

MARRIAGE: QUO VADIS?

Paul Galea
Faculty of Theology
University of Malta

As young people today see marriage more as a personal relationship, the tendency towards the privatization of the relationship becomes greater. While the majority of young couples seem to be following a linear progression in their relationship along traditional lines, others are starting families away from the established structures of society and even outside legality. The rapid rise in teenage pregnancies and the fact that one third of the children born in Malta each year are outside wedlock attests to this rapid transformation. While being committed to one's partner and to the relationship remains a challenge for all married persons, the challenges for younger couples are becoming more complex as the crisis in commitment is manifested as early as in the courtship. The separation of sex from a commitment, the sexual initiation at an early age, and the privatization of the relationship have also undermined the "structures" and stages of dating and courtship. The lack of signposts and milestones in this journey has blurred the boundaries between dating, courtship and marriage to the extent that their definition is confused and the transition from one to another is often lost. Retrieving the structures for intimate relationships is a necessity for society. The covenantal model at the basis of the sacrament of marriage, offers a balanced view blending the interests of individuals with those of society, the desires of adults with the needs of children, the responsibilities of the Church with those of the State, and the legality of the contract with the bonds of love.

Where are we going? What are we seeing? How did it start? These are not easy questions even if one had to limit the investigation to a particular population and one specific culture. This is a task for anthropologists, sociologists, historians, philosophers, and other thinkers, and last but not least, of clinicians who need to get their bearings right and to make sense out of present situation.

My presentation is not intended to be an exhaustive picture of the situation in Malta. Rather, it is a collection of facts and figures, assembled together with a personal interpretation. It will focus mainly on the early stages of intimate relationships in the attempt to understand better the causes contributing to changes and difficulties experienced later on in married life.

1. HOW DID IT START?

TWO TRADITIONS OF PAIR-BONDING: MEDITERRANEAN AND NORDIC¹

THE MEDITERRANEAN TRADITION

For many people, orthodox sexual morality, supported by political, religious and other public institutions, is in *the tradition of the virgin bride and the double standard (the male need not be a virgin, and if not, it could be easily concealed)*. This tradition is often dubbed as the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Western culture became heir to this ancient eastern Mediterranean system, as recorded in the Bible. The system used to be well preserved in Mediterranean and Latin American Catholic cultures. In these cultures, the virginity of the nubile young woman used to be ensured by a vigorous system of chaperonage. This was also the case in Malta up to some time ago. However, parental control today has undergone a radical change over the past few years. These customs are rapidly changing possibly also under the influence of a sort of comeback of the Nordic system.

THE NORDIC TRADITION

Though named Nordic, the origin of the betrothal system of the north is lost in prehistory and cannot be traced. It institutionalized betrothal as ceremonially more important than marriage. Betrothal signified a couple's intention to become pregnant and to demonstrate their ability to establish a family unit. Marriage simply confirmed the achievement. Without the baby, the marriage was unlikely to take place. ²

The culture of the betrothal system was not a city-building culture, but one of farming and fishing hamlets in which the family was the cooperative and productive unit. This system was one of equality between the sexes, totally disparate from the discriminatory sexism of the system of the virgin bride and the double standard. Thus one may epitomize the system of the North as *the system of betrothal and sexual equality*.

The Nordic system once encompassed all of tribal Europe and that was displaced by the encroachment of the Mediterranean system. Today, this has been revived though under different forms.

Romantic Pair-Bonding and Conjugal Love

The Northern tradition of betrothal and equality of the sexes has always

recognized the phenomenon of pair-bonding on the basis of the *intense romantic and possessive attraction* between two partners rather than on mere sexual attraction. Parents were later to endorse these lovers. This phenomenon is known as falling in love, or being in love.

The Mediterranean tradition, in its original form, did not prescribe pair-bonding on the basis of falling in love. Rather, it prescribed that a man's family select his partner, or at least consent to his own selection. The man presented his proposed virgin bride to his own family. Having obtained their consent, he then claimed her from her father. In former times, the claim involved overt negotiation regarding the economic factor, the dowry, which in more recent times, is more covertly taken into consideration.

The change from a negotiated marriage to one based on romantic pair-bonding can be traced to the ideology of the Troubadours in the 12th century. It is likely that the Troubadours mediated a compromise between the traditions of the North and of the Mediterranean with their philosophy of romantic love through poems and songs. The Mediterranean tradition was incorporated into church doctrine at this time and marriage was seen as a sort of remedy for concupiscence as a result of original sin.³ The Troubadours could be seen as some kind of a wedge in separating the *official church doctrine on marriage and sex* from *the love of youth*. It could be interpreted somehow as the beginning of *the secularization process*.⁴

It could be the case that western culture has been straddling on this dichotomy ever since. Many young people today still struggle to reconcile *love* and *sex - to be in love before they copulate (make love)*.⁵

The Birth-Control Age

In sex, the special challenge of the 20th century stems from the discovery of birth control. The rubber condom was the first effective method of birth control. It was exhibited to the public for the first time in 1876 at the Philadelphia Exhibition, celebrating the 100th anniversary of the U.S. The birth-control age did not begin in earnest, however, until the late 1920's, with the discovery of the latex rubber process. The latex condom was thin, effective, cheap, mass produced, and mass distributed. Since then, as is well known, other methods of birth control have been perfected, such as the pill, the IUD, and more. The lax abortion laws in many countries, moreover, provided further remedies for unwanted pregnancies.

