

# *Marriage and Family in Mainland China Today*

---

---

*Hyacinth  
Translated by Ingrid Chan*

**I**n March 2014, I was invited to have a sharing session with a group of Catholics on “Marriage and Family in Mainland China Today”. Later, the Holy Spirit Study Centre asked me to write up the contents of my sharing, to be published in their periodical *Tripod*. The following article is the result.

## **What is Marriage in China?**

China’s current laws and judicial system do not define clearly the meaning of marriage. It is commonly understood that marriage consists in the love between a man and a woman, their living together and the procreation of offspring. The *Textbook of Marriage and Family Law* (Law Press, 1995) defined marriage as: “one man and one woman form a permanent union for the sake of living together. All marriages contracted under the law have both rights and duties.”

The Code of Canon Law of the Catholic Church defines marriage in this way: “A marriage is brought into being by the lawfully manifested consent of persons who are legally capable. This consent cannot be supplied by any human power.” (c.1057 §1). The article goes on to state that marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman for the purpose of establishing a marriage. Other canons regarding marriage point out the unity and indissolubility of marriage.

It can be said that God wants the union of man and woman. In the Old Testament, God commanded human beings to get married and to have children. God told Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply” [Gen 1:27-28]. In the Old Testament we see that the patriarchs, prophets and priests got married and had children.

However, God commanded us to love Him above all things, and this was the first commandment. In the New Testament, Jesus commanded us to love Him above the love of our parents, wives, children, and brothers and sisters: “If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). From a study of the Bible, we see that marriage was more like an obligation in the Old Testament, while in the New Testament, it is more like a free choice. However, one has to be responsible for the choice one has made. According to Canon 1055 §1, the purposes of marriage are:

1. The good of the spouses (the conjugal act is blessed by God; it is an act of unity of body and mind). Only in a conjugal relationship can one experience the pleasure of sexual love. All extra-marital acts are not blessed by God, and the deliberate pursuit of sexual pleasure is subject to punishment. The good of the spouses not only consists in sexual pleasure. More importantly, it is a spiritual sharing.

2. Procreation and the education of offspring (Children are a gift from God, the source of all happiness—Ps 127:3-5; 128:3-6; being childless is unfortunate – Lev. 20:20; 1 Sam 1:1-20; Is 47:9). Marriage and procreation were the holy tasks of every Jew; being unmarried was abnormal and unfilial. There is an old Chinese saying: “There are three ways to be unfilial, and having no sons is the worst.” The teaching of the Church is: If procreation is excluded from marriage, it could be a case for its nullification. We have to note that “sterility” and “contraception” are different; the former does not nullify marriage (cf. c.1084 §3), because the spouses are open to procreation when they perform the conjugal act, but they are willing to accept the fact of impotence. “Children are a gift from God”, but such a gift should not be taken for granted. God grants this according to His will, and one should not impose their own will upon it. The latter case happens when the spouses are not open to procreation during or after the conjugal act. In other words, in their conjugal act, they arbitrarily exclude procreation (e.g. artificial contraception, or the prevention of the binding of the sperm and egg,

abortion etc). This is prohibited by the Church and is against the will of God, because it is wrong to reject the gift of God (children).

The above purposes of marriage are in no particular order. But in contracting a marriage, the spouses cannot arbitrarily choose one purpose and neglect the others (e.g. the good of spouses, but not the procreation and education of offspring); otherwise, the marriage is subject to nullification.

### **Marriage and Family in Mainland China Today**

The first phenomenon is the fear of marriage or the unwillingness to get married. Generally speaking, this is mainly due to the fear of the load of responsibilities which marriage entails; fear of the fetters of marriage; fear of being the provider for the family (fear of procreation and education of offspring) etc. However, an even worse problem is that many people are immature (although they get married, they still behave like children; men rely on their parents, women are spoiled by parents; both spouses do not know how to keep house). Instead of being independent, they are dependent on others. Therefore, they are unable to bear the responsibilities of marriage.

