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The Personalist Vision of Marriage in the Context of its Contemporary Depreciation

Abstract

This paper presents the personalist vision of marriage referring mostly to Christian teaching on marriage and family. The post-modern society highlights a very critical assessment of the institution of marriage, supporting an individual rather than marital life. In such a situation the Catholic teaching on marriage, and ethos of marriage, is more and more challenged even by Christians, especially in the area of moral decision and life practice. In response to post-modern challenges, Christian personalism refers to the truth about the vocation of man to fulfil their humanity in corporality-determined sexuality. It is not only about anatomic differences but about a different manner of being man in many spheres. Christian reflection, unchangeable as to the assessment of the character of the relationship between a man and a woman, first and foremost refers to a thesis about both the distinctness and complementarity of sexes, embedded in the very human nature. Christian teaching identifies marital love only with the form of the commitment of the person who loves, in their own dynamics, to the good of the person loved. Complete love is directed towards a physical, mental and spiritual union with the loved person and develops from sensuality, through the mental and cultural sphere, to the spiritual domain. A Catholic apprehension of marriage does not question its natural character but defends it, and at the same time shows a radical change that takes place between a man and a woman through the sacramental virtue. Marriage is a deep union and covenant based on love rooted in God remaining the source of Love.

Keywords

The Catholic vision of marriage, sacramental community of persons, equality of sexes.

1. Introduction

Despite self-disappointment and disappointment with our brethren, nearly everybody dreams – as Pope Francis said – about meeting the other “half.”¹ Pope Benedict XVI, during the Fifth World Meeting of Families in Valencia, reminded that promotion of the values of marriage does not stand in the way of fully experiencing the happiness that man and woman encounter in their mutual love. The purpose of marriage is to make love healthier, stronger and more truly free.² Despite this lofty truth about marital love, it is, regrettably, difficult to avoid a conclusion that, so often, it is not reflected in daily life of contemporary societies. It is, therefore, absolutely necessary to reflect upon the ethos of marriage, so strongly exposed in Christian reflection, not only from the point of view of individual persons but also societies. Putting this ethos into practice through development of a deep, personal marital community, engrained in the Creator’s love and strengthened by a sacramental gift, is one of the most important tasks the contemporary Church is facing.

2. The post-modern crisis of marriage as a sacramental community of persons

The post-modern world, developing extremely fast, does not help, young people, in particular, shape a mature personality. This translates into their having problems with establishing good marital relationships.³ The genesis of a critical assessment of the institution of marriage among many contemporary people should also be looked for in their painful experiences of their parents’ marriages. It is also hard to overlook that today, entering into marriage is simply becoming

¹ Cf. Prayer Vigil in Preparation for the XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. Address of His Holiness Pope Francis, see: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151003_veglia-xiv-assemblea-sinodo.html (11.08.2018).

² Cf. Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Benedict XVI to Valencia (Spain) on Occasion of the Fifth Meeting of Families, Vigil of Prayer, Address of the Holy Father, 8 July 2006, see: http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/july/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060708_incontro-festivo.html (11.08.2018).

³ Cf. M. Biedroń, *Realizacja funkcji rodziny w kontekście globalnych przemian socjokulturowych*, in: *Rodzina we współczesności*, ed. A. Ładyżyński, Wrocław 2009, p. 51.

only one of many life options whose choice is not determined by anything external.⁴ The Catholic ethos of marriage is more and more often challenged even by Christians, especially in the area of the pragmatics of life. Meanwhile, the condition of particular marriages may be treated as an important factor of the diagnosis of the status of society and the Church trying to preserve the ethos of sacramental marriage.

Marriage, not only perceived from the Christian point of view, is not helped by the development of a culture of *narcissistic* individualism and freedom, devoid of responsibility for others, even a spouse. Whilst so strongly preferred, individualism favours freeing up dynamics and the potential of individuals, yet interpreted egoistically, especially in marital life, it contributes to undesired consequences, in particular in respect of its stability. Persons focused on their self-accomplishment have obvious difficulties to establish social ties, specifically those like marriage, which generates important obligations that require the abandonment of egoistic plans. This creates a huge space for shaping a single, childless and free-from-any-marriage-and-family-problems style of living.