Birth control challenged not only the material culture, but also the moral order.

The reaction of each generation of adults since the birth-control age began has chiefly been one of struggling with their own personal morality vis-a-vis birth control. The newly developing group of teenagers is left too much on its own to formulate its own morality for coming to terms with birth control. To complicate matters, the age for arriving at this formulation has been decreasing, as the age of the onset of puberty goes down.

Recreational and Procreational Sex

Compared with other cultures, Western culture has been sexually repressive. Western sexual mores are derived not only from religious dogma but also from the writings of mental health experts on sex.⁶

The “sexual revolution” of the 60’s and 70’s brought a new openness about sex and new interest in sexual satisfaction; of giving it and getting it. It fell under the slogan of *free sex*. Sex manuals, movies, TV, with explicit sexual content found its way in people’s homes, something which eventually as to find its full expression in the virtual sex or cyber sex of the internet sites of our days.

In the 80’s the fervour dies out. A crucial factor was the spread in the AIDS epidemic and other sexually transmitted diseases. The emphasis now was on *safe sex*. Safe sex however, has not quelled the interest in *good sex* with some beneficial effects. It has eased the flow of information about sex, increased sexual communication between partners, and dispelled anxiety over harmless sexual practices. At the same time it has ushered new forms of anxiety: many sexually normal men and women now worry about the adequacy of their sexual “performance” leading psychologists to deal with the issue.

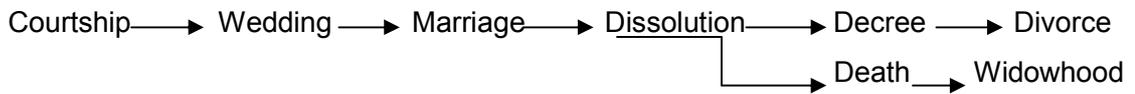
These new practices have given rise to a premarital (and extra marital) sex life together of unknown proportions. They engage in sex not in order to prove that they can procreate, but because they can plan *not to procreate*. They belong to a particular generation in all the history of mankind for whom *recreational sex* in adolescence and young adulthood can be predictably separated from *procreational sex*. They are able to test the viability of their erotic pair-bonding before they embark on parenthood and the marital contract for the legal protection of offspring.⁷

2. WHAT ARE WE SEEING?

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF MARRIAGE⁸

The natural history of marriage has (used to have) five major steps or conditions

Figure 1. Five Major Steps in the History of Marriage



Courtship

To the average person, courtship describes the meetings between two people specifically designed to develop into marital commitment. Courtship used to take place under the watchful eyes of the woman’s parents. As young people today postpone first marriage until their late 20’s or early 30’s, they increasingly emphasize that most dating relationships do not have commitment as an underlying goal. Perhaps this partly explains why today we do not use the word “courtship” as much.

From *close supervision* of marriageable females of the past, we have moved today to the *formally free* systems. In the latter, young people have relatively greater autonomy in choosing partners and in continuing the relationship as they wish. In actual practice, most patterns of courtship lie between the extremes of young people having complete control and young people being entirely excluded. Parents still continue to exercise a lot of influence over their sons and daughters in the choice of their partner.

Figure 2. Parental Control in Courtship



From Courtship to Dating

Courting has long since given way to the practice of dating. In contrast to a meeting during a courtship, the date was planned by the young persons themselves, and they went on it unchaperoned.

Many inventions of the technological age also stimulated dating. The car made parental observation of young couple much more difficult. The telephone, the mobile phone in particular today, and the internet made conversations easier, more frequent and instant. Leisure activities, movies, dances (discos), travelling, and other entertainments draw young couples into dating and into more informal and unsupervised activities than their parents had known. Dating as a formal event seems to have become a more casual attitude about going out together. Many people still date in the traditional way, of course, but dating seems generally to have become much more relaxed.

Reasons, Purposes, and Functions of Dating

Dating functions to introduce and familiarize young people with others of the opposite sex. Dating provides ways for them to interact with and learn about each other. It is a mechanism of heterosexual socialization. Dating experiences help young people learn what is acceptable and preferable to members of the opposite sex. Dating various partners helps clarify what characteristics are desirable in a mate and teaches one about oneself. Dating functions as a key element of our courtship by moving individuals into heterosexual relations and, eventually, into marriage.

