

The Family as the Foundation of Society

Tuesday, November 4th, 2008

Full text of address by Cardinal Seán Brady, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland at the Céifin Conference, Ennis, Co Clare



It is a particular privilege to be asked to address the Céifin Conference and, since 1997, it has become one of the best known and highly respected annual events in the country. It has generated lively debate and made a very significant contribution to the important topics discussed over those eleven years. I take this opportunity to congratulate you Fr Harry and the others involved in founding the Céifin Conference. I salute your initiative and creativity in establishing a much needed forum for debate during this critical period in our country's history. Long may it continue.

Introduction

You have asked me to address the theme of 'The Family as the Foundation of Society'. I am pleased to do so. There are few institutions more important to the future of our society than the family. There are few that have been subject to such rapid and fundamental change in our lifetime.

This morning I would like to explore some of the contours of that change. In particular I would like to set out the basis for the Church's conviction that marriage, the family and the general good of society are so interdependent that one cannot flourish without the other. I will examine some of the recent trends associated with marriage and the family. I will argue that legislation and policies that promote commitment in marriage are, in fact, more socially progressive and beneficial to society than those which endorse, simply because they have become more widespread, attitudes and trends which undermine that commitment. I will also comment on the question of a proposed equivalence between cohabitation and marriage as well as same-sex unions and marriage. This as you know has been the subject of considerable public debate in light of the Government's intention to introduce new legislation in this area.

Let me share with you the contents of a letter which may express more adequately than I ever could the link essential link between faith, family and society. It is offered through the eyes and perhaps with the wisdom of an older generation. It captures something of the scale of change which has occurred in Ireland in recent years, what the title of your conference describes as a 'revolution'. It was sent to me by a 77 year old Clare woman, now living in Kilkenny, wishing me well for my visit to her native county. She decided to write to me when she heard that I was going to talk on the family and to suggest a few ideas for my talk. When I am asked to talk, such help is always welcome! She said:

"When I grew up we never knew what money looked like, we were never hungry, we had a family life, we always said the Rosary and had time to talk with our neighbours".

"Today we have so much money that people have no time for anything, most of all God. There is no word about sin or the Ten Commandments. There is nothing wrong today. What good is money and big houses? Do they bring happiness? All those things only last for a while. This is the only thing that lasts, God."

"Please tell the people about what matters most, their souls, not their bodies. Bring back family life, family prayer and read the Bible".

Marriage and the Word of God

I was struck by this last sentence in particular. It bore a remarkable resemblance to something that was said at the recent Synod of Bishops in Rome, the theme of which was: 'The Word of God in the life of the Church'. Proposition 20 of the Synod spoke specifically of the link between marriage, family and the Word of God. It said:

The Word of God stands at the origins of marriage (Gen 2:24). Jesus himself inserted marriage among the institutions of his Reign (Mt 19:4-8), giving it a sacramental status. In the sacramental celebration, man and woman pronounce a prophetic word of reciprocal donation of self, they become "one flesh," a sign of the mystery of the union of Christ and the Church. (Eph 5:32) Through the fidelity and the unity of the life as a family, the spouses are the first announcers of the Word of God to their children. It's necessary to sustain them and to help them develop within the family, modes of domestic celebration of the Word such as reading the Bible, and other forms of prayer. Spouses should recall that the Word of God is a precious

source of support amid difficulties in conjugal life and in the family.

And this brings me to my first point; the family based on marriage as the foundation of society is a truth revealed by God in the Scriptures: it also one of the most precious human values. We should not be surprised then that when people become less concerned with what God has to say generally, or when the popularity of an idea replaces objective human values as the basis of morality, commitment to marriage as the basis of the family also diminishes. As the letter I have just read suggests, what we are involved with here is a wider 'revolution' about how we approach morality and values generally.

So how should we respond to this revolution? How might we invite people to rediscover the importance of the family based on marriage as the basis of society?

