

Hong Kong Family Movement through Changing Church Views on Marriage

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A Brief History of the Church's Teachings on Marriage

If we look through the biblical texts concerning marriage, we may discover some points which seem to contradict each other. The Book of Genesis presents a very positive image of marriage. God created human beings, male and female in His divine image, and entrusted them with the mission to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it”. (Gen. 1:26-27)¹ From this, we can see that human beings, both male or female alike, are images of God. Through their union in marriage, they become the perfect image of God's love. The sexual union between husband and wife leads to joy and communion. Together they pass these on to their children, the fruits of their love. This is God's will for humankind, and God saw that it was good. (Gen. 1:25) Unfortunately, such a positive outlook on marriage changed drastically at the time of the Patriarchs. There was an appalling inequality between men and women. Women were considered the property of their fathers and husbands, and their major function was to produce offspring. According to the Law of Moses, a husband could divorce his wife, but a wife did not have the right to divorce her husband. A healthier perspective on marriage came into being at the time of the prophets, who believed that marriage was a symbol of God's faithfulness and of His covenantal love for His people.

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ blessed and sanctified marriage. Citing the Book of Genesis, Jesus said, “From the

¹ All the biblical verses cited in this translation are taken from the Revised Standard Version—Second Catholic Edition (RSV-CE).

beginning God made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.'" Jesus opposed divorce because man could not separate what God had joined together. Moses allowed the people to divorce because their hearts were stubborn; it has never been God's will for man to get divorced. (Matt. 19:4-8) In the age of the apostles, St. Paul affirmed the loftiness of Christian marriage, saying that it is "a great mystery". (Eph. 5:32) Marriage is a symbol of Christ's relationship with the Church. Yet at the same time St. Paul himself led a life of celibacy and encouraged the early Christians to follow his example. Since Christ's second coming is imminent, the most urgent task for Christians is to prepare themselves for His return, but not to worry about marriage. (1 Cor. 7:7-8)

The Church's teachings on marriage also changed as time went on. At times her teachings might appear contradictory. In the age of the Church Fathers, marriage was to a large extent a "business transaction" between families. The Church Fathers vehemently opposed such kinds of arranged marriage. They stressed that marriage is the union of a man and a woman, and that the family bond is the source of unity in society. However, some Fathers saw the father and the husband as the authoritative figures in the family. There was no place for "democracy" in the family. Some Church Fathers even thought that reproduction is the primary aim of marriage. As time went on, many Christians began to see marriage as a legal contract made with the consent of the man and the woman concerned. This shows that the Christians of that time had not yet developed the concept of marriage as a sacrament. The Council of Trent gave definitive answers to the questions of medieval theologians regarding the nature of marriage. When is marriage consummated? Is it at the point of mutual consent or after the conjugal act? Should the couple be considered as husband and wife if they do not have any conjugal act after the marriage ceremony? The Council of Trent stipulated that marriage takes place when the couple gives their mutual consent and are joined together in the sexual union. Marriage is then said to be legitimate and unbreakable. If there is only mutual consent but not the conjugal act, the

marriage is still valid, but not regarded as unbreakable. Besides, only those marriages contracted in the presence of legitimate witnesses, like a bishop priest or deacon, and in the presence of two other witnesses, are considered valid. The idea of marriage as a kind of contract was included in the 1917 Code of Canon Law. This reinforced the view that marriage is a contract, and its primary aims are reproduction and the education of their children. The mutual support between husband and wife was only a secondary aim. This legal concept of marriage was passed on from generation to generation. In their encyclicals some Popes spoke about marriage as a sacrament. Some theologians supported this view based on the teachings of the New Testament. Nevertheless, the concept of marriage as conveyed in the 1917 Code of Canon Law remained the dominant viewpoint.

At the Second Vatican Council, the Christian understanding of marriage surpassed the legalistic view of the Council of Trent. Vatican II presented a more comprehensive understanding of marriage, one which was closer to the biblical point of view. Marriage is much more than a “legalistic matter” conducted with the mutual consent of a man and a woman; it is a covenantal relationship. Inspired by their unending love for one another, a couple is willing to offer themselves unconditionally to one another, and welcome the birth of new lives. The undying love between husband and wife is an image of God’s everlasting love for all humankind. Vatican II affirms that marriage is a couple’s response to God’s love for them; it is also an expression of God’s love. The Council went on to say that marriage is directed towards procreation and education of children. (GS 48)

Christians are influenced by the history and culture of the society in which they live. They must also struggle in it in order to survive. Even the “contract” of marriage cannot guarantee that the couple will love each other and stay with each other forever. Many marriages do break up. Even in a highly civilised society, women are not entirely free from the concerns of reproduction. Those who cannot give birth to children have to face discrimination within their families. They may even be rejected by their husbands. In the face of life’s real challenges, how should Christian couples put into practice the covenantal love between them? How should they

educate their children? More importantly, how should they educate their children in the Christian faith?