Stages of Dating

Dating relationships tended to follow a sequence or pattern. Although some couples only date once or twice, individuals eventually date someone with whom they have a longer lasting relationship. Most people have several serious dating relationships that break up before marriage.⁹

Casual dating —————> **Regular dating** —————> **Steady dating** —————> **Engagement**

Casual dating usually begins with young people “dating around”, that is dating a number of individuals at the same time (sometimes even more than one in the same night). This stage of dating has also been referred to as a *random dating stage*, but partners do not really date each other randomly.

Regular dating partners go out with each other frequently and decrease or stop dating others altogether. This is a stage of relationship development when one or both partners come to expect that they will see each other more often and others less. If the relationship fills the need of the partners, it becomes increasingly exclusive or steady.

Steady dating is a period of serious dyadic exclusiveness more intense than just dating regularly. Steady dating relationships seem to be entered into much more quickly in contemporary dating, after a shorter casual or dating around experience, than was the case even a few decades ago. If their relationship continues, probably the next stage for most couples is engagement.

Engagement is a public acknowledgment that the couple is planning or intending to get married. This period differs from going steady because it is explicitly marriage oriented, like being betrothed in some cultures. Traditionally, a diamond engagement ring, or some substitute, has been included as a symbol of the partners’ engagement and future marriage. During engagement, relationship exclusiveness is surrounded by

norms that are almost as strong as fidelity in marriage. Nowadays, the marriage date may be decided when couples become engaged. During engagement, preparations are made for the approaching wedding date.

The stages of casual dating, regular dating, steady dating, and engagement should not be taken as an invariant sequence through which all premarital relationships must pass. These stages suggest a pattern which is most common. There are of course, variations and departures, including dating only a single partner before marriage, living together or indefinitely, running away to get married (eloping), and so on.

Regardless of specific dating stages almost without exception heterosexual relationships develop a long continuum of exclusivity and commitment, and the partners *can identify markers or turning points in their relationships*.

“The Perfect Storm”

This linear and marked development used to be the norm in the majority of relationships leading into marriage both in Malta and elsewhere. What has happened in these recent years, however, is the blurring of these markers turning the picture into something which is very difficult to define. Scott Stanley describes this as “The Perfect Storm”.¹⁰

As societal conditions change, these generate high numbers of people with insecurities about attachment and low confidence about relationships and marriage. At the same time protective structures have been dismantled as courtship structures have also disintegrated. Irrespective of whether these could be retained in their traditional form, they served as steps, marked stages and provided important information. They served as a sort of scaffolding. We are in a period where nothing has replaced these structures. As people move from dating to cohabiting, for some these intermediate stages get compressed. For others, they are simply postponed. For others still, new stages and roles are taken up and anticipated (or complicated) as with fertility issues, whether planned or not.

In Malta the situation has its unique characteristics. What we have been witnessing in these recent years is a combination of factors with important repercussions in the long run. From an analysis of the data collected from 443 engaged persons attending the Cana marriage preparation courses it was found that the average length of a courtship in Malta was between 6 to 8 years.¹¹ What is of particular interest, however, is that many started pairing at a relatively early age, that is, around 16. Many

of these youngsters seem to have followed the stages of courtship in a more or less linear manner as described before. Others, however, seem to have compressed these stages, or even skipped them altogether. Teenage pregnancies and uncommitted fatherhood are examples of the resultant confusion. Others give the impression that they are “trapped” in this relationship. This explains the diminished attachment to the partner as captured by the CPS questionnaire in 12 per cent of the cases. Yet they press on with the wedding preparations as they simply yield to pressures, whether social or psychological. As the wedding day approaches presumably this attachment does not get any stronger. This down slope is not likely to change after marriage. Stanley describes these situations as of “sliding” into marriage, of succumbing to the inertia, rather than “deciding” to enter into it in a free way.¹²

From Dating to Cohabiting

In the USA, across all age groups, there has been a 45% increase in cohabitation between 1970 and 1990 and, it is estimated that 60% to 80% of the couples that were married in those years were cohabiting. Since 1970, the rate of marriage has dropped by one third, the out-of-wedlock birth ratio has climbed from 11% to 33% of all births, the divorce rate has doubled, and the number of people living together outside of marriage has grown by over 1000%. In the meantime, marriage continues to decline while non marital cohabitation has increased dramatically. In Britain, 70% of first partnerships are now cohabiting.

Situation in Malta

While the number of marriages in Malta, religious and civil, between 1995 and 2006, has remained on an average of 2161 a year, the number of Church marriages has gone down progressively from 1812 in 1995 to 1470 in 2005, whereas civil marriages have doubled, from 10% in 1995 to 20% of marriages in 2006. The number of couples where both parties were Maltese has also decreased steadily, from 80% in 1996 to 60% in 2006. The number of separations, on the other hand, more than doubled from 4,120 to 11,045 reflecting an increase of 6,925 or 168.1 per cent over the same period. Those who qualify as single, that is persons who were never married, accounted to 30.6 per cent of the population reflecting an increase of 1.3 per cent over the previous decade.

