so embedded in the culture that it influences the culture from the inside. I am in complete agreement with Pope John Paul II when he notes that the synthesis between faith and culture is a requirement not only of culture but of faith, and that "a faith which does not become culture is a faith not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived."<sup>1</sup> This essay attempts such a synthesis between Christian marital theology and American culture in order to make a credible contribution to the meaning of marriage in America.

*The Situation*

Over the last three generations, marriage as a social institution has progressively weakened. Marriage rates are lower, age at marriage is higher, since 1960 the divorce rate has doubled, marital fertility is lower, non-marital childbearing has skyrocketed, and so has pre-marital cohabitation. Since 1980, the proportion of children born outside of marriage has almost doubled from 18.4% to about 34%. Each year in America at least 1.2 million babies are born to unmarried parents.<sup>2</sup> Weaker marriage ties have not translated into happier marriages or families. The percent of persons in intact and happy first marriages "has declined substantially in recent years,

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the proportion now being about one-third." Despite high rates of divorce, the proportion of children living with unhappily married

parents has not declined.<sup>3</sup>

Why did marriage weaken? Scholars point to a variety of important cultural, legal, and economic changes, including: radical individualism; increased expectations of intimacy in marriage, particularly among women; greater social approval of alternatives to marriage, such as cohabitation; the greater relative economic independence of women; so-called "no-fault" divorce reform; the rise in social insurance programs that make individuals less dependent on families in general and marriage in particular; and less social support (and pressure) for getting and staying married from family, friends, professionals, churches, business, and government. Those, at least, are contributing causes in the privileged class, those who have the means available to make choices. In the underprivileged class, sub-standard educational achievement and consequent chronic unemployment make stable marriage and family simply a hopeless ideal.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, there is abundant research evidence to show that these trends are transmitted across generations; delayed marriage, decreased marital fertility, and divorce in one generation are associated with the same and higher trends in the next. One study following a nationally representative sample of over 2,000 married people found that children whose parents divorced were 76% more likely to divorce themselves, even after controlling for the quality of their parents' marriage.<sup>5</sup>

Has this decline happened because Americans no longer care about marriage? Absolutely not. Marriage remains a widely-shared social aspiration. In a 1996 survey, just 1% of Americans said marital success was "not very important" to them. Only 8% call marriage an "outdated institution," a proportion that has not changed over the last generation. About half of Americans say "divorce in this country should be more difficult to obtain,"<sup>6</sup> and public support for this point of view is rising.<sup>7</sup> Family scholar Norval Glenn describes the paradox: "Marriage remains very important to adult Americans — probably as important as it has ever been — while the proportion of Americans married has declined and the proportion successfully married has declined even more."<sup>8</sup>

The younger generation is equally enthusiastic about marriage. Eight out of ten high school girls say that having a good marriage and family life are "extremely important."<sup>9</sup> More than two out of three

younger Americans agree that "when parents divorce, children develop permanent emotional problems." Three-fourths believe that divorce laws are too lax.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, young people today view cohabitation more favorably, and are less likely than in the recent past to firmly connect marriage with childbearing. Both of these attitudes appear to be translating into action. Between 1976-80 and 1991-95, the proportion of high school senior girls who said having a child while unmarried is either "a worthwhile lifestyle" or "not affecting anyone else," jumped from 33% to 53%.<sup>11</sup> By the early 1990s, about 40% of women under the age of 30 who became first-time mothers were not married.<sup>12</sup> Between 1975 and 1995, the proportion of high-school girls who agreed "It is usually a good idea for couples to live together before getting married" skyrocketed from 32% to 55%.<sup>13</sup> Between 1975 and 1995, the proportion of all couples who were cohabiting, rather than marrying more than tripled, and 64% of women born between 1963 and 1974 made their first union a cohabitation rather than a marriage.<sup>14</sup> By the early 1990s cohabitation was replacing marriage among young parents, as well: the proportion of out-of-wedlock births to cohabiting couples leaped from 29% in the early 1980s to 39% in the early 1990s.<sup>15</sup>

In each of these cases, the untutored strategies of the young make it *less*, not *more* likely that they will achieve their goal of a stable, happy marriage. The divorce rate for spouses who cohabited prior to marriage is some 50% above the rate for spouses who did not cohabit, so that children born to cohabiting parents are more likely than children born to married parents to experience the separation of their parents. That leads to a variety of problems for children, which in turn leads to a variety of problems for educators, including religious educators.