Changes in Attitudes to Marriage

Part of that response, I would suggest, is to acknowledge that some aspects of this so-called 'revolution' have been good for marriage and the family. While the letter I read reflects a concern that we have lost something valuable from the past, I am sure no-one would want to say that everything about marriage and the family in the past was good. We should be glad for example that there is more equality between men and women in marriage and in society generally. There is a greater awareness that both parents have a mutual responsibility in bringing up children and in sharing domestic tasks. We have learnt so much about the importance of responding to the emotional and practical needs of children, about how to support the development of children in constructive ways. As I will mention again later, we are also learning just how important a stable family home is to the happiness and long-term well-being of children.

All of this is good. In fact, I would go as far as to say that the prospect of a married couple establishing a happy, loving and stable family home in Ireland today has never been greater. Our challenge is to help women and men rediscover the joy of marriage, the life-long fulfilment it can offer, especially those who are reluctant to make a long-term commitment.

And this brings me to my second point. While some aspects of the 'revolution' in our approach

to marriage and the family have been good, is it possible that something good from the past has been lost? I think this is what my friend from Clare was saying in her letter. I note it was a theme considered in the first Céifin Conference entitled, 'Are we forgetting something?' My letter from the woman in Clare suggests that part of what is needed is to help people rediscover the good that comes from faith and prayer. She mentioned the Bible in particular.

This coincides with a key proposal of the recent Synod. In making people more familiar with the Word of God, in an informed and formative way, we can act in support of marriage, the family and the good of society itself.

This is because, as it explains in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 'the importance and centrality of the family with regard to the person and society is repeatedly underlined by Sacred Scripture' (n.209). The family is presented from the very opening pages of the Word of God as 'the primary place of humanisation for the person and society and the cradle of life and love' (n.209)

Church Teaching on the Family based on Marriage as the Fundamental Unity of Society

The family is also the natural community in which human social nature is experienced. It makes a unique and irreplaceable contribution to the good of society. The family unit is born from the stable and committed communion of persons which marriage provides. 'Communion' has to do with the personal relationship between the 'I' and the 'thou'. 'Community' on the other hand transcends the 'I' and 'thou' and moves towards a 'society', a 'we'. The family, therefore, as a community of persons, is the first human 'society'. It is at the very heart of the common good.

The common good "is the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily" (Gaudium et Spes, n. 26)

The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains it in this way: 'The family is the original cell of social life. It is the natural society in which husband and wife are called to give themselves in love and in the gift of life. Authority, stability, and a life of relationships within the family constitute the foundations for freedom, security, and fraternity within society. The family is the

community in which, from childhood, one can learn moral values, begin to honour God, and make good use of freedom. Family life is an initiation into life in society.' (n.2207)

The Catechism goes on to say: 'A man and a woman united in marriage, together with their children, form a family. This institution is prior to any recognition by public authority, which has an obligation to recognize it. It should be considered the normal reference point by which the different forms of family relationship are to be evaluated' (n. 2202).

Marriage and the family therefore are of public interest. They are fundamental to the public good and entitled to special consideration and care from the State. Other relationships whether they are sexual or not, are the result of private interest. They do not have the same fundamental relationship to the good of society and to the bringing up of children as the family based on marriage.

At the heart of this understanding of marriage is a truth taught by Scripture and confirmed by human reason. It is the truth that the 'Physical... difference and complementarity' of a woman and man are oriented toward the goods of marriage and the flourishing of family life' (CCC n.2333). Being a man or woman is not accidental to who we are or to God's plan for the family and society. It is essential to it.

This is why the Church holds that the good of persons and the proper functioning of society are closely connected with the healthy state of marriage and family life. In the words of the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 'without families that are strong in their communion and stable in their commitment' societies grow weak. This is also why 'relegating the family to a subordinate or secondary role, excluding it from its rightful position in society, would be to inflict great harm on the authentic growth of society as a whole.'

The Positive State of Marriage in Irish Life

Some will argue that this presents an idealised view of marriage and family life. They will point out that the concept of a nuclear family of father and mother, united by marriage and bringing up children in a stable and loving environment does not capture the reality or the ideal of an increasing number of people. They will point to the existence of an increasingly diverse range

of family units in Irish society, to an increase in long term cohabitation, to increasing breakdown in marriage and to the prospect of radically new forms of legally recognised relationship as evidence that the model of family revealed by the Scriptures is increasingly irrelevant.

