
The contemporary marriage scene is marked by a striking paradox. Just when we can boast of the ideal of marriage being loftier, richer and more meaningful than ever before, we are also embarrassed by the unprecedented number of broken marriages all around us. For the author of this excellent handbook on contemporary marriage, Dr. Jack Dominian, marital breakdown is the single most important social upheaval of our day. Statistics are readily available to support his assertion especially in the Western world but few large urban centers even in the non-Western world can boast of a strong family life immune from the attacks of modern social evils.

Broken homes, disturbed children, one-parent homes, battered wives, child abuse, drug and alcohol addiction are world-wide problems. Western TV, betamax and movies are lowering moral standards and undermining traditional family and personal moral values. Only those families living in remote rural areas seem to be safe. Strong family life with solid marriages still seems to be the rule rather than the exception, as here in the Philippines. But the drift to the urban centers is very strong in all poor countries. Megacities are a growing concern and source of apprehension in all Third World nations.

What to do in the face of such threats to family life, the basic building block of society, the source of strength of all nations? How to help modern youth to enter marriages that will be as successful and fulfilling as those of their parents and grandparents?
The Catholic Church faced the problem in Vatican II and made dramatic adjustments in its understanding and approach to marriage. Deepening its traditional biblical understanding of marriage while integrating the best insights of modern psychology, the Church sees marriage as more than a contract, as a covenant, "an intimate partnership of life and love". It is no longer a question of giving a right to those actions per se apt for procreation but rather an interpersonal covenant involving the whole person.

The ability to form an interpersonal relationship is now seen as basic in the marriage covenant, a spouse who is incapable of such a relationship is deemed incapable of marriage. The reason could be genetic or acquired, culpable or inculpable. The marriage will be judged invalid if either spouse is incapable of this relationship which is unique to marriage and so highly valued today. Marriage demands that a spouse be other-oriented since the obligations of marriage are rooted in a self-giving love. Thus, marriage is not for the self-centered, the loners, the irresponsible, the immature, the disturbed persons. It is not for children who happen to qualify as adults physically and chronologically. Only mature persons can appreciate, accept and fulfill the serious responsibilities of marriage.

In the 1983 Revised Code of Canon Law the Catholic Church has incorporated all of these insights and developments into her jurisprudence. Matrimonial Tribunals of the Church are guided by these new provisions which make more demands on a couple entering sacramental marriage today. The human and the sacramental dimensions of marriage are both seen as being enriched by these contemporary developments.

Still, the number of Catholic marriages in deep trouble is frightening. In May 1986, in his talk to the Italian bishops, Pope John Paul II cited unmarried people living together as one of the main social conditions causing the "disintegration of the family". This is twenty-one years after Vatican II and three years after the promulgation of the Revised Code of Canon Law. The Pope urged the bishops to show a patient and loving attitude towards couples who have not had Catholic marriages, in spite of the fact that they are nominally Catholics in a Catholic nation, the home of the Pope, the center of the Catholic world.

What is wrong? What more must the Church do? Will we be forced to admit that the modern world is so hostile to marriage
that our efforts are doomed to failure?

Dr. Dominian faces these disturbing and challenging questions from his background of many years as a practising psychiatrist, marriage counsellor, husband and parent. Author of many books and articles on various aspects of marriage, Dominian gives us this guide to marriage counselling. It is by no means exhaustive. As a “guide” it points the way. Analyzing the various psychological and emotional aspects of the problem from the human and Christian point of view he gives us a ray of hope amid the encircling gloom.

For Dominian the modern scourge of divorce is a symptom of a much deeper problem, arising from a fundamental change in the way marriage is perceived today. This change is already widespread in the West and is most likely to spread to other parts of the world where western mass media penetrate and carry their messages, wanted or unwanted.

What is this fundamental change? In the contemporary perception of marriage there is a revolution of rising expectations regarding the psychological and emotional aspects of marriage. Modern spouses are seeking so much more without being able to articulate clearly or appreciate just what they expect or demand. This revolution of rising expectations has not been matched with a corresponding increase in resources on the part of the spouses nor of society. There is still little or no opportunity for them to evaluate themselves or their intended spouse in the light of their heightened expectations. Warning signals are misunderstood or completely ignored. Marriage is still too often seen as a reformatory, or a way to escape from over-strict parents, or a punishment for pregnancy, or a cure for serious personality problems, etc., etc. The break up of such marriages is only a matter of the time it takes for the spouses who married in haste to repent at leisure and to realize how much their actual marriage falls short of their true aspirations and expectations. When they see that the inner world of their marriage is a wasteland, an arid desert, they can no longer tolerate it. Usually neither family pressure, nor concern for their children, nor religious sanction can keep them together. They insist that they have a right to be happy. They ask why they should suffer the rest of their life because they made one great mistake in choosing their spouse?

