

Families: Artisans of an Evolving Society
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Introductory Observations

It was my privilege to begin my preparation for this talk by reading your observations on the status of marriage as it is and the vocation of marriage that God calls us to embrace. This method of doing theology by reading the signs of the times and interpreting them in light of the Christian gospel is familiar to me, but I am not often able to engage in such a broad reading of what theologians call “the situation.” With the help of your observations from all over the world, I was able to think more about marriage in a global context, and to remember that my reality as a professor in a mid-western U.S. city is a very small part of what is going on. I am grateful for your wisdom, daunted by the prospect of addressing this diverse, theologically-educated, committed audience, and hopeful that you will find my attempt to link your observations to my theological work helpful in the context of your quest to judge rightly and act justly in a world in which marriage is becoming more and more difficult to sustain. My goal will be to summarize the current state of marriage in the modern world, discuss some key aspects of Christian theological thinking on the family, and suggest some possible ways to bring Christian theology into action in order to better impact the future of marriage.

My thesis is that Christian families have a dual vocation of creating a civilization of love within the family and acting for justice in the world. In the words of John Paul II, they are called to communion and solidarity. This may not be a conventional response to

the modern crisis of the family, but it is, in my view, a profoundly Catholic and Christian one. But let me begin by briefly discussing the crisis that provokes such a response.

I. Marriage in the Modern World

As your observations show, in most places in the world, there is a sense that things are changing. Rising divorce, cohabitation, premarital sex, abortion, single-parent families, and an increasingly casual attitude toward marriage are commonly cited markers of modern culture. On the other hand, most believe that marriage maintains its place as first cell of a stable society and most seek a partner to love, cherish, and live happily ever after with (even if they also marry for practical reasons and are not fully prepared for the sacrifices marriage requires). In our culture, marriage is some ways under attack, threatened by the fast pace of life, the stress of modern living, by materialism, individualism, and a lack of marriage-affirming media images. Moreover, modernity has brought with it an increasingly private view of marriage which is less shaped by extended family and community than by individual wants and desires. More hours of work for men, women, and teens leave less time for building and maintaining the relationships we cherish. Yet, cultural stories of marital happiness continue to be told and in most communities marriage remains the expectation and the norm.

Like the culture, the law can be seen as both upholding marriage (via the awarding of economic benefits to married couples, the passage of family-friendly legislation, the recent focus on government-encouraged marriage preparation, and the rise of covenant marriage laws), but also threatening it (via liberal abortion laws, a diminishing social safety net, and potential changes in the definition of marriage). While it is important to remember that modernity brings individual freedom that most of us

would be loathe to surrender and a strong focus on relationships that is largely to our benefit, it is hard to deny that its excesses make marriage more difficult to sustain. There is some evidence that individuals and governments are beginning to realize the crisis and act to preserve marriage, but it is not clear that salvation is possible.

What, then, of the future of marriage? Most of you believe that the future depends to some extent on what we do in the face of this situation. If Christian marriage is supposed to be something other than what we see around us, if it is meant to be, as you said in your responses, a lifelong covenant, a sacrament, a relationship of sacrificial self-giving between spouses and children, a sign of love of God and neighbor, a Christ-centered, evangelizing community, what are Christians to do? How can the Christian vision of marriage influence the rest of society?

The Church tries to make its vision a reality by being the guardian of marriage, preaching permanence, helping couples prepare for marriage, reminding them of the central place of children and the importance of openness to life. John Paul II, certainly, has provided a deep and rich theology of marriage for the world. Yet, as many of you acknowledged, more support during marriage is needed and much of that support must come from the laity, from those with direct experience of the vocation of marriage. However, Christians who wish to have an impact on the future of marriage must complement their experiential knowledge of marriage with study and critical reflection on their own tradition. With a deeper understanding of our faith, we will be better able to act.

Now some would argue that acting on the basis of faith is not an effective strategy in a pluralistic world in which Christian faith is only one of many starting points. Some

theologians believe that we ought to focus on natural law arguments for marriage and family, as these are more easily defended in the public square. While I agree that the rational aspects of our tradition provide good opportunities for dialogue with those of other faiths and none, I want to focus today on what I take to be the more central project of seeking the core of the gospel message on family, fostering ongoing conversion to that gospel message among Christians, and bringing that witness to a pluralistic society. With this in mind, I ask, what is the Christian gospel vision of marriage and family?