In China, some people are afraid to get married or are unwilling to get married. The reasons are very complicated:

(a) They fear being deceived by the spouse, and of being hurt. The high divorce rate is a warning signal: marriage is unstable; there is a lack of security; some people are affected by their relatives or friends, or they live in the shadow of their parents. It is quite easy to get a divorce in China (if one party wants to divorce and mediation fails, the court can pronounce the divorce). However, it is not easy to solve property disputes after the divorce.

(b) It hard to find Mr/Ms Right: Everyone wants to choose the perfect spouse, but it is almost impossible to find such a partner. Therefore, many persons cannot find Mr/Ms Right.

(c) Some men think that they can have “sex” without getting married. But, after getting married, they have to hand over their

income to their wives; they have to report their whereabouts to their wives, and will undergo a “trial” if they come home late at night. Wives may also read their text messages, or check their phone records etc. There is no freedom at all!

(d) Some women think that they can earn their own living (and even save some extra money), so they do not need to rely on men. They think they can live carefree and without worries. On the contrary, they have to take care of their husbands and children after getting married, and be concerned about household chores. If they live with in-laws, they even have to act in accordance with their will. They think that marriage is so burdensome!

(e) Being single allows more freedom: one can manage one’s own livelihood, one can eat or sleep according to one’s own will.

(f) Lack of financial support: it is too expensive to get married, e.g. betrothal, the wedding banquet, buying a house and a car etc. Added up, these can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, even up to a million dollars.

Some people do get married, but then they want to divorce. While most countries allow people to divorce, some still prohibit it. Here are some divorce rate statistics for reference:

#### The International Divorce Rate:

Russia: 54 percent

USA: 50 percent

Canada: 48 percent

Australia: 40 percent

China: 30 percent

Japan: 27 percent

The average divorce rate in China is about 30 percent, with 43 percent in the cities, 12 percent in the rural areas. That means that in China about 30 percent of marriages end in divorce.

According to the PRC’s Ministry of Civil Affairs, more than 3 million couples applied for divorce in 2012. (People’s Daily Online

19 June 2012): “Today the Ministry of Civil Affairs published the ‘Statistical Report on the Development of Social Services 2012’. It revealed that in the year 2012, 3,104,000 couples applied for divorce, an increase of 8 percent, while 13,230,000 newly married couples, representing an increase of 1.6 percent, got married. According to the ‘Statistical Report 2011,’ there were 2,874,000 divorce applications, representing a growth of 7.3 percent, while 13,024,000 couples registered for marriage in 2011.

In 2012, the number of 20 to 24 year old Chinese getting married made up the largest proportion, accounting for 35.5 percent of the previous year's total marriage registrations. The figure has decreased by about 1.1 percentage points each year.

Meanwhile, the 25-29 age bracket saw an increasing number of marriage registrations last year, up by 0.8 percentage points from the previous year to 34.2 percent.

#### The Top 10 Cities with the highest divorce rate in China:

No. 1: Beijing, the capital of the People’s Republic of China, with a rate of 39 percent.

No. 2: Shanghai, the biggest financial centre of China, with a rate of 38 percent.

No. 3: Shenzhen, the special economic zone, with the rate of 36.25 percent.

No. 4: Guangzhou, 35 percent.

No. 5: Xiamen, 34.9 percent.

No. 6: Taipei, 34.8 percent

No. 7: Nanjing, 33.8 percent

No. 8: Dalian, 31 percent.

No. 9: Hangzhou, 29 percent

No. 10: Harbin, 28 percent

#### **The Church’s Views on Divorce**

In order to defend the permanency and sacredness of marriage, the Church opposes divorce. Many people (including Catholics) will be surprised on hearing this. In fact, even the disciples were surprised when they heard Jesus’ teaching on marriage. They asked:

If the relationship is like this, who will get married? (cf. Mt 19:10). Many people wrongly think that they can get married in the Church, and can get divorced in the Church too, just as those who get married and divorced in civil society.