The remedy? Dr. Dominian insists that couples be made aware of the realities behind their own expectations in modern marriages.
Marriage counselors, clerical or lay, must be conscious of the psycho-dynamics that the modern spouses most probably cannot articulate or comprehend even for themselves. Yet they are very serious about having a happy marriage, about being happy in the inner world of their marriage with all its rewarding emotional fulfills.

It is this inner world which is now the center focus, the area where marriages are bonded forever or soon shattered. In the first half of the book, Dominian analyzes this inner world for us with professional expertise and appealing style. Taking the interpersonal relationship as the basic feature of modern marriage he examines its main functions: Sustaining, Healing, Growth, Sexual dimension, Love.

In the intimate inner world of contemporary marriage couples want increasingly to be understood in the innermost depth of their being and this, for them, understandably, is a most important part of their marriage. In modern jargon we might say it is not negotiable, it is the bottom line.

The old roles of the male as the good provider and the female as mother and housekeeper have given way before the new ways men and women relate to one another. Ultimately the intimate behavior of marriage as Dominian notes is governed by social factors on the one hand and psychological factors on the other. Both have altered substantially in our day and contemporary marriages have to cope with these major changes for which there is, as yet, no adequate education, preparation or support.

Among the sociological changes is women's emancipation or liberation which began some two hundred years ago and has rapidly accelerated in this century, particularly in the last twenty years. There have been extreme tendencies in some places but the key aspirations are in keeping with the basic Christian belief that men and women are both created in the image of God with equal worth. Sound Catholic theology supports the best of the feminist movement.

SUSTAINING

With so many wives working, the role of material provider is no longer the exclusive domain of the husband. The material sustaining of the family which was so important in previous generations
is now being considered subordinate to emotional sustaining. The need of economic support remains but the two must be considered together for a successful marriage.

HEALING

When the couples reveal their inner worlds to one another as they never did to anyone else, the desire for healing is deeply felt. Life’s accumulated hurt, pain, distress, frustrations, failing, be they physical or, more commonly, emotional — all can interfere with the ability to relate to one another. The wounded person today asks for healing from his or her spouse. The wounds become part of the inner world of the spouses, their unique inner world. The one who feels insignificant wants recognition, while the un-appreciated and rejected want recognition for their good qualities, seeking to feel wanted, needed, appreciated. Reassurance is sought for anxiety, encouragement to overcome shyness or lack of confidence, etc., etc. Dominian believes that marriage is just beginning to be appreciated as the “most powerful, if not the commonest, and most significant source of healing in the community” (p. 50).

Dominian also sees this healing power of marriage as having monumental implications for the Christian faith. The holiness and sacramental character of marriage, so essential to the Catholic tradition, is now enriched by appreciating this potential for healing in a good marriage. The traditional emphasis on Christ as a healer, confirmed over and over again in the Gospels, sees God as healing through the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Trinity is present and operates sacramentally in marriage with healing as one most noticeable and most meaningful manifestation of the true love which is so central to the whole of Christian life.

If modern couples do not find this healing, for whatever reason, the marriage is in serious danger. The failure in healing could be due to the spouses themselves. If one or both spouses bring limited resources and too many psychological wounds from their families, or their school days or social environment, they may be asking or expecting too much, overloading the marriage circuits. The inability to play a healing role may indicate a deeper inability to form an interpersonal relationship. It may even reveal a defect that is canonically invalidating in current Church law.
Where a good pre-marriage counselling program exists, it would be the task of the counsellor to involve the couples in analyzing themselves and their would-be spouses, their own strengths and weaknesses, what they expect from marriage and what they bring to the marriage. Are their expectations unreal? Are they asking too much? Are they doomed to frustration because they ignore early warning signals, expecting marriage to cure what a team of expert psychiatrists would not promise to cure? Some of the saddest words a marriage counsellor hears are "But he promised to change if I married him". And, of course, there was no need to change, once he was married. If all the love of parents, family and other relatives, all the care of teachers and friends did not succeed, how can anyone reasonably expect that marriage will radically change a spouse? It is another example of Russian roulette, of getting involved in a lifetime commitment with a partner who is most probably incapable of a one-week commitment.