Table 1. Marriages in Malta 1996-2007

Year	Marriages	Of which both spouses were Maltese	
		Number	% of all marriages
1996	2,370	1,902	80.3
1997	2,414	1,942	80.4
1998	2,376	1,872	78.8
1999	2,409	1,901	78.9
2000	2,545	1,960	77
2001	2,194	1,643	74.9
2002	2,240	1,584	70.7
2003	2,350	1,489	63.4
2004	2,402	1,618	67.4
2005	2,374	1,573	66.3
2006	2,536	1,512	59.6
2007	2,479		

National Statistics Office, *News Release*, 15.5.2008

Marriage with Foreigners

While the number of marriages fluctuated slightly during the years, the same table shows that the percentage of marriages between Maltese spouses has declined steadily. This means, that more mixed marriages are taking place. Local statistics reveal a trend amongst Maltese males with a preference for British girls. More recently however, there has been a steady increase of Russians and Asians partners. A number of foreign nationals come to Malta to marry Maltese women with the intention of obtaining Maltese citizenship and a right to be domiciled in Malta, although this has become more difficult now.

Cohabitation

According to the 2005 Malta census, declared cohabiting heterosexual couples, where both partners were single, amounted to 505, or 31.4% of the 1,606 persons declared as cohabitants. This is to say 5.5% of the married population. The number of persons whose marriage was annulled and who are now cohabiting is 572 or 35.6% of declared cohabitants. The exact number of cohabitants is very difficult to attest for a number of reasons to be explained further on.

In a study conducted by Tufigno¹³ in 2005 regarding Sexual Practices amongst adolescents, from the number of Participants (N = 373, 127 males, and 146 females), aged between 13 and 16, from 9 different schools, (Forms IV & V), it was found that 90% came from two-parent families; 7% came from separated parents; and only 3% came from single-parent families.

Compared to other countries, these figures suggest that the great majority of the Maltese is in favour of marriage, whether religious or civil. Cohabitation in Malta, though on the increase, does not compare with situations found elsewhere in Western countries. At the same time one has to keep an eye on the increasing tendency towards the privatization of relationships especially for singles who can marry. As a matter of fact, although formal cohabitation might be significantly lower than in other countries, *de facto* cohabitation is probably on the increase. The exact figure is not possible to draw for various reasons, one being that many continue to keep their parents' address. One might argue that there is little need for cohabitation in Malta in order to have frequent face to face (and sexual) contacts because of the close distances and increased opportunities. Another reason is that courtships are being extended way too long and weddings are being postponed because of further studies, increased housing costs and elaborate wedding preparations.

For many unmarried girls under 20 these deep and intimate early relationships however, have a very clear ending, pregnancy.

Early Sexual Initiation and Pregnancy

In the study on Sexual Practices (Tufigno, 2005) conducted amongst Form IV and V students in Malta involving 373 participants, it was found that 53% of males and 47% of females reported sexual activity and that the average age of sexual initiation was 14. Of these, 10% reported engaging in full sexual intercourse. It is interesting to note that these manage somehow to reconcile their Religion with their sexual activity as 80% of these reported being also regular Church goers.

According to the National Survey on Sexual Behaviour of children aged 14 to 16, in 2008, 13% had engaged in sexual intercourse. Less than 20% of these used a condom.¹⁴ Contraceptive use by sexually active teenagers is alarmingly irregular or non-existent. This is a consistent finding in Western countries.¹⁵ This is more the case amongst the younger adolescents in Malta.¹⁶

In a recent survey conducted by the University Chaplaincy amongst University

students (N=421), 44% of participants reported having practiced sexual intercourse during the past year, and 76% see nothing wrong in pre-marital sexual intercourse.¹⁷

According to the figures released by the Government unit “Ghozza”,¹⁸ which caters for pregnant schoolgirls, there has been a substantial increase of reported cases over the past few years. Between January 2006 and March 2007, 68 babies were born from mothers under 16 years of age. The youngest age recorded of a single mother was 12 years.

Table 2. Statistics From Unit “Ghozza” 2000-2007

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>2001</u>	<u>2002</u>	<u>2003</u>	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>
< 18	114	120	131	140	153	156	176	100

- *These are approximate statistics reflecting only persons using these services*

According to the European Perinatal Health report (2008), the Proportion of mothers giving birth in 2004 who were younger than 20 years of age in Malta was above 5%. The proportion of women delivering a live or stillbirth under 20 years of age falls under three categories: countries with a low proportion of births to teenaged mothers, defined as less than 3% of all births; those in an intermediate position (3-5%); and those where 5% or more are in their teens. The local figures are comparable to the UK (7.2%) and some Eastern European countries, even though then one might have to take into consideration also the abortion factor which is by far easier for British girls. Furthermore, if one were to consider their educational level, according to this report, the absolute majority have had either Primary level education, or none at all.¹⁹

Table 3. Percentage distribution of live births by age of mother.