Yet it is worth asking whether these popular assumptions about the state of marriage as the basis of the family life in Ireland are actually true? The fact is that life-long marriage remains the preferred choice of the vast majority of men and women in Ireland. Recent research by the Catholic Marriage Care Service, Accord, for example, confirmed that the marriage rate in Ireland has ‘actually increased in the past 10 years – suggesting something of a “revival” in marriage relative to the mid and late 1990’s when the rate fell to historically low levels.’[1] The survey also found that ‘Marriage is a sufficiently rewarding experience such that 9 out of 10 would recommend it to others’. In contrast to the view that the traditional family unit revealed in the Word of God is no longer relevant, the report concluded that ‘the traditional family arrangement of children being raised by both their natural parents is the one preferred by almost all married couples in our survey.’[2]

This is a far cry from any sense of crisis in the family based on marriage sometimes portrayed in public debate. While some 12% of couples in Ireland chose long term cohabitation instead of marriage, the family based on marriage is still the fundamental unit of our society by a substantial margin. It continues to play an essential part in the well-being and stability of Irish life. In the words of the Accord report: in Ireland ‘healthy, happy marriages [still] make for strong family life; and strong families contribute to the economy and demand little in return from the taxpayer. In other words, “family capital” is at the core of “social capital”, upon which we build the future for our country.’[3]

It is this essential link between ‘family capital’ and ‘social capital’ which in part explains the special place afforded to marriage in the Irish Constitution. Article 40.1.1 of Bunreacht na hÉireann recognises the family ‘as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.’

It is not accurate to suggest that this is merely a remnant of Catholic influence on the formulation of the Constitution and therefore to be rejected as anachronistic or sectarian. Similar recognition and terminology can be found in the Constitutions of many other countries around the world which have them. The Greek Constitution for example describes the family as ‘the foundation of the conservation and progress of the nation.’ Such values are also consistent with Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights when it states: ‘The family is the

natural and fundamental unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.’ Article 16 of the Social Charter of Europe (1961), Article 23 of the International Treaty on Civil Rights, Article 10 of the International Charter on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights as well as many other national and international instruments affirm and develop this basic insight that the family is the nucleus of society, and for that reason, deserving of special status, development and care.

Proposed Changes to Legislation and Policy

It is on this basis too that Article 41.3.1 of Bunreacht na hÉireann places an obligation on the Government to guard the institution of marriage with special care. This brings me to the sensitive and complex issue of the Government’s stated intention to legislate for a variety of relationships other than marriage, notably for cohabiting and same-sex couples.

In its submission to the Oireachtas All-Party Committee on the Constitution on this issue, the Committee on the Family of the Irish Bishops’ Conference in February 2005 acknowledged, and I quote, that ‘a diversity of family forms support the fundamental human activities of care, intimacy and belongingness to varying degrees, yet it is appropriate that the Constitution should guard with special care the institution of marriage. [However] such a commitment to special care of the family based on marriage ought not, nor does it, prevent the State from seeking to offer appropriate support to individuals in other forms of family units.’ (p.6)

The issue then is not whether it is appropriate to introduce policies and legislation which provide some level of protection for people in relationships of long term dependency. In many circumstances this will be totally appropriate and just. The question is at what point such legislation or policy begins to undermine the family based on marriage as the fundamental unit of society and thereby undermine the common good?

In this regard the publication by Government of the General Scheme of Civil Partnership Bill in June of this year gives cause for concern. Obviously we must await the publication of the actual legislation arising from the scheme to make a complete assessment. It is clear however that the General Scheme envisages the possibility that Government will grant to cohabiting and same-sex couples the status of marriage in all but name. Some restrictions will apply to adoption by same sex couples. Apart from this however and given reports that the Department of Justice has confirmed that “social welfare and tax entitlements on a par with those of

spouses will be provided through the finance and social welfare Bills”, it is difficult to see how anything other than the introduction of de facto ‘marriage’ for cohabiting and same-sex couples is envisaged.

If this is the case, those who are committed to the probity of the Constitution, to the moral integrity of the Word of God, and, to the precious human value of marriage between a man and a woman as the foundation of society, may have to pursue all avenues of legal and democratic challenge to the published legislation.

