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The Biblical Vision of Marriage

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The Biblical Vision of Marriage

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Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sunday Readings for October 4, 2009 for Cycle B:
Gn 2:18-24; Ps 128; Heb 2:9-11; Mk 10:2-16

THE BIBLICAL VISION OF MARRIAGE

Lawrence E. Frizzell

Before the Second Vatican Council priests would be told to preach a series of sermons on the Decalogue, the sacraments and, in a special way, matrimony. These "lessons" would be related to the Sunday readings but often that might require considerable ingenuity!

The first document of the Council offered a new vision of the biblical texts used in worship. The treasures of the Bible are to be opened more lavishly so that a richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's Word... By means of the homily the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life are expounded from the sacred text during the course of the liturgical year (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* #52).

Of course, we should present the commandments and the sacraments from the biblical text at the appropriate occasions. But a systematic presentation of all their theological and moral implications must be made in another context. Indeed, never has a profound insight into the theology of marriage been more necessary than in contemporary society.

The Council addressed aspects of marriage and family life on several occasions which show the roots of its teaching in the Scriptures.

"The intimate partnership of life and the love which constitute the married state have been established by the creator and endowed by him with its own proper laws... It is an institution confirmed by the divine law and receiving its stability, even in the eyes of society, from the human act by which the partners mutually surrender themselves to each other; for the good of the partners, of the children, and of society, this sacred bond no longer depends on human decision alone. For God himself is the author of marriage and has endowed it with various benefits and with various ends in view..." (*Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* #48).

Of course, to appreciate the dependence of the Church's teaching on the biblical tradition one must survey the entire heritage. However, the passage for this Sunday's readings are especially evocative with regard to the exclusive and perpetual commitment of the partners.

The institution of a monogamous union between man and woman is described in the hymn of creation in seven days (Gn 1:26-28) and in the deceptively simple narrative of Gn 2:18-25, which is part of an older account of creation and its purpose.

Formed from the earth ('*adamah*'), the human being ('*adam*') is commissioned to cultivate and care for the garden in which he is placed. In harmony with God, he is at peace with all creatures, but he searches in vain for a partner. The text teaches the uniqueness of the human bond by describing a

special creative act of God. He produces an equal for the man and presents her as a matchmaker would. The purpose of this part of the narrative is stated clearly so that a basic question for all times is answered. Where, after allegiance to God, do a person's loyalties lie? "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and the two of them become one body" ('flesh' in Hebrew) (Gn 2:24). The intimacy between the partners in marriage is constituted by an exclusive, life-time commitment. In a very profound sense each completes the other and together they fulfil the human vocation in God's service. Unless the partnership is open to the divine presence the beautiful ideal of self-giving will not be complete.

The experience of marriage in ancient Israel, as in other societies, did not always mirror this pattern of peaceful harmony. Because of the tragic consequences of human sinfulness and the disruption of marital tranquility, the law of Moses permitted divorce and remarriage (Dt 24:1-4), even though a prophet bewailed a man's infidelity and declared that God hates divorce (Mal 2:14-16).

Jesus is asked to discuss divorce; while acknowledging the law of Deuteronomy for Israel, he points to the original principle of the Creator and restores marriage to this ideal. In the fervor of mutual love, young couples all over the world repeat two ideas in their songs and poetry: "you" and "forever." An exclusive union until the death of one partner is intended, but all too often in the course of years some compromises mar that ideal. People do need a remedy for the sinful condition in which the human race languishes. Jesus proposed his new vision of the vocation to marriage on the basis of his Paschal Mystery. There people would learn the altruistic love that should be exemplified in family life. Mark appropriately linked the blessing of children by Jesus to the passage about married life. Like the rest of us, parents can learn from their little ones an insight into the essence of the Kingdom of God.