II. A Christian Vision of Marriage

Early Christian Suspicion of Marriage

Many early Christian writers regarded celibacy as a much surer path to holiness than marriage. They worried that spouses (particularly wives), children, and sex would distract believers and make it harder for them to focus on higher goods. St. Jerome, who wrote in the late fourth century, memorably counseled men not to take wives:

Matrons want many things, costly dresses, gold jewels, great outlay, maid-servants, all kinds of furniture, litters and gilded coaches. Then come the curtain-lectures the live-long night: she complains that one lady goes out better dressed than she: that another is looked up to by all. . . . There may be in some neighbouring city the wisest of teachers; but if we have a wife we can neither leave her behind, nor take the burden with us. To support a poor wife, is hard; to put up with a rich one, is torture. Notice, too, that in the case of a wife you cannot pick and choose: you must take her as you find her. If she has a bad temper, or is a fool, if she has a blemish, or is proud, or has bad breath, whatever her fault may be—all this we learn after marriage.¹

It is important to point out that St. Jerome, like most of the early Christian writers, defended marriage against those who thought celibacy was the only path to holiness, but

¹ St. Jerome, “Against Jovian,” in Elizabeth Clark and Herbert Richardson, eds., [Women and Religion: A Feminist Sourcebook of Christian Thought](#), (New York: HarperCollins, 1977) 66-67.

he clearly saw celibacy as a superior choice. Other writers advocated an interesting alternative to forgoing marriage altogether. The third century writer of the apocryphal Acts of Thomas, for instance, uses the device of a play about a wedding to try to convince his audience that spiritual marriage--without sex or children-- is the higher road.

In the play, Jesus addresses a young couple about to consummate their marriage:

Know that if you refrain from this filthy intercourse, you will become holy temples, pure, free of trials and difficulties, known and unknown, and you will not be drowned in the cares of life and of children, who lead only to ruin. If you produce many children, you will become greedy and avaricious because of them, robbing orphans and defrauding widows, and by doing so you will render yourselves liable to the harshest punishments. For many children become a liability, being harassed by demons, some openly, others covertly. Some become lunatics, others are half-withered or lame or deaf or mute or paralytic or idiots. Even if they are in good health, they will be do-nothings, committing useless and disgusting deed. . . . But if you are persuaded to keep your souls pure for God, . . . You will live an untroubled life, free from care and grief, while awaiting that true and incorruptible marriage. At that marriage you will be the attendants of the Bridegroom as you enter into that bridal chamber full of immortality and light.²

While both of these authors are extreme in some ways, their concerns were shared by many early Christians who sought what historian Peter Brown has called “singleness of heart” and believed marrying could be problematic because it divided the heart between family and God. This sentiment is hard to understand today. Why was it so inconceivable to these Christians that a married couple might be united in love for God, their children, and each other? For most, male-female friendship was nearly unthinkable because of women’s assumed lack of capacity for reason; mutual help was the best one could hope for. A mistrust of sexuality and a strong worry about the propensity of marriage to immerse spouses in the material world also contributed to the unwillingness

² Acts of Thomas, in David G. Hunter, trans./ed., Marriage in the Early Church (Fortress: Minneapolis, 1992) 61-62.

of many to see marriage as sacramental. Indeed, it took many hundreds of years for the Church to name marriage as a sacrament and mandate a distinctive Catholic marriage liturgy, and many more to shed the idea that marriage is a lesser calling.

Jesus as Model: Leaving Family Behind

Were the early Christians misguided? While contemporary believers affirm the goods of married friendship, sexual intimacy, and Christian child rearing, the New Testament does not provide much support for the idea that marriage is a path to righteousness. In Jesus' own life, devotion to his mission seems to take priority over commitment to family. A prime example is the story in Mark's Gospel in which Jesus is teaching a large crowd. His mother and brothers hear about this and go to find and "restrain" him. When told that his family has come to see him, he asks, "Who are my mother and my brothers? And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother'" (Mark 3:33-35). Jesus not only rejects his family's attempts to take him away from his disciples, he uses his refusal to come with them as an opportunity to call kinship bonds into question. He says very plainly that those he has gathered around him are his new family and seems to deny all loyalty to his family of origin. Jesus effectively tells his disciples that spiritual connections are more important than biological ties.