### *The Theology*

A single imperial Roman definition has dominated the Western answer to the question "What is marriage?" It is found in Justinian's *Digesta* (23,2,1) and is attributed to the third-century jurist, Modestinus: "Marriage is a union of a man and a woman, and a communion of the whole of life, a participation in divine and human law." Though this definition is no more than a description of how

marriage was practiced in Rome, it has controlled every subsequent discussion of marriage in Western culture. Marriage is a union of a man and a woman, a union that embraces the whole of life. The Congress of the United States saw fit in 1996 to reaffirm this definition as the only American definition in the Defense of Marriage Act. The phrase, "the whole of life," is open to two separate, if related, interpretations. It can mean as long as life lasts, and this implies that marriage is a life-long commitment; and it can mean everything, spiritual and material, that the spouses have, and this implies that the union is unconditional, that nothing is held back. Over the years, the two definitions have been fused, so that marriage is looked upon as the union of a man and a woman embracing the sharing of all their goods "until death do us part." In the freshness and passion of love, that is certainly how most Americans still approach it.

Reflection on this definition uncovers several essential dimensions in marriage. At root, marriage is a created, *natural* institution, created by nature's God to enable man and woman to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28) and to raise children in the love of their Creator. Marriage is also a *legal* contract, effected by the public exchange of mutual consent to marry. This public contract takes the natural institution of marriage and transforms it into a legal institution with formal legal obligations and rights the spouses share. Because of this public recognition and support, marriage creates more security between partners, producing a firmer public bond than lovers can privately create. As high as the divorce rate is in marriage, therefore, it is even higher among cohabitators. Public recognition of and protection for this marriage contract, in tax law, divorce law, inheritance law, insurance law, and family law — the package of legal "goodies" that accompany marriage — contribute to the creation of the permanent marriage bond and permanent family bond that marriage is to be. The more marriage is redefined as a private relationship, the less effective it becomes in helping couples achieve their goal of a lasting bond. Marriage is a family-making bond. It takes two biological strangers and transforms them into "one body" (Genesis 2:24), that is, into blood relations-in-law. As a procreative bond, marriage also includes a commitment and a legal obligation to care for any children the married couple might have. It legally reinforces, especially, fathers' obligations to acknowledge and support children as part of their family system.<sup>16</sup>

Marriage is also an *interpersonal* relationship, the ultimate avowal of committed, unconditional, and mutual love. Marriage incorporates our desire to know and be known, to love and be loved, to forgive and be forgiven by another human being like us; it represents our deepest desires that love is not a temporary, fleeting condition, that we are not condemned forever to drift in and out of transient relationships. Although we can intend that our love be indissoluble, we can never make it indissoluble at any one moment in our lives, for love stretches out with life into the future. What we can do, in Margaret Farley's words, is "initiate in the present a new form of relationship that will endure in the form of fidelity or betrayal." Commitment, she adds, is "love's way of being whole while it still grows into wholeness."<sup>17</sup> The biblical phrase for such interpersonal union, much misunderstood and overly restricted in the West to genital union, is "one body" (Genesis 2:24).