The development of marriages in the spirit of the Catholic ethos is not helped by a widespread rejection of a vision of love being closely tied with altruism, fondness and gratitude. “Love”, so suggestively exposed in the pornographic industry, with its extremely reductionist vision of human sexuality, seems to dominate.⁵ This far-reaching and negative transformation of approach to sexuality has developed also through the dissemination of effective and easily accessible contraceptives, stripping off sexual intercourse of nearly all taboos, and reducing it only to sensual satisfaction without procreative fears. By the “emancipation” of women from maternity, contraceptives also impact indirectly on the stability of marriage, favouring for example infidelity.⁶ Addicted to their body, man becomes its slave, nearly obsessively focused on the accomplishment of their drives.

⁴ Cf. H. Świda-Ziemia, *Obraz świata i bycia w świecie (z badań młodzieży licealnej)*, Warszawa 2000, pp. 486-487.

⁵ Cf. J. Dworakowska, *Prostytucja nieletnich jako rezultat destrukcyjnych relacji rodzinnych. Przegląd badań empirycznych*, in: *Profilaktyka społeczna. Wielowymiarowość współczesnej rodziny. Wybrane zagadnienia XX i XXI wieku*, eds. E. Juško, J. Burgerowa, B. Wolny, Tarnów – Łapczyca 2014, pp. 50-51.

⁶ Cf. M. Ozorowski, *Miłość rodzicielska w nauczaniu papieża Benedykta XVI*, in: *Rodzina i rodzicielstwo między tradycją a współczesnością*, eds. A. Skreczko, B. Bassa, Z. Struzik, Warszawa 2014, p. 51.

It is also difficult to overlook the fact that marriage is no longer the threshold that separates childhood, and not yet shaped adolescent life, from adulthood which brings in specific requirements for spouses. Marriage itself is no longer guaranteed with a former strong social pressure, connected with the fact that it was viewed not only as a union between a man and a woman based on love but also as an optimal and rational condition of an effective functioning of individuals and societies. Today, marriage is practically perceived as a purely personal, thereby subjective project, both as to the choice of the partner's sex and the principles of joint life, which is supposed to give spouses, first of all, an appropriate quality of life.

Through laicization, marital love has been deprived from its original, strongly sacral character. The number of divorces continues to grow and the stability of marriage, as a sacramental institution, is losing the meaning it had in previous centuries. Instead of seeing divorce as a dramatic phenomenon, especially for children, it is perceived as a chance to establish a new marriage, perhaps more satisfactory than the one just ended. It is also difficult not to notice that the acceptance of a lay model of marriage stability is correlated to expectations, and as a matter of fact demands, that the Church will be more liberal in this area.

In addition to that, marriage on the institutional level is becoming a big mosaic as to its forms and methods of functioning. In modernized societies it is being transformed into loose partner relations, also homosexual, and first of all into concubinage, which is usually accompanied with an antinatalist attitude. The limitations stemming from gender as well as a patriarchal model of family, with, at least, formal dependency of a woman on her husband's will, is something of the past. After all, radical feminists no longer fight for equality of women and men but rather lead to the former's masculinization. While negating in practice their roles of a wife and a mother, the ideal of a woman's aspiration for business success and the pursuit of various passions, or giving up marriage altogether, is promoted.

Furthermore, in particular in Western culture, the last decades not only have sent patriarchalism to history, but have also revealed a serious crisis of manhood.⁷ A man, experiencing a strong crisis of his identity, seems to be lost both in the manner of his self-accomplishment in marriage, and in the context of fatherhood. It is difficult to overlook that extreme feminism proclaims the end of men in the world, finding them totally dispensable, even from the point

⁷ Cf. P. Zimbardo, *Gdzie ci mężczyźni?*, Warszawa 2015, p. 31.

of view of procreation, as they can be replaced by *in vitro* techniques. Moreover, the gender culture seems to suggest that the sex is mostly determined by the environment, not by biology. By the propagation of the concept of the non-sexual man, the principles of the theology of creation, incarnation and redemption, with the truth – standing at its core – about human corporality that takes the shape of a man or a woman, are questioned.