Jesus' Message: Questioning the Primacy of Family Ties

How are we to understand this radical de-centering of the family? Jesus' preaching provides some clues. In one typical passage, Jesus tells a man who wants to follow him that he must not stop and bury his dead father, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:60). Here, Luke

shows Jesus asking for devotion to the kingdom, understanding that his command will force his followers to question even ordinary family commitments.

This passage grates against our most basic moral sensibilities. What can Jesus possibly have meant by this? He cannot have been speaking literally. Yet even a figurative interpretation leaves us with a fairly extreme family-denying ethic. Perhaps, some have argued, Jesus is speaking only to those with a special calling to leave everything for him. However, it seems more likely that this saying of Jesus' is not a literal command addressed to a special group (there is no indication that it is) but rather a command intended to address a general need for disciples of Jesus to place their commitment to God above their family obligations.

Some New Testament scholars argue that Jesus' radical anti-family message was rooted in his commitment to inspiring new forms of common life. This mission required some to leave their families and spread the gospel while others opened and re-structured their families at home. The goal was a society in which people treated each other with compassion, forgave each other's debts, shared their property, and refused to lord power over each other. A radical rejection of the traditional family was necessary in order to move toward the goal of renewed family and community life in which discipleship took priority over blood ties.

One major part of this reconstruction was the dismantling of the patriarchal family, as evidenced by Jesus' questioning of the role of fathers. For instance, Mark's gospel includes a story in which Jesus is talking about the coming kingdom. He says, "There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a

hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers, and sisters, mothers and children” (Mark 10:29-30). Fathers are the only group left behind in the new kingdom. Why? Harvard professor Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that men and women are asked to leave family behind and are promised a new family: the community of disciples of Jesus. However, there is no room for fathers in this new family. The absence of fathers in the lists of those who will inhabit the new kingdom is an indication that the patriarchal privilege of fathers is rejected. So men and women are included, but privileged and powerful fathers are not. Similarly, Jesus tells his followers to “call no one your father” (Matt. 23:9), indicating that no one in the new Christian community will have this kind of power over others. These are signs that Jesus is concerned with the creation of new forms of family and community that move beyond the problems of the traditional patriarchal model toward mutuality and partnership. They allow us to make sense of some of the "anti-family" sayings. When Jesus asked his followers to leave family behind, he was talking about a particular kind of family in which men held nearly absolute power.

It is tempting to believe that this concern about sexism is all there is to the anti-family strain in the message of Jesus. After all, this would mean that our own family-focused values were not so far off the mark. If sexism is the problem, and we are no longer sexist, then maybe Jesus’ message cannot properly be called “anti-family.” However, patriarchy in the family is not Jesus’ only concern. As many of his sayings show, family itself is problematic. The strongest of the anti-family sayings, for example (“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple,” Luke 14:26), seems to indicate

that some kind of de-prioritizing of family is essential to discipleship. If these demands are meant to apply to all who would follow Jesus, Christians must confront a Jesus who radically questions much of what we value most.

We have to wonder what could have inspired such concerns. What was Jesus so worried about? It is important to put the hard sayings in context. The marriage ideals of both Jewish and Roman cultures were sweeping in scope and demanding in expectations. It is not difficult to understand that Jesus of Nazareth, who wanted to give himself totally to God, questioned the marital ethos of his time. The demand for so much loyalty to family seemed to him idolatrous. He did not want family to function as an idol in his life, or in the lives of his followers, so he asked his disciples to go against the cultural mores of their time and put God first.

However, Jesus does not reject marriage altogether. Rather, in his refusal to sanction divorce, he reaffirms the importance of the marital commitment in the lives of the people he has gathered around him. He recalls the myth of Genesis and claims that “from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’” (Mark 10:6-9). This saying is widely viewed as support for marriage as a holy union.

