

EDITORIAL: “RECOVERING ORIGINS”

An issue of *Humanum* dedicated to the theme of *Children of Divorce* (named for the landmark April 2012 conference of the Center for Cultural and Pastoral Research, “Adult Children of Divorce”) must inevitably raise the question, not only of how divorce affects children and their development, but of the nature of marriage itself.

With this issue we begin a sequence of four on the general topic of “RECOVERING ORIGINS”, so the frame within which we are considering the nature and breakdown of marriage is one of *anamnesis*, of remembering – remembering our own origins, and in this light the origin of marriage; for unless we remember where we are coming from, we can easily lose all sense of identity and of purpose.

It was the discovery of a book by Elizabeth Marquardt on divorce that gave rise to the very idea of the *Center for Cultural and Pastoral Research*. In that book, the author, as a child of divorce herself, freeing herself from the long-standing censorship of any criticism of the free choices of consenting adults, took on the “settled doctrine” that a “good divorce” was better than a bad marriage. It was, in fact, from within her experience of such a divorce that she was able to see what was essentially bad about divorce (however well her parents conformed to the norms of a “good” one). It was not that her parents fought (hers did not, not, at least, *in front of her*), nor that she could not see *both* her parents (she could, and *equally*, according to the new arrangement), nor that she suffered terribly from the deficit in “social capital” (that was managed well to the point that she was successful in school, went to a good university, and, of course, eventually wrote a book). The problem was the deep *malaise* about her lack of place, a place to stand on. The title of her book would say it all: *Between Two Worlds*. She had been put into the world by two worlds coming together. But now that those two worlds were no longer together, she was “left hanging,” so to speak *between* them with no *terra firma* to stand upon.

Of course, in speaking of the damage that is caused by divorce, we need to tread carefully. *Humanum* is a work of reason as well as faith, and that means we cannot presume to deduce the precise outcome of any divorce *a priori*. Nor can we forget that we live in a society where divorce and remarriage, not to mention living together outside marriage, is increasingly the norm. People often enter marriage *expecting* to be able to divorce – which, of course, from the point of view of the Catholic Church means that their marriage is invalid in the first place. Many of us will know families in which divorce *seems* to have had no ill-effects at all. The situation is therefore complex. And yet, as Marquardt argues and as the books and studies under review in the present issue reveal, the damage caused by even the gentlest and most polite of divorces may be subtle and long-lasting, since from the child’s point of view a unitary “origin” in the love of this man and this woman has been broken, with untold consequences for the child’s sense of identity. The divorce inflicts what Andrew Root in *The Children of Divorce* calls a wound that is more than merely psychological – an “ontological wound.”

It was Marquardt’s witness “from the trenches,” if you will, that suggested a compelling way of engaging our “anthropology” – the “anthropology of love” that we have inherited from John Paul II. It would be the *child* who would give witness to this anthropology, a witness to what is and isn’t negotiable, as it is subjected to the many social experiments of our time. Our focus on the child is not, then, our way of *avoiding* the question about the truth of the human person, the truth of love, and the truth of marriage as we place ourselves strategically in the public square. On the contrary, it is a way of *focusing* these questions with a confidence that these are the questions shared by everyone in that square. A child who, in the company of thousands of others, refuses to accept that

“it doesn’t matter if her parents are together or not” says something both about what it means to be a human being, what it means to love, and to be married, since the child is the *fruit* of it. “By your fruits....”

It still may seem, however, that, now especially, as we are embroiled in questions about whether or not marriage only concerns two people of the *opposite* sex, that the question about the *indissolubility* of that same institution has more or less been settled, if not for any other reason than that it is a *fait accompli* and has been for several decades. But sometimes it is the unsettling of old “settled” questions that is needed to address adequately the new questions we are facing. Apart from the questions this begs about the inevitability of “progress” and the refusal to hold this “progress” to any standard, we don’t think then that the emergence of new literature written by now adult children of divorce pointing to its *most basic problem* is insignificant for these new questions, as it puts into focus the *inalienable* link between *marriage and the child (in both directions!)*.