3. The Catholic vision of the marital community of persons

Each man, every “self” is in fact born from a meeting. This truth refers in particular to marriage being a unique, and absolutely unparalleled, personal community. Marriage constitutes the space that to the largest extent guarantees a person their full, personal development.⁸ A contemporary human, having serious problems with determining their ontological status, should always refer to the fundamental truth that he/she is a person. As a personal being, he/she precedes any distinction: ideological, social and political, having something bigger in themselves, a specific wholeness and a perfection of existence. Incomplete definitions of the human being, from various perspectives, not only do not explain the truth about the human being but also often favour one’s treatment as an object. Personalism adopts integral anthropology, conceiving man as a psychosomatic entity, a coexistence of spiritual and material elements. There is no doubt that materialism, depriving man of their transcendence, negates their personal existence, making them incapable of recognizing and experiencing good, truth and beauty.

A personal being, constituting a spiritual and material unity, actualizes themselves in the natural and supernatural spheres. While appreciating spirituality, Christian anthropology rejects any debasement of body, holding that a human person does not exist outside their body that remains their most evident manifestation, a factor of a powerful expression. While defending human spirituality, an optimistic assessment of corporality is presented here, which, however, distances itself from a specific cult of the human body that has shaped today. It is pointed out that God wanted corporality to constitute the deepest, and

⁸ Cf. M. Ryś, *Wspieranie rozwoju osobowego w rodzinie*, in: *Obudzić (nie)odkryty potencjał małżeństwa i rodziny*, eds. K. Braun, M. Jeziorański, A. Rynio, I. Szewczak, Lublin 2015, pp. 25-26.

most strongly engaging, way of the mutual revelation of two persons: a man and a woman.⁹ In the space of the sacramental marital love, the human body is an expression of a personal gift and affirmation, exceeding the natural order.¹⁰

Sexual intercourse plays an extremely important role in building personal marital love. It is its totally integral element that even determines the validity of a contracted sacramental marriage.¹¹ In terms of Christian personalism, at the roots of the uniqueness of marital love, expressed also in the sexual sphere, there is a belief that it can take place only between a woman and a man. It is difficult to disregard the fact that today there is an apparent inconsistency between reaching sexual versus personal and social maturity. Therefore, sexual life has been nearly totally separated from the decision about entering into marriage that, not infrequently, is generally regarded as unnecessary.

In the meantime, from the point of view of personalism, sexual intercourse is a specific form of expressing love by spouses, totally different from sexual activities typical for animals that do not have any references to the spiritual sphere, or any moral implications.¹² The human sexual drive is not an instinct of an unintelligent being, but a predisposition over which a human being, intelligent and free, is able to have control. Sexuality constitutes an integrating ability of loving God, inscribed by God into a man and a woman. A call to them to shape the marital community on the foundation of pure love does not mean the depreciation of sexuality, but a defence against its deformation. The sphere of *eros* should be appreciated in the perspective of its full beauty, exceeding the biological dimension.¹³ This gift would be, to some extent, mendacious if it

⁹ Cf. Jan Paweł II, *Mężczyznę i niewiastę stworzył ich*, Watykan 1986, pp. 195-198, 443-456.

¹⁰ Cf. J. Stala, E. Osewska, *Anders erziehen in Polen. Der Erziehungs- und Bildungsbegriff im Kontext eines sich ständig verändernden Europas des XXI. Jahrhunderts*, Tarnów 2009, Polihymnia; *Focus on Family and Education*, ed. E. Osewska, Split 2016, Crkva u svijetu; *Wychowanie a wyzwania ponowoczesności*, ed. E. Osewska, Warszawa 2011, UKSW; *Rodzina i edukacja w zmaganiu o przyszłość Europy*, ed. E. Osewska, Tarnów 2016; E. Osewska, *The Involvement of Lay Faithful in Consecratio Mundi*, "The Person and the Challenges" 7 (2017) Nr 2, pp. 81-92.

¹¹ Cf. M. Komorowska-Pudło, *Seksualność młodzieży przełomu XX i XXI wieku*, Kraków 2013, pp. 25-26.

¹² Cf. A. Bohdanowicz, *Miłość małżeńska a życie rodzinne i wychowanie dzieci*, in: *Rodzina szkołą wartości*, ed. A. Pryba, Poznań 2011, pp. 187-188.

¹³ Cf. Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est* of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI, 5-6, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html (15.08.2018).

were not also a fruit of devoting persons to each other, therefore not only their bodies but also their souls. Since the gift of sexuality is not given in a mature form, it remains also a task, whilst a Christian's duty is to cultivate and develop it for one's own good and the good of others. It is thereby necessary to combine the erotic sphere with the emotional and spiritual ones.