The intention is not to penalise those who have chosen or find themselves in different family forms or relationships. It is rather to uphold the principle that the family based on marriage between a man and woman is so intimately connected to the good of society that it is deserving of special care and protection. The value of the Constitutional guarantees given in this area cannot be limited to the wording of the Constitution about marriage and the family remaining unchanged. The relevant Articles of the Constitution are more than a statement of aspiration. They imply that the State will maintain a qualitative difference between the level of support and entitlements provided by the State to the family based on marriage and that afforded to other forms of dependent relationship.

This makes the stated intention of Government to remove the category ‘Marital Status’ and to replace it with ‘Civil Status’ through the Equal Status Act particularly worrying. Some might argue that it is in fact a breach of the Government’s Constitutional duty to protect the institution of marriage. Those who believe in the values espoused by the Constitution are entitled to ask why such a profound and unnecessary change is envisaged along with others which may yet emerge. Marriage, and with it the common good, is directly undermined when legislation and policy reduce marriage to simply one more form of relationship among others.

It is worth noting in this regard that the definition of marriage for the purposes of the Constitution has been judicially interpreted “as the voluntary union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others for life”.[4]

The Issue of Equality

Some have argued that what is at stake here is the principle of equality. This is to argue that what are being compared are two things which are qualitatively the same. This is manifestly not the case. The link between a public commitment to life-long marriage, and the stability of the family unit, as well as the distinct role of a mother and father in the generation and education of children, gives marriage a unique and qualitatively different relationship to society than any other form of relationship.

In the words of the Pontifical Council for the Family in 2000: 'Equality before the law must respect the principle of justice which means treating equals equally, and what is different differently: i.e., to give each one his due in justice. This principle of justice would be violated if de facto unions were given a juridical treatment similar or equivalent to the family based on marriage. If the family based on marriage and de facto unions are neither similar nor equivalent in their duties, functions and services in society, then they cannot be similar or equivalent in their juridical status.'[5]

This qualitative difference between the family based on marriage and other forms of relationship is increasingly recognised in research. For example, one of the largest surveys on family life to date, the British Millennium Cohort Study (2008) has found that one in four children of cohabiting parents suffer family breakdown before they start school at the age of five, compared to just 1 in 10 children of married parents. Other studies in Britain and the US suggest that children born outside of marriage are more likely to do worse at school, suffer poorer health and are more likely to face problems of unemployment, drugs and crime. In the words of one commentator, "The strong implication for governments is that they should be doing more to support marriages."

All the more remarkable then that Ireland looks set to repeat the mistakes of societies like Britain and the US by introducing legislation which will promote cohabitation, remove most incentives to marry and grant same-sex couples the same rights as marriage in all but adoption. This will effectively dissolve the special status of marriage between a man and woman enshrined in the Constitution. This would indeed be a revolution, perhaps the greatest revolution in the history of the Irish family – as the title of Conference suggests! But will it be a revolution which promotes the common good of our society? Will it really help children and married couples or will it further erode marriage at a time when research and experience point to the value of marriage for children and society?

Whether what is envisaged will breach the Constitution remains to be seen once the legislation is published. But no one should underestimate how radical and far reaching the legislation arising from the General Scheme published by the Government could be. My key message today is thus: The priority of the family over society and over the State has to be reaffirmed. The family does not exist for society or the State, but society and the State exist for the family.

What is being proposed by the Government undermines the very principle of equality it claims to uphold. It limits the provision of support in the General Scheme to relationships which are presumed to be sexual. This is unjust to those in established relationship of dependency which are not sexual. It confirms that what is driving the change in legislation and policy in this area is not a concern for equality at all. The provision of just, reasonable and much needed support to those in established and dependent relationships which are not sexual in nature has been ignored in the General Scheme. Anyone in a caring, dependent relationship, whether sexual or not, should be given certain protections such as hospital visitation rights and a stability of residence in the event of that relationship ending. Why should people in such relationships be discriminated against because their relationship is not sexual? There is a need to address important issues of fairness to people in established relationships of dependency. This is possible without undermining the unique role of marriage in society and its contribution to the common good.

