

## Bishops' draft pastoral warns of dangers to marriage

Tom Roberts | Oct. 12, 2009



A couple process out of Our Mother of Sorrows Church in Greece, N.Y., at the end of their wedding ceremony in 2008. (CNS)

The draft of a new pastoral letter that warns against four fundamental challenges to marriage, describing two of them -- cohabitation and contraception -- as intrinsically evil, will be considered by the U.S. bishops at their November national gathering in Baltimore.

The draft of the letter, "Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan," a copy of which was obtained by NCR, covers familiar territory. It asserts that the church throughout history has taught that marriage "is an exclusive relationship between one man and one woman"; that its dual purpose, the union of individuals and the conception of children, are inseparable; and that each sexual act must be open to the possibility of children. The paper condemns artificial birth control, same-sex marriage, cohabitation and divorce as challenges "directed to the very meaning and purposes of marriage."

The bishops say they are developing the letter, intended as "a theological and doctrinal foundation," as one expression of a 2004 pledge "to be a marriage-building church."

That year, the bishops approved a "National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage" to teach both the church and wider culture the meaning of marriage "from the riches of our Catholic faith."

While acknowledging with gratitude "that so many couples are living in fidelity to their marital commitment" the bishops express great concern over "the fact that far too many people do not understand what it means to say that marriage -- both as a natural institution and Christian sacrament -- is a blessing and gift from God."

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The letter relies heavily on the late Pope John Paul II's perception of new cultural threats "that seek to destroy" the family and on his writings about human sexuality.

The bishops ground their understanding of "male-female complementarity," in the Genesis creation stories,

noting that in the first account God creates both male and female at the same time, thus demonstrating scripture's affirmation of "the fundamental equality and dignity of man and woman as persons created in God's image."

In the second account, God creates Eve after creating Adam as "a helpmate who is suitable for him or matching him. ? Adam and Eve were literally made for each other. Man and woman have been made to come together in the union of marriage."

The stories, according to the draft, illustrate that man and woman are both different and the same. "While human persons are more than biological organisms, the roots of marriage can be seen in the biological fact that a man and a woman can come together as male and female in a union that has the potential for bringing forth another human person."

The text notes that the first command given to Adam and Eve is "be fertile and multiply," a command, in the bishops' view, that echoes the "very nature" of marriage, which is "ordered to the procreation and education of offspring." It is in offspring, write the bishops, that married love "finds its crowning glory."

"The unitive and the procreative/educative purposes [of marriage] are meant to be inseparable. ? These are two connected meanings of the same reality," according to the text. "The transmission of life is a sublime, concrete realization of this radical self-gift between a man and a woman."

To close off even a single act of sexual intercourse to the possibility of procreation through the use of contraception, say the bishops, "is a way of trying to separate the unitive meaning of marriage from the procreative and educative meaning. This is an intrinsically evil action."

The bishops advocate natural family planning, which "makes use of periodic abstinence from sexual intercourse" to limit the number of children, as an alternative to other contraceptive methods. Although the aim might be the same, to limit the number of children, the bishops argue that natural family planning does "nothing to alter the conjugal act" while the use of artificial contraceptive methods is an attempt to "master the sources of life."

In a note of consolation to infertile couples, the bishops point out that even a childless marriage "is a distinctive communion of persons. By its very nature, marriage is both love-giving and life-giving. An infertile couple continues to manifest both of these attributes when their hearts remain open to the needs of others, including adopted and foster children."

Cohabitation, says the draft, negatively affects children as well as couples. "At the heart of cohabitation lies a reluctance or refusal to make a public, permanent commitment." The practice, according to the bishops, turns marriage, intended as a foundation for a community of persons, into a "private institution."

The bishops decry the rise of same-sex marriage as "one of the most troubling developments in contemporary culture." Same-sex marriage "redefines the nature of marriage and the family and, as a result, harms both the intrinsic dignity of every human person and the common good of society."

Divorce is a reflection of original sin, "which disrupted the original communion of man and woman," the document states. Acknowledging that the stresses of modern life and ordinary disagreements and quarrels that occur can jeopardize marriage, the bishops urge "couples in crisis to turn to the Lord," as well as to programs and ministries offered by the church, for help in solving problems.

If in the case of domestic violence, where the safety of a woman and children may be at risk, the bishops acknowledge that divorce may be the "only solution to a morally unacceptable situation." In such cases, the

bishops urge "frequent use of the sacraments, especially the sacraments of holy Eucharist and of penance and reconciliation." Those who have been divorced and remarried civilly are encouraged to participate in parish life and attend Sunday Eucharist, even though their second marriage is not considered valid and they are not eligible to receive Communion.

The bishops encourage divorced persons who wish to remarry in the church to seek counsel and possibly an annulment.

At one point in the text, the bishops deal with a kind of hierarchy of beings and the significance of conjugal love and procreation for humans. "For St. Thomas Aquinas," the bishops note, "while angels are, strictly speaking, higher than human beings by nature, the ability to procreate in love makes human beings, at least in one way, more in the image and likeness of God than the angels, who are unable to procreate."

The bishops meet Nov. 16-19 at the Baltimore Marriott Waterfront Hotel.

Read the the draft pastoral statement yourself: "[Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan](#)" [2] (This is a large pdf file.)

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