A considerable role in the personalist vision of marital sexuality is played by shyness revealing that body and sex are connected with the world of the highest values. It makes a man and a woman aware of their supra-usable and supra-sexual value and personal dignity, and also reminds them about a personal character of sexual relations binding them.¹⁴ The awareness of the dramatic consequences of the sin of Adam and Eve for people, also for their sexuality, induces man in their masculinity and femininity to strive to return to "the beginning". The sense of shyness opens space for shaping disinterested love, where the fundamental question is an affirmation of the value of the whole beloved person.

4. Complementarity and equality of sexes as a constitutive factor of the marriage relationship

Christian reflection, unchangeable as to the assessment of the character of the relationship between a man and a woman, first and foremost refers to a thesis about both distinctness and complementarity of sexes, embedded in the very human nature. In response to genderism, Christian personalism refers to the truth about the vocation of man to fulfil their humanity in corporality-determined sexuality. It is not only about anatomic differences but about a different manner of being man in many spheres. In practice, it is impossible here to talk about humanity without a reference to femininity and masculinity, something we have been living up to from the moment of conception.¹⁵ Before a man and a woman become spouses, they emerge from the very mystery of creation as a brother and a sister in the same humanity.¹⁶ It cannot be ignored that the creation of woman evoked admiration and joy of man who found somebody equal in his

¹⁴ Cf. A. Garbarz, *Antropologiczno-biblijna interpretacja wstydu seksualnego w świetle Jana Pawła II teologii ciała*, "Resovia Sacra" 1 (1994), pp. 70-71.

¹⁵ Cf. M. Komorowska-Pudło, *Psychospołeczne uwarunkowania postaw młodzieży wobec seksualności*, Szczecin 2015, p. 21.

¹⁶ Cf. Jan Paweł II, *Mężczyznę i niewiastę stworzył ich...*, pp. 75-76.

humanity. In the context of man's superiority position against woman, dominant in antiquity, we must refer to the role of Gospel in which Jesus unambiguously points to their equality. The diversification of a human entity into a man and a woman is aimed at their complementarity. Man was created to live in the community of two.¹⁷

Even though their distinction and a different method of experiencing and expressing humanity cannot be overlooked, they need each other, having their own specific abilities and unique calling. Therefore, an encounter with a person of the opposite sex is extremely important for full human development and happiness. A woman and a man, destined for personal communion, may become a disinterested complementary gift of love for each other.

5. Valorisation of the sacred dimension of marriage

In the more and more pluralistic reality, full of chaos and disorientation, activities aimed at discovering, protecting and developing the vision of a sacramental marriage are gaining profound significance, confirmed, of course, by an evident testimony of life. A Catholic apprehension of marriage does not question its natural character, but definitely defends it, and at the same time shows a radical change that takes place between a man and a woman through the sacramental virtue.

A natural desire for love that is usually satisfied in marriage, which indeed is a deep covenant based on love, needs its own reference and rootedness in God, remaining the source of Love.¹⁸ A marriage devoid of love is something deeply degenerated, caricatural and incomprehensible. While appreciating all dimensions of a person, Christian personalism constantly identifies marital love only with the form of the commitment of the person who loves, in their own dynamics, to the good of the person loved. Complete love is directed towards a physical,

¹⁷ Cf. J. Stala, *Familienkatechese in Polen um die Jahrhundertwende. Probleme und Herausforderungen*, Tarnów 2008, Biblos; J. Stala, *W kierunku integralnej edukacji religijnej w rodzinie. Próba refleksji nad nauczaniem Jana Pawła II w kontekście polskich uwarunkowań*, Tarnów 2010, Polihymnia; *Strengthening Families*, eds. J. Stala, J. Garmaz, Kraków 2016, UPJPII; *The Contemporary Family: Local and European Perspectives*, eds. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Kraków 2015, UPJPII; *Religious Education / Catechesis in the Family. A European Perspective*, eds. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Warszawa 2010, UKSW; *Nauki o rodzinie w służbie rodziny*, ed. J. Stala, Kraków 2014, UPJPII.

¹⁸ Cf. Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est* ...,1.

mental and spiritual union with the loved person and develops from sensuality, through the mental and cultural sphere, to the spiritual domain. Sacramental love is not a type of emotional gratification that can be changed or established depending on the individuals' own sensitivity.¹⁹ The key role is played here by understanding that a person is the only creature in the world that God-Love called into existence so that he/she is capable of building their relationship with Him and with other people through love.