Twenty years ago, Fr. Giovanni Giampietro started an experiment in the Hong Kong Diocese of which I was very glad to be a part.

The Beginning of the Family Movement

Twenty years ago, I was going through a crisis in my own marriage. Fr. Giampietro invited me to have a meeting with Dr. Joyce Chang and Mr. Li Lijun, both members of the management committee of Caritas. Fr. Giampietro expressed his desire to start a movement promoting the traditional values of marriage and family. The movement was entitled the “Family Movement.” Based on the traditional Confucian teaching that one “must improve one’s character and build up his family before he can govern the state and rule the world”, the Movement’s aim was to foster the idea of the family as the foundation of society. Fr. Giampietro hoped that the Catholic social workers of Caritas might be able to assist in the Movement. The Movement also gained the support of Fr. Ferdinand Lok. Thus the Movement began through the joint effort of Caritas, the Central Council of Catholic Laity and the Diocesan Office for Laity Formation.

At first, Fr. Giampietro introduced all the members to the Movement. A small group consisting of three to five families, with a social worker from Caritas for each group, gathered each month in one of the family’s homes. They prayed, studied the Bible reading selected for that month, and then shared their experience. My husband and I were members of one of these small groups. At the beginning, most of the members were concerned about marriage problems, conflicts between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, as well as questions about raising kids. Sometimes they talked about work, interpersonal relationships and social affairs. The only rule was that members had to observe confidentiality—they must never disclose to other people what was discussed in their meetings. This principle of confidentiality assured the members that they could share whatever problems they wanted—honesty and trust became the hallmarks of the Family Movement. Very often

members cried as they talked about their experiences. Sometimes couples started a verbal argument right in front of all those present. With the support of other group members, these conflicts were gradually transformed into opportunities for learning. Couples learned to show appreciation and respect for each other. They also learned to love one another and to seek God's will in their relationships.

The members were already very close to each other at the earliest stages of the Movement. They were just like childhood companions with many things to talk about. They participated positively in all activities. Gradually they built up an atmosphere of belonging to one big, harmonious family. There were no "official posts" in the Family Movement. Each member contributed whatever they could to the various activities. When one of the members needed help, all were willing to offer friendship and support. The faith of the group members became even more manifest when they helped each other bear their burdens. Jesus kept His promise to His followers: "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Mt. 28:20) We experienced the presence of Christ in the gatherings of the Family Movement. Most importantly, we felt His presence in our own family lives too. Marriage and family became the focal points where we encountered Christ.

Ten years later, some of the couples became leaders of new groups, most of which were newly baptized families. These new leaders passed on the spirit of the Movement to their members, who very quickly took up active roles in the Movement. We were all very glad to see that these newly baptized families were strongly rooted in the Christian faith. This was also our humble contribution to the Church in Hong Kong. Strengthened and inspired by their faith, many members devoted themselves to the service of their parishes and the Diocese. At the same time, the Movement began to welcome the lay Catholics who had gotten divorced, and provided support for them. God's grace, and the members' companionship helped these people to recover their inner peace, confidence and faith. Many remained faithful to their marital vows, and to the task of educating their children in the Christian faith.

The Mature Stage

Twenty years later, the children of the members of the Family Movement entered adulthood. We were very grateful to God because their faith was mature and strong. At first, they were still very shy and unwilling to acknowledge their identity as Christians before their friends. Now they have become evangelizers in their own right, actively talking about their Christian faith to others. From their process of growth, we see even more clearly the importance of a Christian family education. My elder daughter's boyfriend joined the catechumenate and was baptized before he married my daughter. My younger daughter's boyfriend also joined the catechumenate, and they are now making plans for marriage after his baptism. Both of my daughters are willing to place their marriages onto the altar of God. They decided to join the catechumenate, not because I made it a "condition" for marrying my daughters, but because they saw the living example of how my husband and I, because of our faith, overcame the difficult moments in our own marriage. They saw the importance of Christ's presence in their future families. After obtaining her bachelor degree and completing the Diploma in Education course, my younger daughter applied to study in the two-year catechetical program of the Diocesan Catechetical Commission. I am very happy to see that the Christian faith has an important place in her life. My husband demonstrates his zeal for the faith not only at home, but in his work too. He supports colleagues who have problems concerning love and family life. When he encounters persons of faith, he discusses Christian viewpoints with them, bringing them peace and joy.

Twenty years later, the Family Movement is no longer simply a place for gatherings and activities. It has become a culture inculcated into our families. Gradually its spirit influences society and the Church. Although the effort we have put into it is very little, it produces great fruits with the help of God.

As we all know, a social worker can usually lead a group process for a limited time. Yet some of the social workers have been leaders of small groups for more than ten years. Some of them have now retired from Caritas. However, they have not withdrawn

from their participation in the Family Movement. What makes them stay?