Although marriage is about much more than genital union, it is, of course, also about genital union. It elevates sexual desire and bodily intercourse to a symbol of interpersonal love. The symbolic actions of sex make up a language as surely as do the symbolic sounds of any spoken language, and like any other language the language of sex needs to be learned, for it is only when they know and appreciate the language that two mutually committed lovers truly "make love" in any sexual activity. One of the many goods wholly shared between spouses is sexuality; not merely, as in the 1917 *Code of Canon Law*, as a means for sharing their bodies for procreation but, as Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* more personally taught, as a way to "mutually gift and accept one another" (n. 48). Embraced in the consent to marry is the mutual consent to be faithful, both personally and sexually, for life. There is evidence that this mutual and public vow of fidelity makes both men and women more likely to be faithful. Research data show that cohabiting men are four times more likely than husbands to have other sexual partners, and cohabiting women are eight times more likely than wives to have other sexual partners.<sup>18</sup>

Last, but certainly not least, marriage is a *sacred covenant*. Even people who do not belong to any religion usually see marriage as a sacred union, with profound spiritual implications: "Whether it is the deep metaphors of covenant as in Judaism, Islam and Reformed Protestantism; sacrament as in Roman Catholicism or Eastern

Orthodoxy; the yin and yang of Confucianism; the quasi-sacramentalism of Hinduism; or the mysticism often associated with allegedly modern romantic love, humans tend to find values in marriage that call them beyond the mundane and everyday.<sup>19</sup> Marriage is one of those human events that points men and women to the sacred. Research shows that religion, any religion, is good for marriage; religious faith helps deepen the meaning of marriage and provides a unique base of stability and support when troubles arise.<sup>20</sup> Let us examine this sacred dimension of marriage in more detail.

Central to the Hebrew notion of their special relationship with Yahweh was the idea of the covenant. Yahweh is the God of Israel; Israel is the people of God. Israel's prophets, Hosea, Jeremiah, Deutero-Isaiah and Ezekiel, speak of this relationship in marital terms. They find in the marriage between a man and a woman an image or a symbol to represent the relationship of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel. On a superficial level, the marriage of Hosea and Gomer his wife is like many other marriages. On a deeper level, Hosea sees it as prophetic symbol, revealing in representation the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel.

This conception of marriage as a prophetic symbol of a faithful covenant is continued in the New Testament, with a minor change. Rather than presenting marriage as a symbol of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel, the Letter to the Ephesians presents it as an image of the covenant between Christ and the Church. This biblical notion of marriage as a prophetic symbol of covenant provided the foundation for the Catholic doctrine of marriage as sacrament, which developed with difficulty over a thousand-year period.

Though they differ in the theological language they use about marriage, the contemporary churches agree that it is not only a *socio-legal* but also a *religious* reality. They believe it places spouses in a context of grace. The Catholic traditions express this grace-context in their teaching on marriage as sacrament, that is, as a prophetic symbol in and through which the Church proclaims and celebrates that presence of God in Christ it calls grace. There are two dimensions of that sacrament. There is, first, the wedding ceremony, which ritualizes the free giving of consent by which two Christians establish a marriage. There is, second, the married life of the couple, which concretizes their consent in a life-long partnership of love. In ordinary language,



both these actions are named ``marriage." In Catholic theological language, both are also named ``sacrament"; in Calvinist theological language, both are also named ``covenant."

Contemporary Catholic theology has embraced the Calvinist tradition of marriage as covenant, describing marriage today as covenant as much as sacrament. That development began in the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et Spes*. Marriage, it taught, is ``a communion of love" (n. 47), an ``intimate partnership of life and love" (n. 48), ``founded in a conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent" (n. 48). Though faced with insistent demands to retain the juridical word ``contract," introduced into Canon Law by Gasparri in 1917, as a way to speak of marriage, the Council preferred the biblical, theological, and personal word ``covenant." This choice locates marriage as an *interpersonal* rather than a *legal* reality and roots it in the rich biblical and theological tradition of covenant between God and God's People and Christ and Christ and Christ's church. The revised Code of Canon Law also preferred ``covenant" to ``contract," though it relapses into contractual language some thirty times.