For the good of souls, the Church can dissolve a marriage under some conditions. According to Canon Law, a marriage that is *ratum et consummatum* (if the spouses have performed the conjugal act which is suitable for the procreation of offspring) can be dissolved by no human power (cf c. 1141). This is because the two shall become one flesh; “what therefore God has joined together, no human being must separate (Mk 10:5-9). Except for this kind of marriage, the Church can dissolve other forms of marriages. However, here we have to clarify the difference between the words “divorce” and “dissolve”. The Church does not accept “divorce”, but permits “dissolution” of a marriage for the good of the Catholics, if there is a good reason.

Among Catholic marriages on the Mainland, many couples were not baptized when they got married. But later one party got baptized and was deserted by his/her spouse. The question arises: what should the baptized person do when faced with the breakup of the marriage? Or take the case of a marriage between a Catholic and a non-baptized person for which a dispensation from the impediment of disparity of cult was granted. However, if the spouses later separate, what can the Catholic party do? In the former case, one can apply for the Pauline privilege; while in the latter case, one can apply for the Petrine privilege. Of course, the use of these two privileges must fulfil the requirements of the Church. Another case involves a marriage between cousins, i.e. a case of “consanguinity.” This was quite common in years gone by. Canon 1091 § 2 states that “in the collateral line marriage is invalid up to and including the fourth degree of consanguinity” (i.e. the third degree according to Article 7 of the Marriage Law of China). In fact, both Canon Law and the Marriage Law of China have the same legislative intention, but they use different methods to count the degrees in a collateral line. However, while there is no dispensation in the Marriage Law, there is dispensation in Canon Law, and Church authorities can grant it. The reason these situations arise is that there may have been no premarital inquiry, or

the inquiry was not careful enough. So priests must conduct the premarital inquiry carefully.

### **The Premarital Inquiry**

The local Church should work out a premarital inquiry form. It has to carefully investigate whether there is a consanguineous relationship. If there is an impediment of consanguinity, no dispensation should be granted. Such a dispensation is not helpful but harmful because the Marriage Law prohibits consanguineous marriage. If the marriage is granted dispensation by the Church, and being *ratum et consummatum*, it cannot be dissolved. However, it was illegal under the Marriage Law. The spouses cannot get the certificate of marriage, and hence their children cannot obtain any household registration. This will cause the children to be thrown into dilemma for a lifetime. Therefore, it is suggested that priests or the Church authorities be very prudent in granting dispensations for these marriages, and only perform them if the couples have obtained the certificate of marriage from the government.

During the premarital inquiry, the priest should ask both parties if they have deliberated over their decision to marry free from any threats. If someone gets married reluctantly, there is the danger that the marriage could turn into a dead end. Canon 1069 states that all the faithful are obliged to reveal any impediments that they know about to the pastor or the local ordinary.

Here I would like to summarize the twelve impediments found in Canon Law: under age, perpetual impotence, bond of a prior marriage, disparity of cult (it is different from “mixed marriage”, which does not require a dispensation, but the consent of the local ordinary, Canon 1124), sacred orders, perpetual vow of chastity in a religious institute, being abducted or detained, brought about the death of that person’s spouse or of one’s own spouse, consanguinity, affinity, public propriety which arises from an invalid marriage after the establishment of common life or from notorious or public concubinage, direct line or in the second degree of the collateral line by a legal relationship arising from adoption (cf. Canon 1083-1094).

