



The Family of the Future, The Future of the Family

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Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology

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Abstract:

The 20th century has witnessed a radical change in the “traditional” definition of family. Single family parenting, the nuclear family and parents without partners are terms easily recognized in today’s world. What then do we see as the future of the family and what will that family look like? ITEST presents this workshop through the eyes of our essayists: a philosopher, a social worker, and two theologians all combine to present an integrated study of the family as it evolves into an increasingly technological age.

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Foreword:

The Board of Directors of ITEST chose this topic on the family because the family represents in a particularly neuralgic manner one of the major areas of contention between faith and science and technology. Everything from simply living longer through scientific and technological advance to various advances in embryology, genetics – in general all the life sciences – will have a significant impact on marriage and the family in the future. Even advances in electronic technologies (as we learned in the discussion) will affect marriage and the raising of children.

To talk about Christian families it is necessary to speak about Christian marriage. Consequently, we chose the Reverend Doctor Robert Bertram and Sister M. Timothy Prokes, FSE to deal with the nature of marriage as a covenantal two-in-one flesh union of husband and wife as union both on the level of husband and wife and on that of a divine covenant (Trinitarian) level. We also expanded the theological dimension of Christian marriage and family by adding philosophical aspects of their history in the western world and speculation about their future. This necessary treatment was supplied, respectively, by Peggy Keilholz, MA, MSW and Doctor Kenneth L. Schmitz, who was not able to attend the Workshop because his wife had a serious heart attack. Unfortunately she died shortly after the meeting.

It may seem to anyone reading the papers and the subsequent discussion that the topic is approached more on an abstract level rather than dealing with the how-to and what-for of marriage and family. But the latter issues can be talked about and argued in the great plethora of “handbooks” on the issue. It seemed to us that real progress could be made in understanding Christian marriage and family only on the deeper philosophical and theological level. Like every aspect of the Christian faith, we will never come to the definitive answer on any question in this area. Every time we think we have reached a definitive position something will intervene to move the discussion even further. Essentially we are dealing with mystery even though we may do our best to deny the existence of mystery.

We spent much time at this workshop trying to decide how much of married love involves sexual expression. The whole thrust of Dr. Bertram's paper is meant to consider that issue. It is, in effect, a paean for the bodily in marriage. As such, marriage is exactly at the heart of the Christian experience. Man and woman are built to be completed. As far back as the Book of Genesis this was recognized as a profound religious truth. All subsequent biblical writing (both in the Old and New Testaments) develop this truth, as does Christian tradition.

Modern thought does not hold marriage (and consequently family) in as high a regard. With "no-fault" divorce a marriage can be negated (at least in the eyes of the state) for any reason at all or for no reason. Marriage is totally fungible; it can be entered into or departed from with no legal consequences whatsoever. Moreover, it is thought in our society to revolve more about the parties involved becoming "soul-mates" rather than "body-mates." Doctor Bertram deals thoroughly and well with this issue – for those who are willing to listen. He concentrates on the notion of the biblical "one-flesh" union of husband and wife. "In the beginning" it is said, "that is why a man must leave his father and mother and join himself to his wife and they become one-flesh." Only in this way does the Kingdom grow.

Sister Timothy accepts that centrality and pushes on to the perichoretic inner life of God. While recognizing that we can speak only analogically about the Trinitarian life she makes the point that only that inner life of God tells us about human *being* and *doing*. Only God's inner love and its outward yearning can explain us and tell us how we are to live. This is correlated then in an investigation into the love-life of the Trinity on the one hand and on the other hand mankind's love-life with his mate and even with the works of his hands. It may be that "in the sweat of our brow" we work to solve the problems and opportunities of the human race. But that work will either help in our salvation or it will precipitate its loss.

Dr. Kenneth Schmitz takes a long look at marriage and the family as they have grown (and hopefully matured) in western culture. Starting with the family and its role in Greek society he moves into the Middle Ages and finally modern times. It is a profound paper, full of matter for our reflection on these issues. In future ITEST meetings we would do well to keep in mind the following comment from his paper: "During this century, the female body has become a battlefield..." He continues, "Yet, not surprisingly, on the intellectual level, our culture is determined to a considerable degree by a set of ideas that has long since dispensed with the notion that each thing (including the human 'thing') has a definite nature which grounds the norms of its behavior (natural law)." Both of these notions demand serious attention as we move into the future.