In this covenant, spouses commit themselves mutually to a life of intimate partnership in abiding love. They commit themselves to explore together the religious depths of their life together and to respond to those depths in the light of their shared Christian faith. They commit themselves to abide in covenant and in love, and to withdraw from them only when their partnership has ceased to exist and when all available means to restore it have been exhausted. Though the Protestant traditions, on the basis of their understanding of the Gospels, permit divorce and remarriage, no one should doubt that their theology of marriage as covenant and as sign of the covenant between Christ and the church situates marriage as a context of grace every bit as much as the Catholic theology of sacrament. Marriage, indeed, along with the family or little church that results from it, is a high-point of the Christian vocation.

### *The Theology and the Situation*

A sacramental/covenantal marriage is the very antithesis of American individualism and ``marriage until my individual needs are not satisfied." In a genuine covenantal marriage, a man and a woman

commit themselves to create a life of equal and intimate partnership in loyal and faithful love. When God created the heavens and the earth, when no plant had yet sprung up from the earth because God had not yet brought rain, a mist rose up and watered the earth. The mist turned the dry earth to mud, in Hebrew *'adamah*, and from that *'adamah* God formed *'adam* and breathed into her and his nostrils the breath of life. And *'adam* became a living being (Genesis 2:4-7). ``When the Lord Yahweh created *'adam*, he made *'adam* in the likeness of Yahweh. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and he named them *'adam*" (Genesis 5:1-2).

This myth, for it is indeed a myth and not historical description, responds to the perennial human question: Where did we come from? We, in Hebrew *'adam*, in English ``humankind," came from God. Male and female as we are, we are from God, and together we make up humankind. This fact alone, that God names woman and man together *'adam*, establishes the equality of men and women as human beings.

The further myth which speaks of the creation of woman from man's rib, intends in its Hebrew metaphor the equality of man and woman, not their separate creation. The United States Catholic Bishops underscore this fact in their pastoral response to the concerns of women in the church. Since ``in the divine image . . . male and female (God) created them" (Genesis 1:27), woman and man are equal in human dignity and favor in God's eyes. They are equal in everything human; they are ``bone of bone and flesh of flesh" (Genesis 2:23). It is only because they are so equal, says the myth, that they may marry and ``become one body" (Genesis 2:24).

As Western Christians have seriously misread the Hebrew myth about equal man and woman, so too have they seriously misread the Hebrew notion of body. They have linked it much too exclusively to one facet of becoming one in marriage, namely, the joining of bodies in sexual union. This facet is an important part of becoming one, uniting bodies to express and create the union of persons, but it is far from all there is.

In the Hebrew myth, ``body" does not refer to the external, physical part of the human being, as it does in English. It refers instead to the whole person. In marriage, therefore, a man and a woman covenant to unite not only their bodies but also their entire persons.

Marriage is for the good of persons, not for the good of bodies. In the Hebrew culture of Jesus' time, in distinction to contemporary Western culture, where individuals consent to a marriage which society guarantees as a legal reality, families consented to a marriage which society guaranteed as a blood relationship. That blood relationship makes the spouses one body, one person, in a way that escapes the understanding of those who think only in physical and legal terms. They become, as God intended in the beginning, equal man and woman complementing one another to re-create together *'adam* and the image of God. Rabbis have long taught that, according to God's design, neither man nor woman is wholly human until each receives the complement of the other in marriage. The equal partnership of marriage is demanded by the founding myth in which both Judaism and Christianity are rooted.

Christian marital covenant demands not only the creation of a life of equal partnership but also the sustaining of that life. When believing spouses marry, they commit themselves mutually to create rules of behavior that will nurture and sustain their marriage. As believing Christians, they will come to those rules by paying careful attention to their tradition.

