

# Matrimony

## Comments by Pope Benedict XVI

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) was interviewed by Peter Seewald over the course of 3 days. Excerpts from this conversation on the sacrament of Marriage follow. (Taken from: Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. *God and the World*. Ignatius Press, 2002.)

**Seewald:** Young people in multitudes are thinking about whether they really ought to get married or should live together in a somewhat looser form of association. On the part of governments there are efforts to put associations outside of marriage as well as homosexual partnerships on the same footing as marriage. The question arises: Why should marriage be the only acceptable form of living together?

**Benedict:** For one thing, it happens that only a stable sphere of trust is worthy of the dignity of this intimate human association. And not only so far as the responsibility toward each other is concerned, but also concerning the future of the children who come forth from it. In that sense, marriage is never just a private matter, but has a public and social character. The basic way in which any society is built depends on marriage.

A second aspect to which we must pay attention is this: Wherever two people give themselves to each other and, between them, give life to children, this touches the holiness, the mystery of human existence, which goes beyond the realm of what I can control and dispose of. I simply do not belong to myself alone.

There is a divine mystery within each and every person. That is why the association of husband and wife is regarded within the religious realm, within the sphere of the sacred, of being answerable before God. Being answerable before God is a necessity—and in the sacrament this is planted deep and given its proper foundation.

The question of homosexual partnerships is a different matter altogether. I think that when it is no longer considered important to have a man and a woman in a marriage, in a family, when, on the contrary, homosexuality is given equal status with this relationship, then the basic structural pattern of human existence is being violated. In this way, in the long term, a society will run up against serious problems.

If we listen to the Word of God, then we should above all be prepared to be enlightened by the perception that the association of husband and wife and children is something sacred. And we can successfully build a society in the right way if that society sees the family, and thus the kind of association blessed by God, as the right way of ordering sexual relations.

**Seewald:** The marriage vow is as follows: “I, \_\_\_\_\_, take you, \_\_\_\_\_, to be my wife/my husband. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life.” That all sounds very good, but why should marriage last a whole lifetime, “till death us do part”?

**Benedict:** Because that is determined by the irrevocability of human love, and in the irrevocability of the responsibility that is being assumed. We ought not to try to demonstrate the rational ground for everything, down to the last little dot on the “i”. The great wisdom of tradition comes to us with this, supported in the end by the Word of God itself. Only if I give myself entirely, without keeping any part of me back or being involved just until further notice, until I find something better, does this fully correspond to human dignity. Human life is not an experiment. This is not a commercial contract, but a surrender of myself to another person. Only in the form of a love that is entire and unreserved is the self-giving of one person to another commensurate with the essence of man.

**Seewald:** We have already talked about sexuality several times; obviously the Church feels that this involves a great mystery. Otherwise it would be inconceivable why she has such strict notions about these things, even within marriage. Is it a different understanding about life, about people, that makes the Church forbid contraception?

**Benedict:** Indeed, the Church sees sexuality as a central reality of creation. Here man is brought into the closest proximity with the Creator, into the highest degree of responsibility. He himself is allowed a responsible share in the source of life.

Each single person is a creature of God—and he is at the same time the child of his parents. For this reason there is to some extent an intermingling of divine creativity and human fruitfulness. Sexuality is a powerful thing; we can see that in the fact that it also involves the responsibility for a new person, who belongs to us and yet does not belong, who comes from us and yet not from us. From that viewpoint, I think, it’s understandable that it is at the same time something sacred to be able to give life and, in return, to have responsibility for it beyond its biological beginning. For all these various reasons, the Church had to expound what is important here and what is basically being said to us in the Ten Commandments. She has always, again and again, to bring this as a responsibility into human life.

**Seewald:** Can you be a good Catholic if in questions of sexual morality you are always running counter to the Church’s ideas of what is right?

**Benedict:** The other side of this is that we always fall short of the great things that the Church, in expounding the Word of God, proclaims man to be capable of. If, at any rate, one wants to stay on the path, if one retains a basic recognition of the sacred nature of this co-creation with Christ, then one does not cease to be a Catholic simply on account of failure. Then, in our very searching, we remain, if you want to put it like that, a “good Catholic”.

**Seewald:** The Italian bishops have asked people to have more courage in begetting offspring. For a society that is afraid to beget children is, they proclaim, becoming “less human”.

**Benedict:** Wherever love for children is extinguished then really a great deal is lost. Italians used to be famous for their love of family and children. Today, some regions of Italy have the lowest birthrate in the world. Here, something fundamental has changed with newfound wealth. This is in fact a great temptation for Western societies, to see children as competitors who take away from us something of our living space, something of our future. In just the same way, children are then regarded at best as a possession and as an image of oneself. People are not, in the end, ready to accept them in their own right, with all that must be given them in terms of time and the whole of one’s life.

An Italian bishop once said to me that poor people invest in life; they look on children as their future; rich people invest in things. I don’t want to exaggerate what he meant by that, but it is obvious with us the investment in things, insuring oneself by the value of things, which are a multiplication of our own self, is stronger than our readiness to stand at the service of another life. Even if we take the problem of population growth quite seriously, we still have to recognize, on the other hand, the problem of an aging society that is robbing itself of its own future.

**Seewald:** The catchword population growth. The Church is accused of aggravating serious problems in some parts of the Third World with her strict policy of forbidding the use of contraception, to the point of real misery.

**Benedict:** The misery is the result of a breakdown of the moral sense that once gave order to life in tribal societies, or in the community of believing Christians, and that thus prevented the great misery we can see nowadays. Reducing the voice of the Church to no more than a prohibition against contraception is utter rubbish, based on a completely distorted picture of the world, as I will explain in a moment.

The Church still teaches above all the sacredness of marriage and faithfulness in marriage. That is her true voice. Where people listen to this voice, then children have a sphere of life in which they can learn love and self-restraint, the discipline of the right way to live, in the midst of any poverty. Where the family is functioning as a sphere of fidelity, people have patience and consideration for each other, providing the necessary preconditions for the practice of natural family planning. The misery comes, not from the large families, but from the irresponsible and undisciplined procreation of children who have no father, and often no mother, and who as street children, have to suffer the real distress of a spiritually distorted world. We all know, besides, that in Africa today the opposite danger has long since arisen, through the rapid spread of AIDS: not a population explosion, but the dying out of entire tribes and the depopulation of the countryside.

When I think, besides, that in Europe they pay farmers subsidies to kill off their livestock, to destroy grain crops, grapes, all kinds of fruit, because we supposedly cannot control overproduction, then it seems to me that these knowledgeable

managers ought still to reflect on how, instead of destroying these gifts of creation, we could make good use of them all.

The misery is not produced by people who bring up children to learn faithfulness and love, respect for life and self-restraint, but by those who try to talk us out of morality and who see man only in a mechanistic way: the condom seems to them more effective than morality, but when they think you can replace the moral dignity of man with condoms, so as to make his freedom no longer a danger to him, then they have stripped man of all dignity, down to his most basic self, and have produced exactly what they claim to be preventing: a selfish society in which everyone lives his own life and is responsible for nothing and no one. Misery comes from demoralizing, the expression of an attitude that despises people and that in any case thinks people capable of nothing good whatsoever.

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