So if marriage is not rejected, what is? Certainly, the patriarchal structure of the family is challenged. Yet, it is difficult to deny a more far-reaching anti-kinship message in Jesus’ sayings, for he does not simply target fathers. Mothers, children, and siblings are implicated as well. The bond of kinship and all the ethical priority that comes with it is being called into question, because the Jesus of the Gospels preaches that family, like

money and power, can be dangerous to the person who is trying to live a holy life. He teaches that those who would serve God must resist the temptation to make care of their own their only mission in life. The early Christians heard this message and that is part of why they said such shocking things about marriage and often tried to avoid it.

The De-Centering of Children

In the families that early Christians did form, four important changes were evident. First, children were included, but they were not as central to the meaning and mission of the family as they would have been in the Greco-Roman context. One indication of this de-centering of procreation is the paucity of New Testament material on children. The few passages we do have, like the account of Jesus calling the little children to his side over the protest of his disciples, and the story of Jesus placing a child in the center of group of listeners, saying, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (Mark 9:36-37), are strong affirmations of children’s worth and dignity and of communal responsibility for children, but not of children’s place in the family. The child-centric language common in our own culture is missing. Children were not the reason early Christians get married. They married, if at all, to work together in service of the kingdom of God.

The Movement toward Equality

Second, marriage itself was different at its core. Unlike the patriarchal Jewish and Roman marriages, early Christian marriages were notable for their emerging egalitarianism. Clearly, the first Christians responded to Jesus’ message about and practice toward women by trying to reshape their own marriages. Unlike many of his

contemporaries, Jesus welcomed women to his side, spoke with them, was touched by them, and invited them to be his followers. His radically inclusive ministry inspired the early Christian to transform the cultural expectations of their times, though, of course, change was gradual. For instance in the well-known Letter to the Ephesians, the husband and wife are compared to Christ and the Church. The first sentence reads, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ (5:21). The passage goes on to speak of husbandly sacrificial love and wifely submission, showing that while the early Christians were striving for the egalitarian vision to which they felt Jesus calling them, they were not quite able to free themselves from the ideas of patriarchal marriage that were pervasive in their culture. What we see is a transformation in progress. From this passage, as well as from research on the social world of the early Christians, we know that the families in the young Jesus movement were distinct in their emerging egalitarian practice.

The Rejection of Hierarchy

Early Christian families were also unique in their rejection of hierarchal relations that were central to marriage in first century Palestine. Christian communities were notable for their gathering of people of diverse backgrounds, for their ability to speak of liberation in Christ to slaves, and of becoming a “slave to God” to those of high status. Christians who turned away from marriage did so, at least in part, because they rejected the upper class status that marriage would bring them. Instead, they identified with a small Christian community that included people from all walks of life, and they called this community their family. Those who did marry may have found ways to reform their relationships, making them more inclusive. We know that the baptism of adult Christians

included the formula found in Galatians 3:27-28 (you have “clothed yourselves with Christ Jesus. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”). Many scholars have come to believe that this formula was understood by the earliest Christians not just spiritually, but concretely. To be baptized, then, was to affirm that all socially important distinctions were no longer significant. A Christian was a brother or sister to all. Christian families crossed class lines and in doing so repudiated social norms.

The Inclusion of All

The final characteristic that set early Christian families away from typical Roman and Jewish families is the heart of everything we have been discussing thus far—the idea that early Christian families were not limited by biology. Jesus’ message included the claim that his real family was the Christian community, not his mother and his brothers. His followers sometimes left their biological families for their new Christian life. The early Christians were often seen as unpatriotic and immoral “family-wreckers” because they refused to give into cultural expectations about marriage. However, Christianity began in households where communities led by married couples used family language with reverence, calling each other brother and sister. All of this means that to the first Christians, family was an expansive term that referenced not just the household, but also the community of disciples of Christ. Relationships of love and care that characterize families were not what Jesus was trying to eliminate. Rather, the structure of families, and their preeminence, was problematic, and this is what the first followers of Jesus tried to do something about. They allowed his anti-family sayings to shake them up, and they took pains to cut themselves loose from those family ties that would keep them from

being true servants of God. Sometimes this meant leaving one family and embracing another, and sometimes it meant rejecting biological family life altogether, but either way, the point was to try to live life focused on what really mattered: working to spread the message of Jesus.