Christian spouses will find the ideals to inform their covenant marriage succinctly summarized in the biblical Letter to the Ephesians. The context begins in 5:21, where the author critiques the Household Codes, the lists of traditional household duties in first-century Palestine, together with the inequality embedded in them, and challenges all Christians to "give way to one another because you stand in awe [*phobos*] of Christ" (5:21). The critique both challenges the absolute authority of any Christian individual over another, of a husband over a wife, for instance, and establishes the basic attitude required of all Christians, even if they be husband and wife, namely, an awe of Christ and a giving way to one another because of it.

Since all Christians are to give way to one another, it is not surprising that wives are challenged to give way to their husbands (5:22). What is surprising, at least to husbands who see themselves as lords and masters of their wives and who seek to found this unchristian attitude in Ephesians, is the challenge to husbands. The challenge is that "The husband is the head of the wife as [that is, in the same way as] Christ is head of the church" (5:23). In immediate response to the

obvious question, "How is Christ head of the church?" the writer explains "He gave himself up for her" (5:25). There is here clear echo of a self-description Jesus offers in Mark's gospel: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" (10:45). There is loud echo also of what Jesus constantly pointed out to his power-hungry disciples, namely, that in the kingdom of God the one who leads is the servant of all (Luke 22:26).

The Christian way to exercise authority is to serve. Christ-like authority is not absolute control over another human being; it is not making unilateral decisions and transmitting them to another to carry out; it is not reducing another to the status of a slave. To be head as Christ is head is to serve. The Christian husband, as Markus Barth puts it so beautifully, is called to be "the first servant of his wife," and she is equally called to be his first servant.<sup>21</sup> One rule of behavior by which Christian believers may nurture both their marriage and their sacrament/covenant is the Christian rule of service: of God, of one another, and of the needs around them. That rule of service is to be symmetrical, in the sense that both spouses, not only the wife, are called to service because they stand in awe of Christ.

Another Christian rule for behavior, both in and out of marriage, is the great commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:31). Husbands, the Letter to the Ephesians instructs, are to "love their wives as their own bodies," for the husband "who loves his wife loves himself" (5:28). We can rightfully assume the same instruction is intended also for wives. The Torah and Gospel command to love one's neighbor as oneself applies in marriage to one's spouse who, in that most beautiful and most sexual of Jewish love songs, the *Song of Songs*, is addressed nine times as "neighbor," (1:9,15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4). "Neighbor," in the *Song*, is a term of endearment for the beloved. A paraphrase of Paul clinches the rule of love for Christian spouses: those who love their spouses have fulfilled all the rules of behavior for nurturing and sustaining a Christian marriage (Romans 13:8).

There is a caveat here. In contemporary American usage, love almost always means romantic love, a strong feeling of affection for another person, frequently a passionate feeling for another person of the opposite sex. That is not what neighbor-love means, at least not exclusively. Feeling is often part of neighbor-love, but it is never all

there is to it. If feeling was essential for love, then the love of neighbors, commanded by Jesus, including those neighbors who are enemies (Matthew 22:39; 5:44), would be impossible, for few of us can feel love for many of our neighbors and even fewer can feel love for our enemies. Neighbor-love and enemy-love is more radical than feeling; it is love that *wills* and *does* the good of the other.

The poverty of the English language, which has only one word for love, causes a problem here. We use the same word to say, for instance, "I love my spouse," "I love my friends," and "I love a good red wine," as if there are no differences between these three loves. But there are enormous differences. The Greeks had three distinct words for those three loves: *agape*, the love of another for the other's good; *philia*, the mutual love of friends; *eros*, the love of another for my good or benefit.<sup>22</sup> A consideration of the relationship between these three words and the conceptual realities they express will clarify the covenant love of God and neighbor.