Regarding concubinage, as some Catholics try to escape from the family planning policy, they have had children before they obtained the permission of the government. Therefore, their marriage requires convalidation by the Church. (NB: most scholars believe that if such marriages were considered valid (i.e. with a traditional Chinese wedding ceremony) before the Feast of Pentecost 2007, they were also validated by the Church. This is because the Church in China was granted the faculties in the past, unless the local ordinary cancelled such a faculty or other evidence proved the marriage null. However, Pope Benedict XVI in his Letter to the Church in China (n. 18), which was signed on the Feast of Pentecost, 27 May 2007, revoked all the faculties. If a marriage is proved to be null, then a divorce could not have taken place, because the marriage was not a marriage at all. It was only concubinage, which Jesus referred to in the Gospel (cf. Mt 5:32).

### **The Reasons for Divorce**

There are various reasons for divorce. I would like to sum them up as follows, and suggest some corresponding and preventive measures:

**Under-preparation:** Before marriage, not many couples are well-prepared for it: If there was no preparation or insufficient preparation for marriage, the couple could experience a sort of “flash marriage,” followed by a “flash divorce”. The couple did not know the meaning of marriage, had an insufficient understanding or a misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of marriage. Some clergy or church authorities neglect to conduct a premarital inquiry, and they do not provide any premarital counselling. Thus marriage is not considered sacred, nor family life harmonious. It is suggested that every parish provide learning opportunities for the prospective bride and groom, e.g. premarital counselling, so that they can be well-prepared for their marriage and for their lives after marriage by understanding the Church’s views on marriage, as well as the nature and purposes of marriage.

**Emotional Crisis:** Once an emotional crisis happens, the spouses will become hostile to each other, bring trouble to their relatives, and the family will suffer. Marriage without love is like a man without a soul, a tree without life. However, the spouses should learn to repair their relationship, and to revive their love. It is never too late to mend a broken relationship. If they continue to water the tree of love that they have planted and nourished together, then the tree will bear fruit again.

**A clash of Personalities:** Due to different living habits, family background, and educational history, the spouses may look at things from different perspectives. This will lead to the lack of a common language. In other words, they “share the same bed but dream different dreams.” It is hoped that both partners will have a moderate temperament, and search for their common characteristics. Instead of persisting in their own views and being critical of their spouse’s views, they should mutually respect one another and accept their own human weaknesses.

**Sexual Disharmony:** The conjugal act is like a lubricant that sustains marital life. If a marriage lacks this lubricant, married life would become difficult, and the marriage may finally fail. This is because marriage is like a fish. If a fish lacks water, it will soon die. Hence, spouses should understand each other’s physical and mental state. Instead of being selfish and egocentric, they should show concern and care for each other. Regarding the conjugal act, St Paul the Apostle exhorted: “Do not deprive each other, except perhaps by mutual consent for a time, to be free for prayer” (I Cor 7:5). The spouses should communicate with each other, be honest with each other, and avoid extramarital sexual acts. For the married person, his/her body no longer belongs to himself/herself, but their bodies belong to one another. Therefore they should not offend their own bodies. This is because, as St. Paul said, “Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you...For you have been purchased at a price.” (I Cor 6:19-20)

**Extramarital Relationships:** Being fickle about physical attractions may cause an intruder to enter into the conjugal relationship. This

often happens. However, Jesus taught us to be self-disciplined. We must beware of going off the rails. Jesus said. "Everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Mt 5:28) Nevertheless, many people still get lost in it, and act as if nothing has happened. The spouses must take care to defend themselves and their marriage, because no one can protect you except yourself, and no one can hurt you except yourself.

Working in different places: In order to earn a living, spouses are often forced to separate themselves from each other. Newly-weds or young couples, will especially miss each other from afar, because oftentimes they can only meet once a year. It would be better if they could work together to build their home, to share the good and bad times together. This is particularly beneficial for raising the children. Even if they cannot work together, they should frequently meet each other, and always support and rely on each other. They should frequently express their care and mutual encouragement for each other. The spouses can express their love for each other online, or by mobile phone.

