

Challenges and Blessings to Catholic Marriages and Families in Rural China

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As the country reforms and opens up, “spring” also comes to the Church in China. Although the Church has been “free” in China for thirty some years, the road is still difficult. Macro conditions in China have a great impact on the Church. Let us reflect on the difficulties and challenges that Catholic marriages and families face. But before we do that, we need to understand marital conditions in China today.

As society transitions, and as the economy booms, pressures on the family are becoming more acute. Marital and family problems occur more frequently. China Civil Affairs statistics reveal that in the first quarter of 2011, 465,000 couples filed for divorce. This reflects an increase of 17.1% from the preceding year. On average, more than 5,000 families break up every day. The Chinese divorce rate has been continuously rising for seven years. How does it affect the Church? Let us take a look at the external and internal stresses that Catholic marriages and families face.

First, the “external threat” refers to the influence of the macro society. It is hard to extricate oneself from the environment. Here are some of the challenges.

I. Extended Families Become Nuclear Families

In a survey, 75% of young men hope to start a small family. 87% of young women look forward to having their own family after marriage. This shows young women “fear” the traditional big family. Family cohesion thus becomes weaker. And the relationship between husband and wife also lacks a solid foundation.

II. The Freedom to Fall in Love

Young people seek freedom. They want “love above all.” So regardless of age difference, difference in education, and even religious differences, men and women still look for romance. But from a sociological or psychological perspective, and one can see this from experience, the greater the differences in background, the harder it is for the partners to adapt in marriage.

III. Changing Gender Roles

Traditional gender roles are fixed. “The husband worked outside; the wife took care of domestic affairs.” But there is greater flexibility in modern marriages. There is more emphasis on interactivity, mutual love and help, equality and sharing. In short, the ideal marriage today is characterized by openness, but without alienation. It is intimate but not constricting.

IV. The Role of Sex

Sex used to be viewed as a means of procreation. Now people emphasize sex as the communication of love, and as pleasure.

Many couples consider sex the most important part of their relationship. They blame marital discord on poor sexual relations. Because of the undue emphasis on sex, when a couple’s sex life is not fulfilled, one spouse may seek satisfaction in extra-marital affairs. At the same time, modern attitudes about sex are more liberal. According to a 2012 survey, “How Chinese Feel About Sexual Health,” published by a subsidiary of the party journal, *Qiushi*, 71.4% of the relevant population engage in premarital sex. Extramarital affairs and “one-night stands” are becoming the norm.

V. Legalization of Divorce

Men and women are supposed to be equal in modern society. Together with the rise of feminism, this opens the way to a greater acceptance of divorce. But divorce is not the only, nor even the best way to resolve marital problems. Unfortunately it is often the last resort.

According to a survey that interviewed 1,000 married couples, only 10% affirmed that they had a happy married life; 15% thought it was alright. But 75% expressed discontent with their marital life. So a rising divorce rate is not the only threat to modern marriage. The problem lies in the quality of married life.

VI. The Allure of the Internet

Whether it is on the computer or the mobile phone, people can now go online to chat, or to watch videos, whenever they want. This poses a grave problem for couples whose relationship is rocky, particularly for young couples who live in different towns [e.g., when one spouse is a migrant worker]. Those who are emotionally immature can make friends randomly on the Web, or even pursue “online affairs.” Pornography is rampant on the Web, just as unhealthy places of entertainment mushroom everywhere. Pornographic exchanges are common. All this becomes a trap for the young who lack self-respect and self-control.

Next let us look at some “internal concerns” among Catholic families:

I. Decreasing Faith among the Young

In an age of crass consumerism and moral depravity, if young people do not have a strong faith, it will be hard for them to maintain self-respect and self-control. This generation has also been spoiled by their parents. Without true love, acceptance, sacrifice and forgiveness which are grounded in faith, how can they work through conflicts and misunderstanding in their married life? Weak faith among the young is one reason for the high rate of divorce among Catholics in China. They become selfish and imprudent. They do not know forgiveness; nor are they willing to forgive. Without a vibrant faith, they are no different from non-believers.

II. Over-Intervention by Parents

This generation [a product of the “one-child” policy] grew up under the excessive care of parents, and children often lack the ability to care for themselves. Even after they get married, when

young couples quarrel, they frequently complain to their parents. Some parents are unwilling to let go of their children. Whereas wise parents counsel their children to work through their problems, over-indulgent ones actually champion their son/daughter, and make matters worse.

III. Lack of Marriage/Family Counselors in the Church

People are too busy to chat these days. They usually mind their own business, especially when it comes to married or family life. It is hard to adjudicate family affairs. Most people also do not like to air their dirty laundry. They keep quiet until things get so bad that the spouses go to court to seek a divorce. Unable to help, the pastor pretends not to know or hear about it. But divorce is a tragic stain on the Church.

I am a priest of one of the dioceses of Hebei. What I have written reflects the situation of the Church in China, especially the rural church. From the vantage point of a rural diocese, I also share with you the opportunities that have been provided for our Catholic families:

Sharing and Conclusion

I. We are an agricultural diocese. But as social reforms take place, and the market economy develops, marital problems among the faithful also multiply, and become more complex. Divorce is on the rise. In 2008, the diocese established a “Marriage and Family Commission” in order to proactively, and in greater depth, carry out premarital formation and parent-child education. As far as possible, our team also tries to provide marriage-counselling, to help Catholics live their married/family life in faith.

II. In 2010, we were blessed to send a diocesan priest and two couples to another diocese in Hebei to attend our first-ever Marriage Encounter Weekend. This was followed by a second team to a neighboring diocese. In August, 2012, under the leadership of a couple from the Northeast, we successfully conducted our diocese’s first Marriage Encounter Weekend. Now we have our own “sharing team.” According to the pastoral needs of the faithful, we can host

regular Marriage Encounter weekends. All of the couple-attendees also formed small faith-sharing groups in their own parishes. They meet once a month, and so put into practice the goals of Marriage Encounter: “Let the family influence families, let life convey life.”

In August 2013, five couples from our diocese went to Hong Kong to take part in a “Cana retreat.” Since then, our diocese has developed ties with the Cana community. This August, at the invitation of Cana (Hong Kong), eight model couples represented our diocese at the spiritual retreat. We hope to touch more couples, and sanctify more families through the Cana community. We trust that the development of “Marriage Encounter” and Cana will enkindle hope in our families. May the Holy Spirit guide and strengthen the two communities, so they can be vital witnesses to faith.

III. In 2012, four priests and three sisters from our diocese were privileged to attend at a diocesan formation center a course on pastoral ministry to married couples and families. Professor Zhang Dunhua from Taiwan taught the course. In March, 2014, a couple and I attended a one-week seminar in Hong Kong on “Marriage and Family Pastoral Ministry.” The experience confirmed our dedication to this ministry. We plan to organize parent-child and married life formation programs in different parishes. We hope to help the faithful to recognize their responsibility to preach the Gospel message in marriage.

Let us pray for one another, and work together that the Holy Spirit may help us to understand the challenges to Catholic marriage and family in China. We also pray that we seize the opportunities before us, so that all couples, through their offering of themselves and their witness to faith through their marriage can bring more people to know Christ!