In helping the couple to understand themselves the counsellor must be aware of the three levels of psychological interaction which are summed up in the personality, defences and dynamic needs of the spouses (p. 45). From the personality flows the normal, moment-to-moment interaction. If this results in anxiety, defenses come into play. The dynamic needs arising from childhood have to be handled within the confines of the personality and its defences. Anxiety arises often, as Dominian points out, when important needs of the couple are perceived as not being met. Instead of their basic needs being met each spouse may be defending his or her own position and attacking that of the other. The solution of the good counsellor is to bring them to mutually recognize what the real needs are and why they are not being met. Attacks will end when they shift from anger to good will, from accusations to insights into the real situation. Finally there is a realistic assessment of what needs are appropriate and can be met and what are inappropriate and cannot be met. Anger gives way to understanding when one sees that failure has been due to limitations or ignorance but not due to bad will.

Dominian insists that marriage counselling cannot take place without an awareness of these three levels of psychological interaction. They are summed up in the personality, defences, and dynamic needs.
GROWTH

With our increasing life expectancy modern spouses should look forward to fifty or sixty years together. If marriage is conceived as a static contract for the fulfillment of roles, the current arguments that it is too much to commit oneself for forty years might have some validity. But the supposition is false. Marriages are relationships expressing the growing and changing aspirations of the couples. Today spouses must accept that growth and change are unavoidable in their marriages. Growth can be not only physical but intellectual, social, emotional, spiritual. In a successful marriage couples facilitate each other's growth, being open and encouraging at each phase of growth. Blocking a partner’s growth, resisting it or becoming insecure in the face of it could lead to serious trouble.

Couples will most probably not come to a counsellor complaining of a lack of sustaining, healing and/or growth. But Dominian believes that careful listening to their complaints with these dimensions in mind will show that most of their problems fit into these three categories. If couples can be helped to meet their minimal expectations in these areas, Dominian is convinced that the great number of marital breakdowns will decrease since emergent hopes and felt needs will have been met. Best of all will be the introduction of the couple to an understanding of these needs at the time of preparation for marriage.

SEXUAL DIMENSION

Most would readily admit that in our permissive society there is a greater awareness of human sexuality that is not always matched with greater appreciation of its proper role in life and especially in marriage. As he has done so well in his other writings, Dominian gives a rich analysis of the sexual in marriage, its great potential for fulfilling the needs of sustaining, healing and growth when the sexual act is a reaffirmation of the other as a person, not merely as a sexual object. In their sexual interaction the couples are involved in a dialog using body language, accompanied by great pleasure as they reach and address each other as persons.

When that happens sexual intercourse reveals in its depths the characteristics of thanksgiving, hope, reconciliation, sexual and
personal affirmation. It begets new life a few times during the marriage but should always be life-giving, contributing to the ongoing married life of the couple in sustaining, healing and growth.

LOVE

The level of awareness of the meaning of love in marriage has been raised by a variety of contemporary social and psychological factors for Dominian. In spite of the great number of marriage breakdowns this growth in loving potential is a welcome sign of a better definition and further deepening of the image of God in man. Love in marriage and the family is the most important way of realizing the fullness of being human. It reveals the image of God in man and is the most important bridge between man and God, who is love. Whatever supports this love deserves our highest priority.

In Part II Dominian honors this priority and gives us the fruit of his own many years of dealing with spouses in a counselling situation. The counsellor must be a good listener, listening carefully, in depth, free from interruptions. Active listening is needed, assimilating, evaluating, striving to pinpoint the real problems as opposed to the apparent ones or mere symptoms, narrowing it down, lowering the defences of the spouses to enable them to face honestly the reality of their mutual complaints. No easy task! And all the while he must strive to remain neutral, not seeming to favor either spouse.

The counsellor must accept the fact that he cannot always work out a reconciliation. The couple may have reached the point of no return and only seek a confirmation of their own worst fears. The counsellor should not make the decision for the spouses to separate but he may clarify their situation to show that no viable relationship remains, if the evidence is clear.

It is the part of wisdom for a counsellor to recognize his/her own limitations and be willing to refer the spouses to someone more experienced or more specialized. While the ideal is to counsel both spouses, at times one may refuse to participate or withdraw. Working with one may be necessary even if not the ideal situation. This makes it more difficult but not impossible to be sure that the whole story is being revealed.
Dominian specifies five dimensions on the basis of which spouses relate to each other: social, emotional, sexual, intellectual, spiritual. Dominian analyzes these dimensions and then applies them to the three phases of married life. In Phase I, the first 5 years, the basis for an enduring marriage is laid or the roots of discord are manifested; 30 to 40% of broken marriages occur during this phase. Phase II is from age 30 to 50 when children are the focus of so much attention and the spouses undergo many changes, discovering their authentic selves with possible dramatic consequences for the marriage. Phase III is from age 50 to death which is becoming later and later as our life span is extended.