The reason is very simple: even social workers need the support of the community. Our gatherings have become a place for them to relax from the pressures of work. Social workers are not only givers, but recipients of our support. Some of them invited their family members into the Movement, and have formed a group too. Together they experienced growth in the “home-coming” atmosphere of the Movement. The Family Movement is not only their work, but their mission. Recently we welcomed a few newly baptised social workers from Caritas into the Movement. Ms. Alice Wong, who coordinated the social workers of the Family Movement, expressed the following wish: “I hope that the social workers in the Family Movement would not consider it as a job. They are here to bring out an important message: the family is the basic unit for the propagation of the Catholic faith. As social workers, we are committed to form communities of core families, so that they may be able to fulfil their mission.”

Returning to the Source

The following introduction to the Family Movement was written twenty years ago by Fr. Giampietro, Fr. Ferdinand Lok, Mr. Kevin Lai, Ms. Alice Wong, Mr. Chan Lo Kin, and me:

Hong Kong Family Movement²

Nowadays, many people lose faith in the value of marriage. Such a phenomenon exists even in many Catholic families. There is an urgent need to strengthen the core family and the relationships among its members (i.e. husbands and wives, parents and children), so that it may become a lively community firmly rooted in the Christian faith.

² Translator’s note: An introduction, written in English, can be found on the website of the Family Movement. Please see Hong Kong Family Movement, Introduction, <http://family.dolf.org.hk/org.html>

The Aim of the Movement

To help Catholic couples to live their marriage vows and to develop their children's religious formation through the sharing and support of a family community.

Our Goals

1. To strengthen the faith of husbands and wives, so that they may put into practice their marriage vows, i.e. to love each other with mutual respect and acceptance;
2. To support the faith of the parents, so that they may educate their children in the Christian faith;
3. To strengthen the relationship between parents and children, so that the children may grow in an atmosphere of love, respect and acceptance. It is only through love in the family that children learn how to love, respect and accept the people around them;
4. To foster the unity and sense of belonging among family members, so that they may be able to share their responsibilities and bear one another's burdens. This sharing of responsibilities is the essence of communal life;
5. To raise the members' concern for social issues and policies which affect the quality of family life.

As I read through this introduction today, I realise that, throughout these twenty years, it is not only an ideal written out on paper. It has become a reality in the lives of the members of the Family Movement, as they have overcome one challenge after another—sometimes challenges which have caught the members unprepared—with support from the other members and a strong faith in God. Since many members were like seeds growing up among the thorn bushes, they have treasured even more the friendship among themselves. “The Lord is my shepherd”—we all have profound experiences of the truth of this verse from the Bible. Instead of being choked to death, these seeds among the thorn bushes have strong faith and hope. They spread their love to the people around them, as if they are their own family members.

At the beginning of the Movement, we did not study the documents of the Second Vatican Council in great detail. Now as we celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Movement, we see that all the members of the Family Movement, including the social workers, have been responding to the love of God throughout these last twenty years. Through our marriage and family life, we have unceasingly manifested the undying and unconditional love of God. We have given witness to the vocation and mission of the lay people in our everyday lives:

The laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God so that by exercising their proper function and being led by the spirit of the gospel they can work for the sanctification of the world from within in the manner of leaven. In this way they can make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity. The layperson is closely involved in temporal affairs of every sort. It is therefore his special task to illumine and organise these affairs in such a way that they may always start out, develop, and persist according to Christ's mind, to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer. (LG 31)

Fr. Giampietro's experiment has been a great success. As we celebrate the growth of the Movement under the guidance of the Holy Spirit with grateful hearts, we look forward to further progress and perfection: "You...must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Mt. 5:48)

The unity among the members of the Movement shows that God's salvific plan is not only for us, but for all people. Christian families are called to give witness to and spread the Good News of

love. Our testimony would be even more powerful if there were more Christian families participating in the same mission.

Thus the Christian family, which springs from marriage as a reflection of the loving covenant uniting Christ with the Church, and as a participation in that covenant, will manifest to all men and women the Saviour's living presence in the world, and the genuine nature of the Church. This the family will do by the mutual love of the spouses, by their generous fruitfulness, their solidarity and faithfulness, and by the loving way in which all the members of the family work together. (GS 48)

It is the hope of the Family Movement that all Christian families in the Hong Kong Diocese, China and the whole world will "be more highly prized, and wholesome public opinion created regarding it, if Christian couples give outstanding witness to faithfulness and harmony in that same love, and to their concern for educating their children; also, if they do their part in bringing about the needed cultural, psychological, and social renewal on behalf of marriage and family". It is also our hope that "in the heart of their own families, young people [will] be aptly and seasonably instructed about the dignity, duty and expression of married love. Trained thus in the cultivation of chastity, they will be able at a suitable age to enter a marriage of their own after an honourable courtship". (GS 49)

It is our hope that Christian families will give generous support to those families in need, in particular single-parent families. This is because Christian families, being families themselves, are often more sensitive to the needs of other families. They are the most capable in providing appropriate assistance to the families who need help.

It is our hope that the seed that God has planted in His vineyard will continue to grow, so that more and more people may benefit from its work.