Cyberdating: On many evenings some women sit by themselves at home. They are so bored that they become addicted to the internet, online games and online chats. They are absorbed in the internet, making friends online, confiding their secrets to strangers, even proposing online marriage and making lifelong promises. Expressing one's love online is even more reckless, because it can become unrestrained and dangerous. In such circumstances the internet becomes a "poisonous net," which can destroy love and marriage. We should beware of the people we meet online, because many of them are illusory. I suggest that we limit our time online. We should understand and make good use of the internet. We should not become a slave to the internet or be a "spider man"—i.e. spending the whole day on the internet. Internet abuse will ruin us, and we will regret it all our lives.

Suspicion: Lack of confidence in a spouse is like poison to a marriage. Telling lies (especially to gain advantage over the relationship) is like a fracture in the marriage. Some technologies

(e.g. tracking devices, a GPS system, or a monitoring system) are harmful to marriage rather than protecting it. On the contrary, the spouses should learn to trust each other, and prove themselves trustworthy. They should also have confidence in each other, and not to be egged on by anyone.

**A couple in a cold war:** Sometimes a short period of cold war may be good for a couple, as it could be a time for both parties to calm down, ponder their misunderstandings, reflect on the cause of their fight, and make improvements. The Bible says, “Do not let the sun set on your anger, and do not leave room for the devil.” (Eph 4:26-27) Nothing should come between husband and wife; the spouses may quarrel during the day and they should make up with each other before going to bed. If the couple make good use of the experience of quarrelling, they can develop a deeper relationship. However, if they never give way to each other during their argument, this will lead to a long period of cold war, during which there is no communication. Then either party may even run away from home. This certainly will endanger the marriage.

**Separation:** Due to family violence or other grave causes, the Church permits a temporary separation of the spouses. If the grave cause of separation persists, then the separation can continue. If the case is very serious, then the spouse can apply for divorce in accordance with the Marriage Law of China (NB: Application for divorce according to the Marriage Law does not mean that the Church permits divorce. The Church makes concessions only with the intention of protecting the innocent party. Neither party can remarry after the divorce). When the cause for the separation ceases, conjugal living must be restored, so that either party may not fall into temptation due to intemperance.

**Faith:** This can be a factor if, in a mixed marriage, the one baptized partner neglects the spouse due to religious activities. Another case is where both parties are Catholic, but one belongs to the official Church, while the other one belongs to the underground Church. The spouses always quarrel over their religious faith, attacking and rejecting each other. One may say “You are going to hell,” and the

other replies: “You cannot be saved.” They may even cease contact with each other from that time on. We have to really understand the meaning of Jesus’ saying – “Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.”(Lk 12:51-52) “Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Mt 10:37). We should not make marriage an obstacle to our faith.

**Civil Divorce:** The Church never allows divorce. In spite of the many difficulties in a marriage, the spouses should never divorce. As mentioned above, unless there is no alternative, the couple can apply for civil separation, so as to protect the innocent party. However, the spouses cannot remarry after civil divorce. In fact, according to the teaching of the Church, civil divorce is ineffective in the Church; that is to say, they are still a couple in the eyes of the Church, which always advises the separated spouses to get back together and to build their family again.

### **Maintaining a Marriage and Conjugal Love**

To maintain a marriage, the spouses not only have to realize the sacredness of marriage, but they must also have mutual respect, mutual support, equality, democracy, fidelity, prayer and gratitude in the relationship.

**Realize the sacredness of marriage:** Marriage is a sacrament of love, and love is holy and inviolable. “Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord...As the church is subordinate to Christ, so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her...So (also) husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself...and the wife should respect her husband” (Eph. 5:22-33).

**Mutual Respect:** The couple should treat each other as honored guests. They should respect the habits, character and temper, hobbies, decisions, and religious faith of the spouse. They should

not calumniate each other. They should give proper personal space to each other, that is, regarding going out and social life.

**Mutual Support:** They take care of one another, as well as understand, forgive, accept, and support each other in daily life. As for work, they should exchange opinions and make plans together.