Since the ability to love is conditioned by the existence of eternal Love – the communion of Three Divine Persons, a sacramental marital relationship may not be reflected upon in any other manner but in view of love. After all, God created people as men and women not only for procreation, but also that in the marital communion they will reflect the Divine communion of life and love. The prototype of the marital union should be looked for in the Trinitarian mystery of the life of God who created the union first of all so that spouses' love will develop and mature for their good in their indissoluble relationship. Since the indissolubility of the wedlock reflects the stability and non-variability of God's love to man, you cannot enter into matrimony only for some time. Neither can it be dissolved by spouses themselves, at their discretion, nor by any state authorities. As a matter of fact, we cannot talk here about a divorce but only about a possibility of declaring a marriage null and void, and this only after a complex matrimonial nullity trial that will prove that it was contracted invalidly. In the presence of God, you may not tell untruth to the other person, tear "one flesh" apart and disregard God and the loved person if you have sworn that you would never leave him/her until death do you part.

The command of marital fidelity comes directly from the teaching of Christ, the Gospels and other scriptures of the New Testament while the Church, from the very beginning, in the Epistles and the teaching of the Church Fathers, has invariably proclaimed the doctrine of indissolubility of marriage.²⁰ This issue was decisively resolved by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical letter *Familiaris consortio* (19-20) and by such documents as the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* and *Catechism of the Catholic Church* of 1992.²¹

¹⁹ Cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* of the Holy Father Francis, 66, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (15.08.2018).

²⁰ Cf. P. Gajda, *Prawo małżeńskie Kościoła katolickiego*, Tarnów 2000, pp. 25-27.

²¹ Cf. J. Gręźlikowski, *Przed nami małżeństwo*, Włocławek 2002, pp. 23-24.

It should be said that even though fidelity is often identified with maintaining an exclusive intimate relation with the spouse, it also refers to the impossibility of reserving for oneself the right to have, with other persons, relations assigned only to spouses. In the lifelong character of a Christian marriage you cannot see symptoms of restricting human rights and freedoms. It seems that the opposite is true since the durability of marriage allows man for a more complete pursuit of their life vocation. Freedom and fidelity are not only non-contradictory but also support each other both in interpersonal and social relations. However, respect for a word and fidelity to a promise given may not be purchased or sold. They cannot be coercively forced, nor preserved without a sacrifice. In the face of a marriage crisis, the Church offers a spouse the right to an effective defence, including separation, she deems serious the sufferings of a harmed spouse and harmed children as seriously as the marital vows. Separation is not a revocation of love but a specific type of remote love.

From the point of view of the Church, a decision about marriage may not be taken light-heartedly since this act relates not only to the project of the personal life of the spouses but also to God's plan. Good preparation for marriage has an important meaning for the deep internal cohesion of the marital relationship, decides about its quality, thereby about the happiness of spouses and their families.²² Since in contemporary society, man seems to need wider and wider competences, and spends a significant part of their life to acquire them, this should be also true about marriage. The existence of a happy marriage may not be linked to destiny shared by spouses along with their total passivity. We should rather talk here about a task that should be undertaken with full awareness and responsibility if one wants to fulfil the dreams that most people have about building a happy marriage. There may be no doubts that people who are better prepared for it than others manage to engage in the vocation of marriage, and to pursue it satisfactorily.

6. Conclusion

A successful marriage is still ranked in the first place among values recognized and highly-priced by Poles, also after the period of transformation that had

²² Cf. J. Stala, *Konieczność i uwarunkowania współczesnej katechezy przedmałżeńskiej*, in: *W poszukiwaniu katechezy rodziców*, ed. J. Stala, Tarnów 2007, pp. 199-206.

a serious impact on many other parameters contributing to our reality. Undoubtedly it will also belong a spectrum of objectives they will aspire to in future, and this in turn will translate into the condition of marriages living in future generations. The gift of marriage is a great vocation that, thanks to Christ's grace, should be responded to with generous, faithful and patient love. Contemporary marriage, which today comes to grips with its internal problems, should somehow try again to determine its place in society, in which a reference to the personalist concept of man, society and, finally, marriage itself can play an important role.

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