Celebrating Celibacy

What are contemporary disciples of Christ to do in the face of this radical example? First, we should celebrate the gift of celibacy. The lives of the many celibate men and women in our communities are faithful to the spirit of the New Testament. They testify that there is more to life than what this world has to offer. Their seeking after marriage with Christ reminds all of us of the primary importance of the spiritual life. Their single-hearted devotion to God inspires us to focus on the greatest prize of all. The countless stories of single-hearted celibates in our tradition (from St. Augustine, who finally rested in God after a long struggle with sexual sin to Dorothy Day, who gave up her love to become a Catholic and lead the Catholic Worker movement) remind us of this truth. Contrary to what some in our culture would think, celibacy can be a holy, life-affirming, socially significant choice. It can allow for total devotion to the cause of Christ and for an inclusivity that most families cannot achieve. We should acknowledge that the early Christian tradition puts the burden of proof on believers who choose to marry. The question for those of us who will not embrace celibacy is this: How will you follow Christ amid all the other pressures of marriage and family life?

Celebrating a Distinctive Way of Being Married

Our celebration of celibacy should not preclude a celebration of marriage. Despite early ambivalence, the Christian tradition eventually came to see marriage as a

holy calling, a covenant, a sacrament. Alongside the strain of the tradition that emphasizes single-hearted calling of celibacy are the insistent voices of those who look back to the creation stories of Genesis and point out that marriage is part of God's plan for human beings. Pope John Paul II, in particular, sees in those stories ample evidence that God created male and female to give themselves in love to each other. The vision of Genesis is the assumed norm of the Old Testament and it is complemented by the metaphorical use of married love to describe God's relationship to the Hebrew people; God is faithful as a husband is faithful, even to an adulterous spouse. Jesus reaffirms marriage in the New Testament, even as he displaces it in his quest for radical devotion to God. The Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians compares marriage between a man and a woman to the relationship between Christ and the Church, saying that a husband loves his wife as Christ loves the Church, sacrificing his very life for her. Contemporary theologians modify the metaphor by allowing that both spouses can be Christ for one another. This esteem for marriage is an important part of our tradition. It comes, in large part, from the experience of married people who testify that they have come to know God, not apart from, but in and through their families.

Today marriage is celebrated as sacrament of human friendship, a communion of love, a covenant of intimate partnership. Most Christians believe that it is through our most intimate relationships that we taste something of divine love. This idea is so widespread that when students in my marriage course study the New Testament anti-family sayings and the pro-celibacy tracts of the early Christian fathers, they are stunned. It has never occurred to them that family could stand in the way of a relationship with God or prevent someone from being a better Christian.

However, it is important that our high esteem for marriage does not allow us to forget the early Christian suspicion of marriage. The witness of the New Testament and the early Church is just too strong to ignore. We can remember not by running from marriage, but by advocating a distinctive way of being married. If Christian marriage is to avoid the problems that so worried Jesus and the early Church fathers, it must allow for the sort of devotion that Christian discipleship requires.

Pope John Paul II's theology of the family offers a good model. In contrast to those Christians who advocate a more single-minded focus on the family, the Pope claims that families have four distinct tasks: becoming a communion of love, serving life, serving society, and being the church in their home. As I briefly describe these tasks, I want to suggest ways in which each task might be linked to specific practices.

Forming a Communion of Persons

The total self-giving of the spouses to each other and to their children is the foundation of family life, but not its only end. The appropriate image would not be a couple staring into each other's eyes, but spouses holding hands and looking outward. Their communion is total but not at all insular. Couples strive to live out this vision by nurturing their love. These days I see communion in the relationship of my grandparents (ages 83 and 92). He is difficult to care for these days, repeating the same phrases over and over, and forgetting what happened 15 minutes before. She nurtures "her Joe" without fail. This year she displayed the valentine he bought for her last year, knowing he would be unlikely to remember this year. It reminds the family of the first valentine he sent her, a marriage proposal in 1940. This communion of love has lasted over 60

years, is marked by unselfish dedication to a large extended family, and has inspired many inside and outside our family to nurture married love.