Though all three words refer to legitimate human love, they each intend something very specific. *Philia* intends the good of another person, and so does *agape* more unconditionally. I believe *philia* is the foundational love on which both *eros* and *agape* build. What *eros* builds is essentially something physical called, after Freud, *desire*. Where *eros* dominates a relationship, equality and mutuality are destroyed and replaced by the desire to possess, to dominate, and to use. That is fine when we are talking about a red wine or a racing-green sports car, but to seek to possess or to use another human being for my exclusive benefit is, in effect, to abuse her or him. An exclusively erotic approach to the love of another person creates the very situations it seeks to avoid, namely, alienation, isolation, loneliness, emptiness, everything but interpersonal communion. *Agape* intends and actually seeks to achieve the good of the beloved, even while recognizing that the beloved's well-being is the only way to our common well-being and, therefore, to my individual well-being. It is *agape*, willed love translated into actions, not feeling love, that the Bible prescribes when it prescribes covenant love. Love of God and love of neighbor are essentially willing and actively seeking the good of God and neighbor. Covenant love is willing love and giving love, not just feeling and getting love. In the *Torah*, that love is characterized as *hesed*, steadfast, faithful love; in the New Testament, it is characterized

as *agape*, the unconditional love of an other for the other's sake.

A sacramental marriage is not just a wedding to be celebrated. It is also, and more critically, an equal and loving partnership to be lived for the whole of life. When believing spouses covenant to one another in marriage, they commit themselves to explore together the religious depth of their married life and to respond to that depth in the light of their mutual covenant to Christ and to the church in which he abides. Marriage does not isolate the spouses from life. It immerses them in life, and confronts them with the ultimate questions of life and death that are the stuff of religion. Sometimes the questions are easy, concerning upbeat things like happiness, friendship, success, the birth of children; sometimes they concern downbeat things like sadness, alienation, friendship, pain, suffering, fear, grief, and death. Life demands that sense be made of the questions; marriage demands that the spouses make sense of them together; Christian marriage demands they make sense of them in the light of their shared Christian faith.

In our age, Christians have to decide what sign their marriage will offer to a world that is sinful, broken, and divided by racism, sexism, classism, and divorce. Since they are believing Christians, that sign will depend, at least in part, on Jesus' assertion, already considered, that he came "not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45). No Christian individual, couple, or church, can be anything less than for others. No Christian family can be anything less than a "domestic church" for others (*Lumen Gentium*, 11), healing first its own brokenness and then reaching out to heal the brokenness in the communities in which it exists. Service to the society in which they live is the responsibility of all Christians, married or unmarried. Sacramental/covenantal marriage adds only the specification that the spouses exercise their service as part of their marital life.

Even in the most individualistic of societies, a label readily applicable to the United States, marriage is never just a private act between two individuals; it is also a public act. Societies have a stake in marriage, which is why they require for its validity a public celebration before approved witnesses. Marriage is an act by which two individuals, a unique I and a unique Thou, come together to form a coupled We, the biblical one body. It is not, however, an act by which the We so focuses on itself that it excludes all others in the community from which the We emerged. Marriage, rather, is the act in which the We is

so constituted in the community that the We becomes open to all.<sup>23</sup> Marriage binds a couple to one another, but it binds them specifically to one another in a wider community. If and when the We's love becomes further fruitful in the generation of a child, the resultant family is equally bound to the wider community.

In his treatment of the Lord's Supper, of the eucharist which derives from it, and of the character of both as memorial meals, Leon-Dufour underscores an element of the Supper that has been obscured by the Catholic emphasis on the transformation of bread and wine. That element is Jesus' washing the feet of his disciples, which Leon-Dufour interprets as integral to the memorial meal. This foot-washing is a prophetic symbolic action that both reveals Jesus' will to be remembered as servant and challenges those who keep memory of him to do the same.<sup>24</sup> John's Jesus underlines the challenge in his final testament: "I have given you an example that you also should do as I have done to you" (13:15). Jesus, who lived a life of culturally-concretized neighbor-love (Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:31), challenged his disciples to do the same.