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>1960</u>	<u>1966</u>	<u>1970</u>	<u>1976</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>1986</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>1996</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>
Age < 20	3.9	4.6	4.3	4.1	2.8	2.8	2.7	4.8	5.7	6.0	*6.24

- * Denotes provisional figures obtained prior to publication.

National Statistics Office, *News Release*, Malta 15 May 2007.

Table 4. Live Births Outside Marriage

Year	Number	% of total live births
1960	63	0.7
1966	61	1.1
1970	79	1.5
1976	64	1.1
1980	59	1.1
1986	80	1.5
1990	95	1.8
1996	289	5.8
2000	464	10.6
2005	779	20.2
2006	865	30.0*
2007	964	+

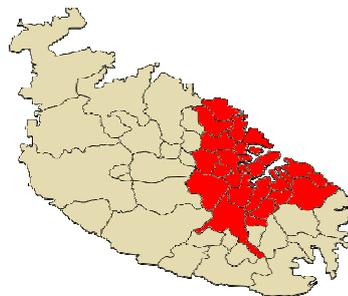
* of which 795 were born of Maltese mother

+ of which 888 were born of Maltese mother

National Statistics Office, *News Release* dated 15.5.2008

Like other European countries and the USA, single mothers and their offspring are most prevalent among the less educated people who engage in low paying jobs and they are amongst the poorest of society. The highest concentration of single mothers is found in the southern and northern harbour areas.²⁰ For the others who intend to sanction their relationship, and raise their offspring, marriage is a decision that will have to wait.

Figure 1: The Southern & Northern Harbour Area



The State's Response

Malta offers a number of social services to single mothers. A maternity leave is offered by employers. After delivery, a single mother may apply for relief consisting of Lm1.50 per week. This allowance is reduced to seventy-five percent of that weekly rate if she is living with another family. In addition, a milk grant is given for a further forty weeks. Any personal income not exceeding Lm40 per week, having a property whose value does not exceed Lm6,000, and the ownership of a car, are not taken into consideration by government when relief applications are being examined. Children with special needs are helped up to age sixteen and after that age they are given a pension. Single mothers entitled to relief under the pink form are also given an energy relief, which means that they do not pay for water and electricity services. These social benefits are given to all single mothers. If a single mother lives on her own she is also given a housing allowance of Lm26 and this entitlement is reduced to 75% of the housing allowance if she lives with another person. This housing allowance is further reduced by 0.162% if the father of the child contributes to the child's upkeep. Single mothers may work and no deductions are made if she earns Lm21.16 or €49.29 per week. However, if her pay is more than that, the difference is deducted. If she works for more than eight hours per week she has to pay one tenth of the social services contribution.

The full rate of children's allowance and relief amounts to Lm124 or €250 every 13 weeks for every child. Maternity benefit amounts to Lm25.75 per week which is increased to Lm27.25 per week if she is entitled to the pink form relief. The bonus allowance of Lm58 is allowed in full. Moreover, the children's allowance is adjusted according to the wage of the father in cases where parents are married. All other allowances cease to be paid once the single mother marries.²¹

In 2006, 1879 single mothers received Lm3,571,780.63 in social benefits and allowances, relief, etc. 164 other mothers presumably had some form of employment as they were not eligible to social benefits or other allowances.²²

The Survey on Income and Living Conditions published for the first time shows that during 2005, 14.9 per cent of all persons living in households fell under the poverty line. The poverty rate amongst males stood at 14.2 per cent, while that amongst females stood at 15.5 per cent. When analyzing poverty by household type, it results that the poverty rate was highest among persons living in single parent households. This stood at a staggering rate of 47.9 per cent.

The government of Malta is not immune from criticism over the way social assistance is being offered to single mothers. Very often such criticism is levied against the authorities accusing them of encouraging teenage sexual activity and pregnancies. This has been denied and the following argument is being made in reply. What would happen should these teenage mothers be left to fend for themselves without government assistance? They would probably end up as prostitutes to support themselves and their child. It is also argued that the government supports these teenage single mothers like any other mother to encourage married young couples of fertile age to have children, as births in Malta are already below replacement level of population. These young mothers actually do care for their children despite the difficulties. Is not this choice more preferable than to having an abortion? But there are other questions which need to be addressed, such as, why not help all married mothers even more if we want to increase the birth rate? Why are single mothers helped only in this way?

What about the fathers?

From a limited investigation of the Baptismal records held in the parishes included the Northern and Southern Harbour area, it was found that 80% of baptisms in Paola, 45% of Porto Salvo, Valletta (St. Dominic), and 35% of Cospicua are registered as “Unknown Father”. The other parishes show similar high percentages. Oftentimes, the presumed “unknown father” is also present for the baptism of the child, as some parish priests get to know later.

Very often, these young mothers do not provide the name of the father, not because he is not known, but more to preserve their sole guardianship over the child especially if there was never any commitment to marriage or to get more social assistance.²³ This is where the girls’ family comes in to make its contribution not only by keeping the mother with the family but also by taking care of the baby, very often, with much love and affection. Usually, it is the grandmother who volunteers to take care of the baby while her daughter continues with her education.