Serving Life

Communion leads to the service of life, or as the Pope writes, married love spills over as couples accept new life as a gift, educate children in Christian values, live simply, and welcome those whose lives others deem worthless. The family's embrace of marginalized persons flows out of their love for each other. All of this constitutes service of life. My father in law has been a particularly strong example to me of this service. Since retirement, he has spent five days a week working a sidewalk counselor at an abortion clinic, and has often given of his own money and to secure what is needed when women decide to keep their babies. Over the years, he has always opened his wallet, table, and home to strangers in need, and would have a constant stream of overnight guests if my mother-in-law did not protest! Putting his duty and desire to welcome over social discomfort, his way of life is a challenge to those of us who would rather close our doors.

Participating in the Development of Society

In addition to loving each other, having babies and keeping a welcoming home, John Paul II holds that families must work to transform the world around them so that respect for the dignity of human persons increases. This means committing to the work of charity and justice. Here I think of the stories my students bring back from their summers of service and study in Nicaragua, stories of families with little to live on who nonetheless insist on sometimes life-threatening involvement in political campaigns,

literacy work, and advocacy for the elderly. I think of these families every time I think I don't have time to work for political change.

Sharing in the Life and Mission of the Church

Finally, John Paul II tells us that families are not simply part of the Church; they are the Church in miniature. As my colleague Florence Caffrey Bourg shows in her work on domestic church, the experience of family life is sacramental. She gives the example of a particularly hectic day when she is frustrated by the vomiting of her oldest child. Hurrying to get her four children ready for the Holy Thursday service, her irritation disappeared when she found herself washing vomit from her son's feet. Through her tears, she saw the experience anew as a grace-filled moment of service to Christ. Domestic churches like my friend's family strive to recognize the grace within, grow in faith, bear witness, and serve, just like the larger Church.

Beyond Focusing on the Family

The Pope's theology (centered on the four tasks described above) assumes that families must be committed to more than their own good. The genius of Catholic teaching on the family is its refusal to limit families by telling them to simply focus on themselves. Christian families, from this perspective, are to grow in self-giving love within and outside the bonds of kinship. This constitutes a distinctive way of being family in a materialistic and inwardly-focused society.

In St. Louis, I am privileged to know many families who strive to live out the often neglected social aspects of this Christian vision of the family. Some give up the comfort and isolation of the suburbs for the joys and challenges of difficult neighborhoods in the city. Many support the Catholic Worker shelter in town, by "taking

house" overnight, cooking meals, tutoring students, or even preparing Christmas breakfast. Some are connected by the Parenting for Peace and Justice network, begun by St. Louisans Jim and Kathleen McGinnis, which forms support groups designed for parents who want to combine child rearing with serious commitments to promoting nonviolence and working with the poor. Others give up lucrative jobs so that they can do more socially significant work and have more time for family and community. Many attend anti-war protests together. I have never lived in a place where I have felt so challenged and inspired by the witness of people who refuse to let family stand in the way of Christian commitment. Marriage, for these families, is instead a vital source of communion and solidarity.

This is precisely what John Paul II asks of all Christians in his wonderful apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in America*. In this document, the pope speaks of the necessity of evangelization within the church. He takes us through the stages of this action, through encounter with Christ, conversion, communion with other people of faith, and solidarity with the poor, which is made manifest in communal, social, and political action. This, he maintains is the core of Christian life, the life to which ordinary American Christians, even families, are called.

In the midst of a social crisis of the family, it is important to think about the significance of marriage. I have tried to argue this morning that in the Christian tradition marriage must be a vocation to communion and solidarity if it is to be justified at all. The distractions of marriage are powerful. We all know how social and financial obligations can make real discipleship seem impossible. However, like celibates, married persons will be able to live out the radical calling of Christian faith if they understand that

marriage involves commitment, suffering, and joy through which they may come to see the face of God. Celibates may enjoy the luxury of giving themselves fully to a mission. Still, married Christians know that kissing a spouse, bathing a child, serving soup in local shelter, and gathering a group of family and friends around a table to pray are also ways to serve God. God is present, even there, calling us to be Christ for each other and those outside our doors.