The Catholic moral tradition, following Aristotle, insists that the human animal is a social animal, a premise from which it draws two important conclusions. The first is that no one attains full humanity or full Christianity alone; everyone needs friendly communion with others to reach mature humanity. The second is that beyond the private good of individuals extends the public or common good of the larger community, and both humans and Christians are required by their essentially social nature to "situate particular interest within the framework of a coherent vision of the common good." John Paul II stresses interdependence among this hierarchy of values along with solidarity. This solidarity "is not a vague feeling of compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people . . . [but] . . . a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good . . . to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all."<sup>25</sup> Following a well-marked magisterial path of recent decades, marked out by John Chrysostom, Patriarch of Constantinople at the end of the fourth century,<sup>26</sup> John Paul later underscores this solidarity as a preferential option or "love of preference for the poor"<sup>27</sup> and proposes as a motto for the time *opus solidaritatis pax*, "peace as the fruit of solidarity."<sup>28</sup> Though this social

teaching has in mind primarily the larger community beyond families, it clearly applies also to families, especially to those Christian families who would be domestic churches.

The Church, the family of Christ, Pope Paul VI taught, "has an authentic secular dimension, inherent in her inner nature and mission, which is deeply rooted in the mystery of the Word incarnate and realized in different forms through her members."<sup>29</sup> The Christian doctrine of the incarnation of God in Jesus constructs a bridge over the gulf between heaven and earth, between the supernatural and the natural, between the sacred and the secular. The Christian Church, founded and rooted in Jesus, enlivened by his Spirit, and charged with the continuation of his mission, seeks to maintain that bridge. It, therefore, must also be incarnate in human life. That theological doctrine explains why John Paul II teaches that the lay faithful are marked by a "secular character," and why he insists that this secular character is to be understood in a theological and not just a sociological sense.

The world, John Paul suggests, is both the place and the means in and with which the lay faithful fulfill their Christian vocation. God, he goes on to explain explicitly and theologically, "has handed over the world to women and men so that they may participate in the work of creation, free creation from the influence of sin and sanctify themselves in marriage or the celibate life, in a family, in a profession and the various activities of society."<sup>30</sup> The reference to Christian spouses and Christian families could not be clearer. They are to sanctify themselves in their marriage and family, of course, but they are to sanctify themselves also by immersion in their community, "in a profession and the various activities of society." They are to live in their community and "permeate and perfect" it "with the spirit of the gospel" (Canticles).

Pope John Paul may have the final word in this extension of the biblical story of Jesus to the Christian message of life and love. He draws attention to a temptation which laity "have not always known how to avoid," the temptation to separate faith from life, to separate "the gospel's acceptance from the actual living of the gospel in various situations in the world."<sup>31</sup> What the Pope implies, and on occasion explicitly says, is clear: to be responsive and faithful to their vocation to follow Christ, Christian families need to reach out in active love to their



communities. The fruitfulness, the very Christianness, of their marital and family lives depends on it.

The hope, firmly founded in the Easter faith that God brings new life from death, is that the Christian marriage and family has a contribution to make to both the church and the society to which it belongs. Its contribution will never be sufficient by itself. It will need the cooperation of other major institutions: the economic institution, which controls all American lives, especially the lives of the economically-deprived poor; the political institution, concerned with the common good, especially the good of the politically-deprived poor; and the educational institution, which has a particular responsibility for the good of the educationally-deprived poor. Nevertheless, if the institutions of family and religion, cooperatively embedded in the Christian family, could transform American families into institutions of neighbor- (including enemy-) love, solidarity, and justice for all, what a transformation could be achieved in society and in all its major institutions.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>*L'Osservatore Romano*, March 8, 1982. The Pope repeated the same phrase in a letter to Cardinal Casaroli appointing him President of the Pontifical Council for Culture. See *L'Osservatore Romano*, June 28, 1982.

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998* (Washington, DC: Department of Commerce), Table 92.

<sup>3</sup>Norval Glenn, "Values, Attitudes, and the State of American Marriage," in *Promises to Keep: Decline and Renewal of Marriage in America*, ed. David Popenoe, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and David Blankenhorn (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), pp. 15-33. See figures 2.2 and 2.3.