Part III is concerned with special problems of great importance in the lives of the spouses. The decision to marry at one end of the spectrum and the decision to leave at the other end. Infidelity is examined as it might occur in any of the three phases of marriage. Jealousy, sexual variations, especially homosexuality, the problem of alcoholism, the occurrence of violence, and the experience of depression are seen through the prism of Dr. Dominian’s years of counselling.

Part IV is concerned with preventing breakdowns in marriage. The aim must be to make the couple aware of their own deepest desires, usually unarticulated, not fully realized. In separate interviews and then together they should be helped to know each other, their strengths and weaknesses, their psychological and emotional gender differences. Character and personality traits should be evaluated as honestly as possible in the light of their courtship, e.g. violence, drunkenness, extreme jealousy, promiscuity should be considered as storm signals that may foretell disaster.

In his final chapter Dominian stresses support for the marriage once it has started. This fits in admirably with the concern of the Catholic Church as expressed in the 1983 Revised Code of Canon Law. Canon 1063 calls on the ecclesial community to give assistance to married couples “so that the matrimonial state is maintained in a Christian spirit and makes progress towards perfection”. Through preaching and catechesis and the mass media the true meaning of Christian marriage and the duty of Christian spouses and parents should be taught. Before they enter marriage there should be personal preparation to predispose them towards the holiness and duties of their new state in life. Pastors are to prepare “a fruitful liturgical celebration of marriage clarifying that the
spouses signify and share in that mystery of unity and of fruitful love that exists between Christ and the Church". Finally, the canon urges pastors of souls to provide ongoing spiritual assistance to married couples so that "while faithfully maintaining and protecting the conjugal covenant, they may day by day come to lead holier and fuller lives in their families".

To emphasize the importance of such assistance to married couples in Canon 1064 the bishops are urged to establish a structure to assure continuing support, after consulting men and women of proven experience and skill, as it seems appropriate. One commentator has wisely observed that the implementation of these two canons (1063 and 1064) could renew the whole Church. The importance of the integrity of the family cannot be exaggerated. The whole Christian community should be concerned and involved. It is a matter of self-preservation in the face of the greatest social upheaval of our day — the plague of broken marriages.

Pope John Paul II has emphasized his concern for the family in the strongest terms possible in his 1981 encyclical "Familias Consortio". He states that we are at a moment of history in which the family is the object of numerous forces that seek to destroy it or in some way to deform it (no. 3). Christian spouses and parents are reminded that they have an irreplaceable contribution to make to the building up of wholesome family life (no. 5). Preparation is more necessary in our times than ever before and it must be seen as a gradual and continuous process with three main stages: remote, proximate and immediate preparation (no. 66). He concludes his rich pastoral treatise on the family by reminding us all that the future of the world depends on the family (no. 86).

This encyclical was, of course, the sequel to the Synod of Bishops of 1980 when they gathered in Rome from all around the world to discuss the problem of the Christian family in the modern world. It is truly a worldwide problem.

To show how Catholic periodicals reflect this concern for the family we can cite the issue of Lumen Vitae, vol. XL, no. 4 (1985), from Belgium, which is devoted entirely to "PREPARING FOR MARRIAGE". The writers include a French archbishop, a priest, and lay people, all active in various phases of marriage preparation. The breadth of scope of the articles is shown especially
by the account from India where a most successful program has been training uneducated tribal women to become proud and happy housewives and mothers. It is noted as an experiment that should be of interest to many Third World countries. If a program works among such aborigines "caught in the web of illiteracy, poverty, backwardness, ill-health, land resources which cannot be expanded anymore" (p. 434), it should work almost anywhere. The success of the experiment is all the more surprising when we recall the Indian prejudice against girls. "Why educate my girl? She will go to live in somebody else's house after marriage" is the argument of many a poor mother. But the group of nuns behind the movement succeeded in the face of all obstacles, catering to girls left behind by the formal system of education.