III. The Future of Marriage

What, then, of the future of marriage? If Christian families embrace this vision, will it impact the culture around us? Can it help us out of the crisis in which we now find ourselves? John Paul II's vision for the family, a vision that is true to the early Christian fear that family life will make discipleship more difficult and to the experience of Christian spouses that families can grow in discipleship together, is, to be sure, a very idealistic vision. It is difficult for the average Catholic family to live, difficult for parishes to support, and even more difficult for those outside the Christian tradition to understand, let alone accept. Yet this CFM gathering itself provides some evidence that the vision is alive. When you were asked to describe Christian marriage as it truly is, you spoke of how spouses can choose to take their vows seriously, to stay together in good times and bad, to challenge each other to become better persons, to form children in Christian values, to learn from each other how to love, to constantly strive to be a true reflection of God's love for humanity.

This is the communion the Pope calls us to, and clearly you know this from experience, not just from reading theology. Many of you also spoke with great concern

about the state of society and problems faced by most ordinary families. You know that the love the Pope calls us to is not limited to family members. Those who would tell us to simply focus on the family do not speak the whole truth. Christian Families who fail to connect their faith with commitments to solidarity and justice suffer from what one of you called “dead faith.” A faith turned inward cannot have a social impact. Families have a dual responsibility to form persons in love and become vehicles for solidarity and social justice. We are called to embrace a Christian vision of love of the human person, of what John Paul II calls “human dignity” inside and outside the home.

Let me end with the concrete example of family meal, in order to illustrate how communion and solidarity are connected. If one can think of a Christian family as a “domestic church,” one can think of the family meal, in some sense, as Eucharistic. In a traditional Catholic sense, it can be thought of as a sacramental (a vehicle of God’s grace) like holy water or the rosary. The family meal, like the Eucharist, is important, not because it is the high point of the family’s existence, but because it symbolizes what the family is and what it does. If the family meal is neglected, not only do relationships among family members suffer, but so does the sense of what the family is about. The meals brings the family together and provides an opportunity for shared talk, celebration, and mission.

In my own family, dinner conversations about my father’s work as a lawyer for the poor became fundamental to the identity of all three children. They influenced our career choices, shaped our politics, and gave us a strong sense of civic responsibility. Similarly, my parents took up into their own lives and identities their children’s challenges in journalism, theater, debate, and youth groups. Both kinds of conversations

led to discussions of larger social issues. Both brought our family closer together. As we shared stories about our work and argued about our values, we became more a part of each other's lives. We grew as a family because we took the time to talk, and because we had something bigger than ourselves to talk about.

Now with my husband of 12 years and our three young sons, I am trying to create my own version of this family ritual. As my children are all under the age of 11, just getting them to sit down with us for 20 minutes without fighting or spilling something is an accomplishment. Still, we pray, thanking God for everything from Harry Potter to baseball, we invite friends and family over as much as possible, and we try to maintain an inclusive table where all who wish to join us are welcome. Little by little, we are beginning to talk about serving the poor and the larger social issues everywhere around us. In the ritual of the family meal, I hope that my children will discover, as I did, what it means to be a Christian.

If family meals are to be sacramental, they must be about more than just family members, just as the Eucharist is about more than just the church. Families are public as well as private, concerned with both love and justice. Families should share meals together not only so that their members may enjoy each other's company and solidify bonds that will be crucial to all members, but also because families are small communities with social missions. If families do not gather as communities of love in their homes, they cannot then be communities of love for the world, but if they gather only to love themselves, they do less than the Christian tradition requires of them. Families are called to and capable of much more.

While this might not sound like the answer to the far-reaching crisis of the family in our modern world, I am convinced that it is only by adhering to this Catholic Christian vision of deepening communion inside the family and increasing solidarity with those outside it is the only way to truly transform society. From this perspective, neither the right nor the left has all the answers. Working on one side or the other will not suffice. Only by recognizing the dignity of each person at our tables and in our communities will we begin to move toward a world that is something of the family God intended it to be.