<sup>4</sup>William J. Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Random House, 1997).

<sup>5</sup>Amato and Booth, *A Generation at Risk: Growing Up in an Era of Family Upheaval* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 115.

<sup>6</sup>The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, "The Family, Marriage: Highly Valued" *The Public Perspective* (February/March, 1998), pp. 17-18.

<sup>7</sup>Lynn D. Wardle, "Divorce Reform at the Turn of the Millennium:

Certainties and Possibilities," *Family Law Quarterly* 33 (1999): 783ff.

<sup>8</sup>Norval Glenn, "Values, Attitudes and the State of American Marriage," pp. 15-33.

<sup>9</sup>See figures 13 and 14 in David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions the Social Health of Marriage in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: The National Marriage Project, 1999), June.

<sup>10</sup>David Popenoe, *Changes in Teen Attitudes Toward Marriage, Cohabitation and Children, 1975-1995* (New Brunswick, NJ: The National Marriage Project, 1999), pp. 1-10.

<sup>11</sup>See figure 16 in Popenoe and Whitehead.

<sup>12</sup>Amara Bachu, *Trends in Marital Status of U.S. Women at First Birth 1930 to 1994* (Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998). Available online at: <http://www.census.gov/population/www/techpap.html>

<sup>13</sup>See figure 17 in Popenoe and Whitehead.

<sup>14</sup>Tom W. Smith, "The Emerging 21st Century Family," in *GSS Social Change Report No. 42* (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, 1999), Table 2.

<sup>15</sup>Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu, "Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children's Family Contexts in the U.S." Paper presented at the 1998 annual meeting of the Population Association of America. Available online at [www.ssc.wisc.edu/cde/cdewp/home.htm](http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/cde/cdewp/home.htm).

<sup>16</sup>See David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), and David Popenoe, *Life Without Father: Compelling New Evidence that Fatherhood and Marriage are Indispensable for the Good of Children and Society* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

<sup>17</sup>Margaret Farley, *Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 34.

<sup>18</sup>Tabulations by Linda J. Waite and Kara Joyner, from the National Health and Social Life Survey. See their study *The Case for Marriage* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), chapter 6.

<sup>19</sup>Don Browning, "What Is Marriage? An Exploration." Paper presented at the Institute for American Values Marriage Consultation, New York City, January 25, 2000, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup>Constance L.E. Sheehan, Wilbur Bock, and Gary Lee, "Religious Heterogamy, Religiosity, and Marital Happiness: The Case of Catholics," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 52 (1990), 73-79; Darwin L. Thomas and Marie Cornwall, "Religion and Family in the 1980s: Discovery and Development," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 52 (1990), 983-92; Barry A.

Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman, *One Nation Under God: Religion in Contemporary American Society* (New York: Harmony Books, 1993); Vaughn R.A. Call and Tim B. Heaton, "Religious Influence on Marital Stability," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36 (1997), 382-92; Center for Marriage and Family, *Ministry to Interchurch Marriages: A National Study* (Omaha: Creighton University, 1999).

<sup>21</sup>Markus Barth, ed., *Ephesians*. The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1974), p. 618.

<sup>22</sup>See C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1960).

<sup>23</sup>See Karl Rahner, "Marriage as a Sacrament," in *Theological Investigations* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), p. 207.

<sup>24</sup>Xavier Leon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread: The Witness of the New Testament*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 82-95.

<sup>25</sup>John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38, *Origins* 17/38 (March 3, 1988). All emphases in original.

<sup>26</sup>See especially John Chrysostom, *On Almsgiving*, 6, and *Homily on the Psalms*, 110, 3.

<sup>27</sup>John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 42.

<sup>28</sup>John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 39.

<sup>29</sup>Paul VI, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 64 (1972), 208.

<sup>30</sup>John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* [Apostolic Exhortation on the Laity], 15.

<sup>31</sup>John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 2.