Whatever the reasons behind the fatherhood crisis, whether real or apparent, it is a fact to be reckoned with. The Malta figures match those of the USA, and in their worst. This rapid transformation in the Maltese family, at any rate, begs further questioning.

The first question has to do with the veracity of this demographic factor of a “fatherless” generation. Is it possible that a traditional society like Malta, with long and strong family ties undergo such a rapid transformation within the span of one

generation? How tenable is it that this strong evolutionary bond between parents and children, still strong in other primates, be lost in such a short time by claiming that a substantial proportion of the Maltese fathers do not care about their offspring?

While it is a demographic fact that 30% of children are born out of wedlock, and that a small number might be the product of irresponsible behavior, this is not necessarily the truth in all cases. In other words, what we could be seeing here is an attempt at the “deinstitutionalization” of traditional marriage and the family and a “reinvention” of these, though retaining the essentials. Whether this is done for a financial benefit or other is still to be established. Whatever the case, this could be a new way of being a father, a couple, and family and not necessarily that fathers are forfeiting this responsibility.

Adolescents & Sex: Some Considerations

1. As opportunities for socializing have increased and contacts facilitated through modern technology free dating has been extended almost without limits.
2. As marriages are postponed to the mid 20's and beyond, and sexual initiation is lowered to 14, many of these sexual encounters are presumably without any commitment in mind. For others, there is a long history of pair-bonding equivalent to a *de facto* cohabitation.
3. Despite the available birth control measures today, many do not use them.
4. Most parents are confused as to how to exercise control and authority on their children who are still minors. Some might be colluding with them by letting their son's and daughter's partner sleep or live with them in their home.
5. Malta has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancies and of children born out of wedlock (31%), comparable to the USA (33%), but taking into consideration that abortion is illegal in Malta. We also have one of the lowest birth rates in Europe.
6. Malta offers a number of social services to single parents: children's allowance, milk grant, bonuses, etc. For the state there is no distinction between married or unmarried mothers. Every women of Maltese nationality, married to a Maltese citizen, who enjoys a refugee status, or is a EU citizen and resides in Malta, is eligible to maternity benefits.
7. Despite this assistance, like other European countries and the USA, single mothers and their offspring are most prevalent among the less educated people who engage in low paying jobs and they are amongst the poorest of society.²⁴

3. WHERE ARE WE GOING?

A CRISIS IN COMMITMENT

People today seem to have a different way of understanding marriage commitment than from the past. The transition is from *a commitment to an institution to a more personal bond*. While promoting good relationships is extremely important, failing to defend and to preserve marriage as a social institution can be equally harmful. This means that a balanced view of marriage is imperative today more than before. As the personalization of marriage blends with the privatization of the relationship and with the modern market economy, chances are that when a person's needs are not met in the relationship satisfactions could be sought elsewhere.

Commitment is defined as a "pledge", something to which one is bound. It is an obligation; something that we sustain and maintain with all of our being. From the perspective of syntax and metaphor, people in the Anglo-Saxon culture use the word "commitment" in the context of marriage in the sense of "Promise" (or Pledge), "Dedication" (or Devotion), and "Attachment" (or Bond, or Tie). It denotes both *a state of intentionality and a meaningful emotional relationship to another person*.

Commitment has been extensively studied from the perspective of the Investment Model in social psychology and it is distinct from "satisfaction". While the latter is understood as a positivity of affect or attraction to one's relationship, "commitment" is the tendency to maintain a relationship and to feel psychologically "attached" to it. This definition of commitment includes two categories: "behavioral intent" and "psychological attachment". According to this model, these two categories of commitment go together and influence each another.²⁵

Commitment has been studied from a relationship dynamics perspective using constructs such as communication and conflict. Results have shown that, consistent with commitment literature, *higher reported commitment was associated with less feeling trapped in the relationship, and greater relationship satisfaction*.

To understand the level of commitment among Maltese engaged couples a validated questionnaire, *The Commitment to Partnership Scale (CPS)* (Galea, 2006), was administered to 443 subjects taking part in marriage preparation courses. The CPS measures factors such as Attachment, Trust, Maturity, Investment and Values.

Results show that *average to high* scores were obtained on the Attachment scale (88%); the Values scale (88%) and the Trust scale (60%), whereas *low* scores were

obtained on the Investment scale (80%) and the Maturity scale (74%).

These results related to the Maltese scenario suggest that, while in most couples the psychological attachment and the interest in the partner is quite high, what seems to be lacking is the personal maturity to commit in an adult way, as well as the intention of inputting of important resources other than the material ones.

When one combines this picture with the previous ones, particularly those related to cohabitation, sexual activity and length of engagement, one is faced with a peculiar situation which is probably typical of this local situation. In other words, while only a relatively small minority of youths opts to stay out of marriage, there are signs that the majority of our youngsters are not sufficiently mature to make this commitment despite early and prolonged sexual relationships.

