

Last week I mentioned the wisdom I had gained concerning marriage and preparation for marriage over the fourteen years of my priesthood, and especially my work in canon law and the Marriage Tribunal. I would like to take the theme a bit further this week and flesh it out. The Church, basing herself upon natural law—knowable by right reason—and the divinely revealed moral law that comes to us from Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition—teaches clearly the way to live rightly in this world. However, these clear teachings are very often at odds with the culture in which we live. The culture that the Church professes and holds up is characterized as the culture of life; that is, a respect for and dignity of every human being—which includes a right to life—but also the moral demand and obligation of exercising free will in accord with the truth of our nature. Opposed to this culture of life is what Pope St. John Paul II termed “the culture of death”. The sacraments of the culture of death are unrestrained sexual impulse and its corollary; abortion and artificial means of contraception; and no-fault divorce. Since the 1960s and the “Sexual Revolution,” this culture of death has invaded humanity in the West and has devastated society. As a Christian people who promote the culture of life, we are called to stand out like a light in this darkness.

Many people are coming to the Church specifically because they have seen the beacon of Truth shine through the moral teachings of the Church, and they come to us as refugees from the culture of death. They come looking for healing and wholeness, and the Church provides this through the Sacrament of Reconciliation—and the grace provided through the other Sacraments—to live as God intended us to live. However, we also need to build the structures to accommodate these refugees. Just like the Church has always had homes for unwed mothers and pregnancy help centers as alternatives to the choice to abort, the Church also needs to have a structure for those who flee from the moral and spiritual captivity of cohabitation before marriage. So often, young people are deluded by the seemingly reasonable argument that “living together” is wise. The first argument is usually economic: “It’s cheaper.” Secondly, many people treat cohabitation as a “trial marriage”. The fallacy of the latter is proven by statistic after statistic, showing that those who cohabit are more likely to have significant problems in their later relationship, due to a lack of commitment and trust, and are 50% more likely to divorce.<sup>1</sup> Besides the statistical matters, there is the obvious detriment that habitual sin wreaks upon the soul. As to the former, the fallacy is discovered when one acknowledges that economics usually has very little to do with right and wrong. In fact, the right way is oftentimes more arduous and difficult—straight and narrow, as our Lord would say.

In order to welcome these refugees from the culture of death, we must develop a sort of “underground railroad” *a la* Harriet Tubman: a series of “safe houses” for the fugitives from sin’s captivity. When a couple, or even just an individual, discerns that the culture of death is not serving them or their future marriage, and they desire a way out, how do we as a Christian people help them to overcome the economic hurdle? Could it be that we develop a list of homes where individuals can find safe haven and refuge as they await their wedding day? Are there members of the faithful who would open their homes to people seeking the godly way of chastity? If we are to be serious about the carrying of crosses—and helping one another to carry the cross—we must be willing to put our own homes at the service of the Gospel. What a witness this would be to children and to siblings and to friends and acquaintances! What a counter-cultural declaration of purity and self-control!

My vision for sacramental marriages here at the Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul is that we do all that is possible to aid the virtue of our young people. Too often, people come to us broken by the culture of death and living in its throes: cohabitation, previous civil marriage, or the experience of divorce and remarriage. Mercy towards these refugees cannot be an accommodation of their sinfulness, but rather an accompaniment by encouragement and resources. My hope is that we can develop a comprehensive path for our young people to be drawn in by the light of Truth and formed and shaped to choose the good and virtuous path, and to counter every argument of the culture of death and all of its allurements by the convincing hand of charity and community. Only then can we be strong and confident in our proclamation of the Faith, because we will have the means of accompanying those who heed the call to virtue. If we fail to provide these aids to virtue, we should not wonder why people walk away and do not follow the way of the Gospel. Our structures and rules and procedures must always make it easier for people to choose Good and live virtuously and make it more difficult to sustain vice and evil ways.

Logistically speaking, this will have to be a coordinated effort. When someone comes to the parish office with this dilemma, to whom does the pastor turn? So often, these pious thoughts are left only as synapses of the brain, and left undone in actuality. Too often, great initiatives are not undertaken because it is assumed that the hierarchy of the Church or the institution should provide all of these means. I assure you, the office staff at this parish is already burdened beyond the means available to us by the offertory to provide administration of such an undertaking. However, the laity have a special vocation and a special genius by their secular means to accomplish the noble ends of Christian charity. Isn’t this precisely what the movement of the laity was about in the Second Vatican Council? To imbue the secular order with the Spirit of the Gospel is the noble vocation of the laity.

I challenge you to consider whether or not God might be calling you to make this ministry a reality. Is the Lord touching your heart to act on this in a leadership way? Is the Lord calling upon you to gather your fellow believers together in an organized effort to combat the culture of death? This is an open call. Will you respond?



<sup>1</sup> “Marriage Preparation and Cohabiting Couples: An Information Report on New Realities and Pastoral Practices,” USCCB, 1999, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/marriage/marriage-preparation/cohabiting.cfm> (accessed 5/9/19).