Starting with girls usually suffering badly from malnutrition, low vitality, anaemia, a negative self-image and other anti-values that go to make up the poverty syndrome, the program worked a transformation without alienating them from their families or tribes or social class. After a literacy and simple arithmetic course, combined with the basics in child care and nutrition, personal hygiene, basic medical knowledge, they moved into vegetable growing, poultry, piggery, the art of marketing. Sewing, stitching and other relevant household skills were added and some general knowledge plus lectures on the role of women and, of course, on religion and morality. In spite of great financial problems, the project just completed its 25th year. The graduates "have added a certain graciousness and refinement to home life in the villages". The young tribal women have been enabled to live up better to the role that was assigned to them in traditional tribal society, and to establish a happy mixture of traditional values of home life with modern skills and information.

A crowning proof of the success of this Third World project is the fact that many educated and semi-educated bridegrooms will not marry a girl in that area unless she has completed the course given by the nuns. They succeeded in preparing girls for marriage in spite of almost insuperable obstacles. It should be an inspiration to all of us no matter what socio-economic group we work with.

In the Philippines, where so many live below the poverty line, with so many squatter families, marriage problems can be very common. A recent newspaper article (Manila Sunday Times, 11 May 1986, p. 1) underscores one aspect of the problem, the "mail
order brides’, the poor girls who arrange their marriage by mail with a complete stranger in another culture to escape from a life of poverty at home.

The article was based on a press release from Australia which stated bluntly: “About 500 marriages involving Asian girls which took place in Australia last year are doomed to failure”. The statement continued: “These are so-called ‘mail-order brides’ from the Philippines who are so desperate to come to Australia that they are prepared to marry someone they have never met or barely known”. The source was an official of the migration division in Canberra. He was very pessimistic about the chances of success of such marriages saying, “Mail-order marriages are bound not to work”. Since some of them do happen to work out we can be a bit more optimistic but it is somewhat like rolling dice: the chances of losing out are very high.

In such cases marriage is being used by the girl as a means to escape from poverty with the firm hope of being able to help her family financially. The reality can be very different. The culture gap often brings a rude awakening. The Australian spouse is not brought up to appreciate helping relatives financially and he may have no interest or concern for the Filipina’s ambition ‘to send money home. He may even resent it and refuse to permit it. The inner world of marriage can be shattered by such a refusal. Add to this the loneliness and homesickness when a poor girl from the Philippines finds herself in a remote farm area with no one she can relate to socially. What she has taken for granted all her life, easy, lighthearted communication in her own tongue suddenly becomes a rare treat or disappears altogether for months at a time. The sense of loneliness and alienation can be devastating. With none of the resources of the well educated professional her marital situation can be gloomy indeed, prompting such a pessimistic prediction as the immigration official cited. The dream of happiness in a rich country often ends in a dreary divorce court in a lonely rural area without the emotional support of family or friends. Both Philippine and Australian governments are very anxious to prevent such heartbreaks but it has been a losing battle.

In the Philippine squatter and slum areas marriages suffer from the grinding poverty that is their daily fare. While it is commonly taught that the family that prays together, stays together, no one
can claim that the family that suffers hunger and privation together, stays together. Sinking too far below the poverty line can mean the loss of a sense of human dignity and a lowering not only of physical but also of spiritual vitality. The poverty of Third World squatters and slum dwellers should be a source of scandal to all of us. The bishops of Latin America have called such poverty “anti-evangelical” (Puebla, no. 1159). Sheer survival is the primary concern of such poor. The inner world of marriage is often shattered by the brutal hardships. Hunger, malnutrition, unemployment can crush the human person to such an extent that they run away from their marriage responsibilities, seeking refuge and forgetfulness in drink or drugs or promiscuity. Such unfortunate spouses are further proofs of the age-old truth that without a certain level of material security and stability morality will usually break down.

CONCLUSION

The need is great and admitted by all concerned. Marriage is in serious trouble in the modern world. Popes, bishops, priests, counsellors, married people, are all very much disturbed by what they see happening all around them. The family, the only hope for the future of the world is “crumbling’, “disintegrating’. Young people are being prepared more for non-marriage than for marriage due to the collective uncertainty of our times. Dr. Jack Dominian sees all of these threats as symptoms of a much deeper problem arising from a fundamental change in the way modern spouses perceive marriage. Due to sociological and psychological changes of our age the young are much more concerned with the inner world of marriage than their parents or grandparents. But they themselves cannot clearly articulate their own expectations or desires. Their rising expectations have not been accompanied by an increase of resources on the part of the spouses or of society. As a result the couple are often disillusioned and abandon their marriage. In this handbook Dr. Dominian offers his expert help to bridge the gap, drawing on his years of experience as a psychiatrist and counsellor. All involved in marriage preparation or counselling will find this book a rewarding experience, a valuable source for firming up or enriching their approach to modern spouses.