



**The following is the talk Archbishop Seán O'Malley gave at the MASSACHUSETTS FAMILY INSTITUTE SUMMIT October 2, 2003**

"Love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage," and in some sectors of modern society love and marriage are becoming as obsolete as that outmoded form of transportation. The Boston Globe under the rubric, "Goodbye Ozzie and Harriet," reported a few years ago that only 7% of American households have stay-at-home moms and working dads.

Even in times of prosperity, our economy is not family-friendly. The same report documents the fact that only 36% of the U.S. households are comprised of married folk; the other 64% are made up of single parents, couples who cohabit, widows, etc.

By the same token, the divorce revolution has taken its toll on family life. Between 1960 and 1990, the number of children who experienced the divorce of their parents increased from less than 1% to more than 50%, and 1/3 of the children born today are born out of wedlock. Divorce was touted as a means to greater equality for woman. Actually, divorce has contributed to the feminization of poverty. After a divorce, mothers and children typically experience a 73% decline in their standard of living, while men experience a 42% increase. In 90% of the divorces, the responsibility of raising the children falls to the women. No wonder a woman in the Irish Dáil said that, "a woman voting for divorce is like a turkey voting for Christmas."

Violence against women and children has also increased dramatically with the breakup of the family. According to the Surgeon General, the home is often more dangerous for women and children than the streets. On average, 57,000 wives are violently assaulted each year by their husbands, 216,000 by ex-husbands, and 200,000 by their boyfriends. The risk of physical and sexual abuse against children has escalated, often due to the absence of the biological father and presence of boyfriends and other transient males.

The sad statistics of American life in today's world add up to a typical family with a higher degree of instability, more stress, and greater personal turmoil than is commonly recognized. Often chemical solutions are used to solve spiritual problems and separation is used to solve interpersonal problems.

Believers who "marry in the Lord" and those who consider marriage a sacrament have a special duty in salvaging society from the free-fall spiral that threatens civilization itself. The grave problems that beset our world today will not find solutions around the great oak conference tables in Geneva, New York, or the Oval Office, but around the dinner tables where loving parents share their life, their faith, their friendship with their children at meal times, when families come together to be nourished by prayer, by conversation, by being together.

Pope John Paul II has said in Familiaris Consortio that the first and fundamental contribution of the family to society is the, "very experience of communion and sharing that should characterize the family's daily life." By becoming what it is meant to be, the family is the first and most efficacious school of socialization, which takes place through their welcoming of each other, their disinterested availability, their generous service, their deep solidarity.

The Holy Father has written in his letter to families: "It is not an exaggeration to reaffirm that the life of nations passes through the family...and through the family passes the primary current of the civilization of love."

But the institution of marriage so crucial to the raising of children and a sound family life is in crisis.

Whether one agrees with the establishment of the Office of Marriage Initiatives, any concerned citizen should be alarmed by the rational that the government offers in recent testimony that indicates:

"The cost to society from the breakdown of marriage is substantial. According to one federal estimate the cost of faltering child development" approaches \$1 trillion a year, by feeding a demand for welfare services and by contributing



to a multiplicity of social problems, including poverty, crime, addiction, poor health, lower education achievement, job instability, depression and suicide...”

There have been federal programs to deal with virtually every ill effect of the breakdown of marriage but none that have dealt with that root cause or that promote marriage itself.

On September 17th of this year a study was published that the breakdown of marriage in Australia is costing taxpayers there \$3.6 billion dollars a year. A similar study in Britain done in 2000 estimates that the economic cost of the breakup of the English family is costing \$42 billion a year, which translates to \$11 a week per taxpayer. All of these fiscal liabilities simply betoken the human suffering occasioned by the weakening of the institution of marriage.

The ideal way for children to be socialized and raised is in a stable marriage of a man and a woman. Many single parents and grandparents are doing an outstanding job raising children in the most adverse of circumstance. However, I am sure that if we asked single parents and their children what is the best way to raise children, most would agree that a stable marriage between a man and a woman is the optimal venue for raising children. The unique contribution which marriage makes to the welfare of society has won for the institution of marriage privileges and prerogatives that bolster marriage at the service of child rearing and for the common good.

The nature of marriage as a life long union of a man and a woman who enter into a total sharing of themselves for the sake of a family is not simply a religious teaching. Marriage predates the founding of our government, indeed predates the founding of our Church. Marriage is not a creation of the State nor of the Church and neither has the legitimate authority to change its nature. To dismiss people’s legitimate concerns about the institution of marriage as an unjust discrimination against homosexual persons is to miss the point of the centrality of marriage for the well being of society. The concerted campaign of movies and TV to reshape the public opinion into accepting same sex marriages has been a great disservice to the American people.

As for Catholics, the same Catechism that demands that people of homosexual orientation should be treated with every respect and with compassion also defends the unchangeable nature of marriage.

One of the reasons for the social fabric coming unraveled is that we have placed an exaggerated emphasis on the preferences and conveniences of individuals elevating these personal preferences to the level of rights and entitlements to the detriment of society.

Any redefinition of marriage must be seen as an attack on the common good. The weakening of the institution of marriage has already had too high a social cost. Our concern must be to strengthen marriage and create a climate that will be supportive and indeed promote the traditional paradigm of marriage.

We are part of a pluralistic society and in no way pretend to force our religious preferences on other peoples but neither can we be intimidated by those who see our defense of the common good as simply narrow minded or intolerant of others’ supposed rights. The rights of children and indeed of the community demand that we support family life by protecting the definition of marriage. Nothing will strengthen family life and society like a strong institution of marriage, nothing weakens family life and society like a weakened institution of marriage.

I would urge all the members of our community, regardless of their religious persuasion or sexual orientation, to realize what is at stake and to oppose any attempt to alter the definition of marriage. I am not so naïve as to think that saving the definition of marriage is enough to undo all the harm suffered by society caused by a weakened institution of marriage. I would hope that those who promote same sex unions will not be so naïve as to fail to recognize the impact that redefining marriage will have on American culture which has already suffered too much because of the deterioration of family life.



Strengthening marriage in the face of the widespread cohabitation and the galloping divorce rate needs to be a concern of every citizen. Radically redefining marriage would simply serve to intensify the assault on marriage and the American family.

Thank you for your commitment to strengthen marriage and family life.

God bless you.

Most Reverend Sean P. O'Malley, OFM Cap.

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