

One Fold

Editor's Note:

Pope John Paul II recently convened his first synod of bishops to discuss the problems of the family in our modern world. In an "Open Letter to the Synod" (printed in *The Tablet*, a Catholic periodical out of London) Dr. J. Dominian addresses those bishops, calling for "a critical and positive evaluation of change." Because "marriage, divorce, sexuality are all in a period of transition," he warns, "there will be a temptation to stress the familiar and the traditional as a way of reinforcing flagging standards. There will be a temptation to condemn, for there is much to condemn. These are tendencies to be avoided." What we need to do instead, he suggests, is to look "both backwards and forwards, with the courage to encourage the good that is emerging and specify accurately the bad that is confusing it . . ." Because of his insights and the relevance of the topic for our Mormon readers, SUNSTONE has chosen to reprint select paragraphs from his letter.

In Western society marriage is in a stage of transition. Since the industrial revolution there has been a type of marriage governed by specific roles of the spouses. The husband's role was that of provider and leader, the wife's that of childbearer and maintainer of the home. So long as these roles were enacted accurately and there was no unfaithfulness or divorce, the marriage was considered good. In this marriage love may have developed but it was not an essential ingredient of the institution. What was essential was commitment, faithfulness, procreation and the execution of the socially accepted roles of the age. Gradually, in this century, a new companionship type of marriage is emerging. The basis of the union is love. Couples fall in love and after marriage aim to convert this love into loving. This loving seeks openness, intimacy, communication, the expression and living of feelings, sexual fulfillment and an equality of worth between the sexes. These two patterns, which exist side by side and in various admixtures in individual marriages, need critical evaluation. The strength of the traditional marriage lay in the commitment, faithfulness and loyalty of the spouses to each other and the maintenance of the bond. These assets are in no way incompatible with

companionship marriage. The strength of the latter lies in the intimacy and openness which bring the spouses to an unprecedented closeness, which in its turn allows for sustaining, healing and growth in the depth of the relationship. From the Christian point of view the realisation of these new dimensions of love are to be welcomed and rejoiced in . . . The ideal movement forward would combine the continuity, reliability and predictability—which are other words for indissolubility—of the traditional marriage and the realisation of a deeper layer of being, which is the promise of the emerging type . . .

What is incompatible with Christian life is that widespread divorce should be the price paid for the deeper realisation of love in marriage. The evil of divorce is not so much the action of those who divorce, but the pain and tragedy of the parents and the children, particularly the latter who are caught in a conflict which is none of their making. Certainly the Church has a duty to decry the plight of the children of the divorced as loudly as it decries that of those killed in the womb by abortion.

The Church needs to look forward and welcome the changing form of marriage and direct its resources, both financial and pastoral, to research and to support for the married. It is possible by continuous appropriate vigilance at the time of the marriage and through support given afterwards, to encourage the realisation of the new expectations of marriage without large-scale divorce. For this the Church needs to look ahead to major and radical changes in education and support for marriage, and the Synod must spell these out. In particular it is vital for the Synod to stress that the wedding day is not the culmination of marriage. The wedding day is the beginning of marriage, as a covenant relationship which has to be supported through 40 or 50 years . . . Christianity has been too far removed from, has not drawn on the real experience of the married.

Had it been in close contact, it would have realised that sexual intercourse is a body language of pleasure and joy which

has the potential of conveying gratitude, hope, reconciliation, confirmation of sexual identity, personhood, and trust. With or without words, couples experience and express through intercourse gratitude first for the time spent together and hope for the time they will spend in the future. Intercourse is often a fitting means of completing reconciliation and one of the most economic ways of affirming sexual identity, personhood, and trust. All this, which is an intrinsic part of the nature of sexual intercourse, can only find its true and authentic meaning in a continuous, reliable and predictable relationship we call marriage. Within it sexual intercourse is a life-giving experience which on a few occasions has the potential of giving new life and on every occasion of enhancing the life of the couple . . .

Christianity has and will always continue to teach that children are God's gifts to mankind, a response to God's invitation to be fruitful and multiply. They are one of the most precious elements of marriage. What is new is the realisation that parents always come first in their stability, happiness and unity for the welfare of the children depends on the well-being of the parents. It is up to them, in a spirit of generosity, to consider how many children they can raise in their circumstances . . .

In a world battered by social injustices, economic strains and the threat of nuclear extinction, the family remains the basis where peace and love is sought. Love is learned in the home; on the success with which it is received and given the peace and sanity of the world ultimately depends. Psychological studies have repeatedly shown that, in conditions of justified discontent, the ultimate acts of inflammatory madness are perpetrated, at the point where genuine discontent meets psychopathic indifference, by those who have never known authentic love . . . For it is in the family that every person experiences the deepest insights of love and therefore of forgiveness; of despair and the need of hope, of conflict and reconciliation; of doubt and affirmation; of sickness and healing; of partiality and wholeness, of physical, emotional and spiritual hunger and of appropriate food. All this takes place in a series of relationships of love and it is within this sacrament that the rudiments of all the other sacraments will be found. It is no exaggeration to say that facilitation of love in marriage and the family is the single most important aspect of evangelisation to activate the presence of God as love within and outside the Church . . .