More Support for Marriage: A Benefit to Society

Marriage deserves to be supported by society. It is so fundamental to the common good that the State acts in the interests of society when it supports marriage through benefits in taxation, social welfare and social policy.

If we have the good of children and of society at heart then it is also clear that we need to try and maximise the number of children being raised by a married mother and father. We can do this through providing positive incentives and the formation of positive social attitudes to marriage. We also need to provide greater support for married couples themselves as they live out their life long commitment to each other and their children. This includes providing more adequate preparation for marriage. Accord is involved in outstanding work in this regard for which they deserve to be applauded. One of the greatest obstacles Accord encounters however, is the difficulty in acquiring a sufficient number of volunteer counsellors and a general resistance on the part of couples to attending a marriage preparation course. In other countries, for example in Italy, the pre-marriage courses consist of a least 9 weekend sessions. Here it is much less. In spite of this priests often comment to me on how couples will spend any amount of time with the florist, the photographer, the hotel manager in preparation for their wedding. These arrangements are important but the time given to them can be in strong contrast to the willingness of engaged couples to take time out together to reflect on the importance and meaning of what they are about to do.

Conclusion

During my thirteen years on the staff of the Irish College in Rome, it was my privilege to marry a great number of couples, hundreds, maybe thousands. As an aside I have to say that some of the best people in all those couples came from Clare. I am not saying that because I am here in Clare but because I believe it and have believed it for many years. My abiding impression is one of people who had high hopes and earnest dreams for a happy and fulfilling life together. No-one I know ever entered marriage with the expectation or desire that it would fail. The Church offers the compassion of Christ for all those who suffer in this way. It invites all of us to have compassion and to offer practical support for those whose marriages have broken down.

And it is here that we come back to our starting point: 'The Word of God in the life and mission of the Church'! Jesus was born and lived in a family, with all its characteristic features. At the wedding feast in Cana he conferred on marriage the highest dignity of a sacrament. Jesus could have produced the wine without the help of the stewards but he decided to involve them and Mary also becomes involved. I see this as an indication that in God's design the community, particularly the immediate family, have a part to play in supporting marriage. There may be a lot of comedy about prying in-laws but the extended family have a vital role to play in supporting marriage.

In the story of Cana we also observe how Mary was sensitive to the needs of the newly married couple. Instead of wringing her hands when the wine ran out, an obvious cause of embarrassment and possibly of conflict for the couple, she gets involved telling the stewards 'Do whatever he tells you'. In this she points all newly married couples to the true source of their happiness and success in marriage – seeking the will of God in all things together.

It was this which was identified as a particular virtue in the life and marriage of Blessed Louis and Zelie Martin, the parents of the Little Flower, St Therese of Lisieux. They were beatified on 19 October past by Pope Benedict. It was Mission Sunday. They are only the second spouses in history declared blessed as a couple.

How appropriate then, that as Ireland prepares to consider legislation with the potential to undermine God's will for marriage and the family, we turn to the example and inspiration of this married couple and draw strength and direction from it. How well we remember the wonderful welcome given by the faithful in Ireland to the relics of their daughter, St Therese of Lisieux,

some years ago. The Martin family of nine children and parents who were fully engaged in business, social and Church life are a timely source of encouragement for all those who promote the value of the family based on marriage in our society.

The Word of God is pro-love, pro-marriage, pro-family, pro-life and pro-society. My prayer is that, through the intercession of Blessed Louis and Zelie Martin, more and more people will rediscover this revolutionary message of the Word of God, for the sake of our society and its future.

Thank you

[1] Married Life: The first seven years; a survey of married life and couples in the first seven years of marriage in Ireland, Accord Catholic Marriage Care Service, Maynooth, 2007, p.6

[2] *ibid.*, p. 38

[3] *ibid.*

[4] B v R [1995] 1 ILRM 491 per Costello J; it should be noted that the above statement was made prior to the fifteenth amendment to the Constitution, hence the inclusion of the words “for life”.

[5] Pontifical Council for the Family, Family, Marriage and De Facto Unions, Holy See, 2000, n.10