Peggy Keilholz deals with many of the more common problems of marriage and family, like divorce, abortion, physical abuse and substance abuse, gambling and many other such things. But she was sanguine in her outlook. She said, "The family is no more dead than God is." Though fully aware of the problems facing both marriage and family, she is optimistic that both will endure. She then moved on to the technological innovation that can reasonably be expected. In this she recognized that in order to persevere into the twenty-first century families have to change. In the words of Coates *et al*: science and technology "are some of the strongest drivers of change. Discoveries in science and new developments in technology change the course of people's lives, their behaviors, and their attitudes to the world." Her treatment of future change is to be recommended.

We live in an age when technological advance is expected, anticipated and finally accepted in almost any guise. We can expect that any new technology (like cloning) will be adopted enthusiastically by some while others will be impotent observers. Why? Because it fits in with the spirit of the times. It seems to offer so much to so few that the many will be coerced to go along with it. In other words it matches the selfishness of the age. In many ways this selfishness is at the heart of very many of our social and religious problems. Perhaps that could be generalized. Instead of giving ourselves in imitation of the Trinity we fashion an idol of ourselves and bow down to it. As Sister Timothy remarked at some place in the discussion we are like Aaron who gathered up the people's gold, threw it in the fire and, without his willing it, out came the golden calf.

Almost all cases of domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse as well as many other things come finally from selfishness and greed. This greed is foreign to both the notions of two-in-one-flesh and being created in the image and likeness of God. This is reminiscent of the Letter of James where we read: “Where do these wars and battles between yourselves start? Isn’t it precisely in the desires fighting inside your own selves? You want something and you haven’t got it; so you are prepared to kill. You have an ambition that you cannot satisfy; so you fight to get your way by force. Why you don’t have what you want is because you don’t pray for it; when you do pray and don’t get it, it is because you have not prayed properly, you have prayed for something to indulge your own desires.” Much of the problem with contemporary marriages (and those of the past, truth be known) is due to those “own desires.”

In its own way, much of the discussion centered around the notion of those desires, whatever they may be. Several times ideals were proposed, either implicitly or explicitly. Marriage, the one-flesh union, should be – ideally lacking (with great effort on both parts) such desires. In a truly strong marriage wife and husband should be so unified that “such desires” arise from the pair, not one or other. It obviously takes time and effort to produce such unanimity and even then that unity can collapse under the press of circumstances. The whole of married life involves working to assure such communal desire – and fulfillment.

As we proceed along the technological road we must admit to not knowing how, when or where the path will end. Clearly there are goods to be obtained, even beyond the physical or even the “virtual.” The models proposed for the encounter with technology all involve Trinitarian love in some fashion or other. As the Father loves the Son and the Spirit is that love, so should we love. We are finite creatures, holding such a vast treasure in earthenware jars, as Saint Paul tells us. We can and will make mistakes; we can and will do evil. We must develop our sense of the repentance God has sent to us, the opportunity to repent in the Lord Jesus. The fruits of repentance are from the Spirit. We must cultivate them.

We should be aware that God delights in surprising us. Both Testaments are a song of praise to the God who continues to intervene in human history in very new and astounding ways. Predictions about the future should, must really, be taken with a proverbial grain of salt. Predictions always proceed from the prejudice (used neutrally) of the predictor. Good or bad surprises are always the course of the future. God loves surprises. He will keep providing them.

In conclusion, two-in-one-flesh union is a covenantal union. It is the result of and signals the rise of a new covenant. As such, Christian marriage recalls and revolves around the Eucharist. Far from being sort of a peripheral entity in our salvation, marriage, linked with Eucharist, is at the very heart of our efforts, supported by the Lord, to become one with the Father. For years and years theologians and teachers have relegated marriage to the edges of sacramental life, perhaps simply because they had no where else to put it. But as Saint Paul says in Ephesians, Christian marriage is like the union of Christ and his Body, the Church. If Eucharist is central to the life of the Church, so too, is Christian marriage central to the life of the Church. It is not just a pious thought that Christian marriage and family is the domestic Church. The Church, indeed all of society, can exist and grow only if marriage and family are held in the highest possible regard.

Robert Brungs, SJ
Director: ITEST
March 15, 1999



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