

THE HOPE OF THE FAMILY

Dialogue with
Gerhard Cardinal Müller

Question: With enormous clear-sightedness, Pope Francis convoked an extraordinary synod on the family entitled “Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization”. This is a real opportunity to address the challenges that our contemporary world poses to the family. What are these challenges? The first challenge seems to be the fact that young people no longer marry. There are those who say that this will be the real challenge for the synod on the family. In a romantic society, characterized by individuals who are extremely fragile emotionally, the trustworthiness of love has been called into question, and with

In the following pages, the questions of the interviewer, Father Carlos Granados García, editor-in-chief of BAC, will be printed in italics and introduced by “*Question*”; this will distinguish them from the cardinal prefect’s answers, which will be in roman type, preceded by “*Cardinal Müller*”.

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it the value of the promise of “forever”. Young people who face marriage encounter difficulties as they try to “believe in love”. Love has become so fluid that it seems to have little strength to serve as a serious basis for planning a family. Young engaged couples, in fact, find it hard to believe in the soundness of the institution: What message should we convey to them? How can we foster hope in young people?

Cardinal Müller: It is obvious that the challenges posed by today’s highly secularized world are enormous. On the one hand, in some traditionally Christian countries, we observe a progressive loss of the sense of the faith. At the same time, in many other places, the Christian religion has been reduced to a set of values, ideas, or social activities, thus losing what is essential and basic in the faith experience: the real encounter with Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and the total renewal of man in an eschatological perspective. Specifically, Christian marriage as a sacrament can be understood in its true significance only when approached from a christological and eschatological point of view.

Marriage is not simply living together with another person: it is a definitive decision within the framework of the relationship of Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom, with his Bride, the Church. As Pope Francis says so appropriately in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, inventing a Spanish neologism, Christ *primerea*; he goes ahead of us and gets there first. From the creation of the world, God wished to say in Christ that his decision with regard to us, his children, was definitive and radical. That is why God willed that marriage should be this intimate, exclusive union between one man and one woman: this union is the source from which the family emerges and the criterion by which to appreciate it. In this regard, the Holy Father recently said that all marriages are ordered and inherently tend to be fruitful: children have their origin in spousal love. In his homily at the morning Mass celebrated in the chapel of *Casa Santa Marta* on June 2, the pope also recalled with some humor a contemporary situation that has a terribly tragic side: we mean the many couples who, instead of having children, prefer to keep a dog, a cat, or some

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other pet. Because they act this way, many married couples renounce the personal reciprocity that gives rise to the relationship with children, which is the fulfillment and the perfection of the conjugal love they profess.

I venture to say that the emotional formation of today's young people is one of the most serious problems we have to confront at the moment. Pastors observe with great concern that many young people turn their backs on the way of life proposed by the Church. Many of them refuse to live out and to enjoy their love in total fidelity, in an indissoluble marriage: in fact, we could say that the idea of commitment frightens them. Consequently, they understand sexuality as a mere pleasure, not as a great opportunity to receive and to communicate life within a community of love. They refuse to bring about a communion of life and love with the beloved person. Basically, I think, these young people are nothing but a vivid example of the serious difficulty that our world has in understanding the true dimension of human life as a communion. In a doggedly individualistic and subjectivist world, marriage is not

perceived as an opportunity offered to a human being to achieve fulfillment by sharing in love. Someone will have to proclaim anew the true God, who is a Trinity of love! We will have to proclaim the God of revelation who calls us all to share in his own relational being. We will have to emphasize that this sharing in the divine life is not reserved for a few select individuals but has been offered to us all, whether single or married. Above all, we will have to explain that this was the great “wedding gift” that God gave to humanity, by means of the Incarnation of the Word and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Remote preparation for marriage, that is, from childhood and adolescence on, ought to be one of the first pastoral priorities in education. A child who discovers that he is unconditionally loved as a son will recognize himself in adolescence as someone who feels impelled to love another person and, finally, in adulthood, after recognizing his spousal dimension, as someone who discovers that his love is fruitful. But I insist that the proximate or immediate preparation for marriage will be ineffective if we do not

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educate Catholics from birth about the personal and affective dimension of the person. Only in this way will we succeed in harmonizing the basic dimensions of human existence: the person, sociability, fruitfulness, responsibility, education, and communion. This is the foundation for a thorough understanding of matrimony.

Young people have the right to experience from the first moment of their lives the things that only the family can offer: I am referring to the confidence and balance that result from the fact of being accepted and welcomed unconditionally by their own parents. There is no better way of laying the groundwork for true hope in young people. For them, their parents are the first representatives of God's love. They mediate the confidence that results from knowing that they are welcomed and cherished by the hands of their Creator, who loved us even before we were conceived. To put it in more theological language, through their participation in the common priesthood of all the faithful, our own parents are priestly representatives of this confidence, love, and unconditional acceptance of our human existence.

*Question: Young people today, as we said, experience great difficulty in making a promise, such as a matrimonial vow, which demands fidelity “forever”. Pope Francis reminded us in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* that “the individualism of our postmodern and globalized era favors a lifestyle which weakens the development and stability of personal relationships and distorts family bonds” (no. 67). In this context, how are we to understand the “forever” of marriage? Is it a limit and a reason not to marry, or is it a manifestation of the great hope that husband and wife have when they contract marriage?*

Cardinal Müller: This “forever” is clearly rooted in the “once and for all” of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the Cross, who gave up his own life for us. To give one’s life is, so to speak, the symbol of love, inasmuch as it is not a vague sentiment but a reality: fulfilling oneself through an act of self-surrender. The heart of love is God’s surrender of himself for our sake. We were freed from ourselves, from selfishness, when we were created for the triune God who lives in love, in the relationship of the Father with the Son in the Holy Spirit. Therefore, being