Could it be the case that in Malta, because of the peculiar situation where courtships are extended and sexual initiation is anticipated, these couples are sharing the same dynamics of "inertia" that cohabitants who eventually marry suffer from? In other words, could it be the case that these *de facto* commitments resulting from sexual, financial, and other social pressures, be actually leading some into "sliding" into marriage, rather than wholeheartedly and freely "deciding" to enter into it.²⁶ This might explain why some marriages fail right after the wedding despite a long and deep premarital relationship.

When one looks at the recent Marriage Annulment figures published by the Metropolitan Tribunal in Malta between 2000 and 2007, one cannot fail to notice a remarkable reflection of this picture. As a matter of fact the absolute majority of annulments given over this period of time were on the grounds of Lack of Due Discretion (244), and on the grounds of Psychic Inability (250). The picture is striking when one compares these figures with the more "religious" grounds, such as the Goods of Marriage (Bona). In fact the number of positive annulments granted on the ground of the *Bonum Fidei* (Fidelity) was 30, on the *Bonum Sacramenti* (Sacrament) was 4, and on the *Bonum Proles* (Exclusion of Children) was 26, that is 60 in all over 8 years.

A CONCERTED EFFORT

Despite the fact that the number of church marriages has declined, and that civil marriages are on the increase, the religious wedding still remains a favourite amongst Maltese couples. Most of these couples attend the marriage preparation courses

organized by the Church. These weddings are accompanied by magnificently organized Church ceremonies and lavish receptions. For most Maltese girls, the wedding day remains the dream day of their life.

At the same time, while a steady number of Maltese youngsters opt for a sacramental marriage, a substantial number of these never go to Church or do so very rarely. According to the Sunday Mass Attendance Census of 2005, on that particular Sunday Church attendance for this particular age bracket was of 40%. The 2005 survey amongst Cana course participants reported higher figures. Those who went regularly to mass were in the range of 64%. The number of those who never went to church or rarely do so was around 35%. The survey conducted by the University Chaplaincy amongst University students (2008) shows similar figures that is, of a good 32.4% who rarely, or never, go to Church at all. This latter study was also able to identify this cohort with those who obtained very low scores on the beliefs scale as well.

If one were to make guarded projections from these figures, one could draw the hypothesis that a good 30% of those who enter the sacrament of marriage do so without a faith basis, while another 75% including Church goers, do not abide by the moral teachings of the Church.

Despite these inconsistencies, the Church still has an enormous opportunity to safeguard marriage. When in ancient societies marriage was mainly an arrangement between families, and often the wishes of the couples were ignored, the Church helped to define marriage as a matter of free consent between husband and wife. The idea of the contract which elevated the rights of the individual in marriage was more the product of the Enlightenment. The downside of the marriage contract model was that it began to look more and more like a business deal which can also be revoked by the consent of the parties should conditions change.

The religious wedding sought to unify the contractual element of consent with a sacramental element of commitment. Over the long arc of its history in the West, marriage has been able to achieve a balance between the interests of individuals and the society, the desires of adults and the needs of children, between church and state, between contract and the bonds of a covenant. This is the deeper meaning of the sacramental or covenantal model. Today we need to recapture that balance more than ever.

One way the Church can contribute to the welfare of all the parties is precisely by helping find that right balance between the institutional side of marriage and the personal

bond. By replacing the contract model by the covenantal model the Second Vatican Council sought to introduce a new approach to marriage. The Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* of Pope John Paul II (1981) was a very important contribution in understanding the “lights and shadows” of the family and in making some concrete proposals. This was followed in 1983 by the publication of the Charter of the Rights of the Family as a model for legislators in fostering the good of the family.

From a theological perspective, interesting attempts are being made today to develop a theology of marriage which is less static and less rooted in Canon Law, and which is more evolutionary, dynamic and realistic in nature, as the concept of “process” marriage entails. Such an approach should give more leeway to pastors in addressing contemporary issues in marriage and could be a further inspiration in developing a matrimonial jurisprudence.²⁷

The Church’s approach to marital and relationship issues requires some solid pedagogical adjustments as well. The Church’s pastoral approach should be on disseminating ideas about the quality of relationships, and in educating in love. In doing so it should not forget that a relationship without a structure lacks both permanence and depth. The concept of sacrament in marriage can add to the sacredness of the bond at a time where both promises and sexuality are trivialised. By restoring the mysticism and the solemnity of the promise, religious faith can help deepen the meaning of marriage and provide a unique fountainhead of inspiration and support when trouble arises.²⁸

The other challenge lies in the understanding and in living of one’s sexuality in a culture which offers diametrically opposed views. It is important that a sexual morality be not understood as prudishness but as a way of being faithful to one’s partner, and of being responsible for one’s actions and consequences. It is also imperative that pastoral functionaries adopt more relevant forms of thinking and find better and more positive forms of talking about sexuality. An appreciation of the beauty of the human body is much needed. Such topics should be addressed not only in the marriage preparation courses but as early as in the preparation for the sacrament of Confirmation, as well as in the religious education programs in schools. School curricula should also reconsider seriously sex education programs as well as educating for life.