Return to the Origin

As Christians we must not lose sight of the ideal, or cease trying to understand what marriage in its essence really means. [<http://www.marriageuniqueforareason.org/>] When Jesus was asked about divorce, he sent his listeners back to the origins of marriage, back to the beginning:

Some Pharisees approached him, and to test him they said, “Is it against the Law for a man to divorce his wife on any pretext whatever?” He answered, “Have you not read that the creator from the beginning made them male and female and that he said: This is why a man must leave father and mother, and cling to his wife, and the two become one body? They are no longer two, therefore, but one body. So then, what God has united, man must not divide.” They said to him, “Then why did Moses command that a writ of dismissal should be given in cases of divorce?” “It was because you were so unteachable,” he said, “that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but it was not like this from the beginning. Now I say this to you: the man who divorces his wife – I am not speaking of fornication – and marries another, is guilty of adultery.” The disciples said to him, “If that is how things are between husband and wife, it is not advisable to marry.” But he replied, “It is not everyone who can accept what I have said, but only those to whom it is granted. There are eunuchs born that way from their mother’s womb, there are eunuchs made so by men and there are eunuchs who have made themselves that way for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can” (Matthew 19: 3-12, JB).

“It was not like this from the beginning.” Jesus refers explicitly to Genesis 2: 24: “This is why a man leaves his father and mother and joins himself to his wife, and they become one body.” It is because woman was made from man, and made into a living soul like him, a “helpmate” for him, according to Genesis. Reading this in the light of the theology of the body explained by Blessed John Paul II, we may say that the “original solitude” of man as a central image of God within the creation – as a physical body, that is, alive by virtue of a spiritual soul that comes directly from God and is made for him alone – opens up into the “original unity” of man with woman – as a male or female body, that is, apt for a physical union within which new life can be created. It is this original unity that makes man (male and female) an image not just of God *per se* but of his Trinitarian vitality, always transcending duality in unity and superabundance.

Marriage in the sacramental sense – rather than in the legal sense of a contract between two people, which can always be dissolved – only exists because of this intrinsic or constitutive relationship to God, the basis of an ontological bonding of the two persons into a new “body” that can be exclusively identified with neither of them. The sacramental union we are describing can exist only until death, but up to that point, no matter how distant the couple may become from each other, it

continues to subsist, and to affect the destiny of each – just as, analogously, two subatomic particles once “entangled” are always linked across time and space, and the fate of one is bound to the fate of the other. The nuptial union in question is not simply a physical pairing for the purpose of intercourse and reproduction (in which two human bodies become a single point of “origin” for the new life of a child), but a persisting unity of two lives in *one story*, one overarching drama.

If marriage is this, it may be a school for sanctity, but it need not be an oasis of happiness or ease. It is a process, a crucible, a factory in which something is being done to each of the spouses, such that they cannot emerge unaffected. The easy acceptance of divorce in our society seems to prevent many people experiencing that struggle and its eventual fruits, which their parents’ or grandparents’ generation often did – the joy and love that comes from persistence, the forgiveness of faults, and the determination to remain faithful to the most solemn of all promises.

G.K. Chesterton was stunned by the ease with which marriages in America could be dissolved in law. “If Americans can be divorced for ‘incompatibility of temper,’ I cannot conceive why they are not all divorced. I have known many happy marriages, but never a compatible one. The whole aim of marriage is to fight through and survive the instant when incompatibility becomes unquestionable. For a man and a woman, as such, are incompatible.” He was overstating for rhetorical effect, but it is the case that man and woman are profoundly different, and the unity of marriage is a unity that *depends* on this difference, not the kind of unity in which one person absorbs and dissolves the other. To quote the review of Andrew Root’s book by Juliana Weber, our problem is that “the Enlightenment’s overemphasis on the individual shifts the objective of marriage from that of shared property, shared power, shared labor and the like, to one of individual and subjective fulfillment” – so that marriage depends on the unreliable affection of two individuals pulled in many different directions.

Indissolubility is grounded in sacramentality. Marriage is a living symbol of, and derives its reality from, the union of Christ with his Church, the union of human and divine nature in Christ, and (supremely) the union of Persons in the Trinity. It is the Trinity and Incarnation that make marriage a sacrament, creating the possibility of a bond that transcends all earthly whims and feelings because it is rooted in eternity and in the graces poured out on the Cross. We are not, in the end, our parents’ children, simply. The very indissolubility they are held to, is a token of the Eternity of which they are only images, and a child that loses his or her ontological “home” through the effects of divorce can find it again in the Church (as Andrew Root also suggests). The very reason that consequences of divorce on children are *serious* (since they obscure the Eternal Love of God) is also the very reason they are not *ultimately* tragic (because our parents are only an *image* of a deeper Origin, which is now present to us in the Church).

Margaret McCarthy and Stratford Caldecott, March 1, 2012

See also the News item “Divorce harms children” (Feb 14, 2012)
[<http://www.humanumreview.com/news/detail/divorce-harms-children>]

NEXT ISSUE: ASSISTED REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGY (A.R.T.)