**Equality and Democracy:** This requires that the couple discuss, and talk frankly with each other when dealing with family affairs. The couple should discuss who goes out to work and who looks after the family. Then they should take up their own responsibilities, share the work, and cooperate closely with each other.

**Fidelity unto death:** Be faithful to each other, as they have promised in their wedding vows. Be true to each other in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. They must also be faithful to the family and children till death do them part. They should be devoted to their careers and duties, and be conscientious and meticulous in each one's own work, for the sake of maintaining the marriage.

**Common Prayer:** Devote themselves with one accord to prayer. They should pray for each other, e.g. the family rosary. Have Bible sharing, and go to church on Sundays. All of these are good ways to hand down the faith to the children and to cultivate vocations.

**Gratitude:** Give thanks to God, be thankful to each other, the family, relatives, teachers and mentors. Through God's grace, the spouses get support from family, teachers, and mentors. Thus marriage and the family will be transformed, becoming ever more wonderful.

### **Christian Family: Domestic Church**

Marriage and family are indispensable. Once the spouses are married, they build a new family. The *Rites of Zhou* said, "Where there is a husband, there is a wife, and the two set up the family." The couple is the heart of the family. The absence of either party will make the family incomplete. "The man considers his wife as the chamber, and the woman considers her husband as the home. If

husband and wife are harmonious, family livelihood prospers” (*Children’s Knowledge Treasury*—“Husband and Wife”). Apart from husband and wife, a family also has children, parents, and siblings. *The Classic of Poetry* (“Tao Yao”) said, “The chamber is the place where husband and wife live; family is the place inside the door.” The family is the vital cell of a country and society. If the family is harmonious, then there is peace in the state; if the family is destroyed, society will also be harmed. Therefore, a stable marriage is the basis of a healthy family life.

For a devoted Christian family, all the members should consider God as the centre and dynamic of their lives. They should follow the example of the love within the Holy Trinity by the faith and doctrine, and in word and act. We have peace only in Christ, communion only in the Holy Spirit, and forgiveness only in the Father. Only with the blessing of God is a family happy, the father kind and the son filial. Only with God’s blessing is there fraternity among siblings, harmony between spouses, and respect for the elders. The family offers everything (including likes and dislikes, happiness and sorrow) to God. Let the will of God be done on earth as it is in heaven. In spite of difficulties, the couple can still overcome them, because God is almighty. For He spoke and it was done. The couple should help the Church, in the same way as the good examples we have in the Bible (cf. Acts 18:26; Rm 16:3 etc.), especially Prisca and Aquila (cf. Rm. 16:3; I Cor. 16:19). These are typical images of the Christian family.

## Conclusion

As marriage is so fragile, the spouses have to cherish and take good care of their relationship. The negligence of either party could lead to a broken marriage. The mutual respect and love between the spouses (this is the commandment of Jesus) is the best way to maintain a marriage. The marital relationship is a mystery, like the relationship between Christ and His Church. The unity of the spouses in marriage symbolizes the unity of Christ and the Church, reflecting the love of Christ for the Church – it is a never failing love. The spouses should always remember their wedding vows. Through prayer they ask God constantly to bless their marriage, in

order to make this covenant a model for the world, and a witness to the Kingdom of God.

The family is a place of peace, a home of harmony. Family members should take the Holy Family as a model, consider God as the centre of the family, and let prayer be the bond among them. The family could build a “domestic church” through these methods: sharing the Bible, learning the Catechism of the Catholic Church, passing on the faith, attending Mass, having confidence in the providence of God, being faithful to the Word of God, sharing common prayer and Eucharist, being faithful to the community and to service. They should fulfil the commandment of Jesus: “To love one another as I have loved you”. May all couples take the love of the Trinity and love for their fellow human beings as the foundation of their marriage. May they take the Holy Family as the model of love, so that by their mutual love, respect, understanding and forgiveness, their marriage would reflect the holiness and dignity of the plan of God to the present world, until the coming of the heavenly wedding banquet with Christ.