The third challenge lies in educating the educators, first and foremost, the parents. There is no doubt that most parents are at a loss when it comes to dealing with these new challenges particularly through sexuality and the internet. Parental skills programs as well other forms of educating can also be taken up by both State and

Church.

We should not underestimate the serious nature of the problem we are facing in Malta mainly in the privatisation of relationships and of the family life. The living outside legality, and the attempt to reinvent the rules of the game could be more in the selfish interest of the adults than in those of their offspring. We are also seeing people who are becoming parents, or who are entering into marriage and who seriously lack both the freedom and the responsibility to assume such responsibilities. We cannot wait for another generation to understand what it means to be living in a “fatherless” society. A concerted effort is needed.

This appeal should find the support of all those who have the family at heart. While marriages continue to battle with their “normal” everyday problems and the challenges from a changing society, the focus shifts on the young who are embarking on this adventure with the most adverse of conditions. If we cannot change the mentality completely, let us work at least to change the conditions. The worst attitude one can take is that of resignation. The fact that other countries have gone through this before us is no consolation. Rather we should learn from them and preserve what we have. The Maltese family should be at our heart as much as the environment, our language, our food and as much as our traditions.

By way of conclusion, and as a summary, one could propose the following set of statements about marriage as a conceptual framework and a common platform for the promotion of the welfare of the Maltese family.

SIX STATEMENTS ABOUT MARRIAGE²⁹

1. Marriage is a Legal Contract

Marriage creates formal and legal obligations and rights between spouses. Public recognition of, and protection for, this marriage contract, whether in tax or benefits, helps married couples succeed in creating a permanent bond.

2. Marriage is a Financial partnership

In marriage “my money” typically becomes “our money”, and this sharing of property creates its own kind of intimacy and mutuality that is difficult to achieve outside

a legal marriage. Only lovers who make this legal vow typically acquire the confidence that allows them to share their bank accounts as well as their bed.

3. Marriage is a sexual union

Marriage elevates sexual desire into a permanent sign of love, turning two lovers into “one flesh”. Marriage indicates not only a private but a public understanding that two people have withdrawn themselves from the sexual marketplace. This public vow of fidelity also makes men and women more likely to be faithful.

4. Marriage is a personal bond

Marriage is the ultimate avowal of caring, committed, and collaborative love. Marriage incorporates our desire to know and be known by another human being; it represents our dearest hopes that love is not a temporary condition that we are not condemned to drift in and out of shifting relationships forever.

5. Marriage is a family – making bond

Marriage takes two biological strangers and turns them into each other’s next-of-kin. As a procreative bond, marriage also includes a commitment to care for any children produced by the married couple. It reinforces fathers’ (and fathers’ kin’s) obligations to acknowledge children as part of the family system.

6. Marriage is a sacred promise

Even people who are not part of any organized religion usually see marriage as a sacred union with profound spiritual implications. “Whether it is the deep metaphors of covenant as in Judaism, Islam and Reformed Protestantism; sacrament as in Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy; the yin and yang of Confucianism; the quasi-sacramentalism of Hinduism; or the mysticism often associated with allegedly modern romantic love, humans tend to find values in marriage that call them beyond the mundane and everyday” (Don Browning). Religious faith helps to deepen the meaning of marriage and provides a unique fountainhead of inspiration and support when trouble arises.

APPENDIX

Registration of newborn babies born outside marriage

New regulations concerning the registration of births to single or unmarried mother came into force on the 1 March 2005,³⁰ and include the following³¹:

1. When single mothers claim that their child is of an unknown father, as very often is the case, they are still obliged to register the birth of their child at the Public Registry. Such a registration would entail that the child assumes the mother's maiden surname.
2. When a single mother registers her child that has been born out of wedlock and, indicates the father's details, the word 'illegitimate' is omitted. The father must have attained eighteen years on the day of registration of the child, (not on the day the child was born) so that he may be allowed to acknowledge the child. In such cases, the child takes the father's surname, to which the mother's maiden surname may be added on the act of birth. Surnames will be registered in that order.
3. The act of birth provides for the name or names by which the child is to be called, followed by the surname.
4. Once registered, any future corrections to the register may only be made following a court decree allowing such changes.
5. The father, who wants to acknowledge a child registered as the son or daughter of unknown father, has to notify the mother by means of a judicial letter and, if she agrees, she has to give her reply by a judicial letter. No reply by the mother is interpreted as a refusal and no action is taken.
6. If a couple who have had a child out of wedlock and later decide to marry, the couple may legitimize the child born previous to their marriage when they apply for the civil marriage bans. This information has to be made known to the marriage official on the day the couple apply for their marriage bans. This procedure does not incur any extra fees or expenses and the need of judicial letters is done away with.
7. Young couples under the age of eighteen may only marry with the consent of both parents. Couples under sixteen years of age cannot marry.

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