

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Marriage Counseling

for

PARENTS AND CHILDREN

the role of parents in the selection of a lifetime partner for their children.

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Perhaps never before has marriage counseling been so widely spread as in our time. Literature on this matter comes off the press so abundantly that bibliographies on the topic could well be considered exhaustive. These are plain facts. And yet, the truth remains that marriage is in crisis. Anytime, anywhere, one comes across unhappy couples, broken homes, abandoned children. . . . It seems that the ever solid foundations of the marital institution are about to collapse.

Is this situation due to a defective technique in marriage counseling or rather to the state of degradation of the so-called modern literature? This much is true. The approach to marriage by young people is usually uncertain and often mistaken. The preparation for matrimony given to the youngsters is both negative and deficient. It warns them of dangers and temptations, but does little to help them in a positive manner. They learn all about the erotic, romantic aspects of love and sex, but seldom are given a chance to appreciate its reality, beauty and sacredness. Counseling techniques prepare the youth for marriage while it forgets all about the reluctant mothers, the cranky grandmothers, the overbearing fathers. . . . Scores of frustrated young couples have come to taste in all its bitterness the reality of an unsuccessful union on account of an unfortunate or untimely intervention of their elders.

This is a phenomenon that usually goes by totally unnoticed. However, information gathered from circles and

institutions dealing with marriage conflicts have brought to light these tragic facts. Situations as embarrassing as the following could and should have been avoided:

A tender girl petitions the court for annulment of her marriage to a boy she never liked nor loved, whom she married just to satisfy the last wish of the departed father and the pertinacious requests of the mother who feels the presence of her husband's ghost in every corner of the house.

A young boy marries to save the face of his father who finds no other means to pay his debts except by giving off in marriage his child to a mentally alienated girl...

Parents do really need marriage counseling as much as children do need the assistance of their elders.

Father Knows Best

In every case efforts should be made to encourage the child to seek parental advice. He may offer thousands of excuses not to do so. The child may argue that his parents are "old fashioned", their ideology obsolete and outmoded and no longer appealing to the younger generation. Hence, the parents' advice appears to him irrelevant if not totally useless. He could even find his elders' "wanting" in understanding in this sort of problems, oblivious perhaps of the fact that his parents were once teenagers and count with all reasons in the world to know better the strength and weakness of these difficult years.

Parents, too, often forget that the child is trying at this age to assert his personality and will revolt against any attempts to keep him away from the free, broad world. He is fighting a battle to affirm his ego and puts up an argument whenever his personality is being submerged into another, that of his elders. It must be remembered, however, that this self-consciousness of the child obeys a natural urge that is good and right and should not be crushed, but rather it should be developed along the proper lines.

Undoubtedly, parents have a greater vision of the problems involved in the selection of a life partner and can therefore provide better guidance than the youth may suspect. The success and happiness of the forthcoming marriage demands a careful deliberation in choosing the right partner. Youngsters find themselves at a serious disadvantage in this regard. The lack of experience plus the tremendous biological impulse stirring within constitute a serious handicap to an impartial and care-

ful deliberation. Cooler heads are badly needed at this stage when the urge for affection, for love has reached its highest mark. This is the right moment for the elders to step in for they have all the human experience and mature knowledge accruing from many years of married life. No doubt they are the best qualified persons in the world to understand the child's problems. The presence of a reassuring hand ready and willing to extend help at this critical moment of making a decision so vital and transcendental may spell the difference between happiness and disaster for the rest of the life. Who else on earth will have more at heart the interests of the child than the parents? Each boy or girl seriously interested in one another should be urged to ponder long and deeply on the advice of Pius XII to the young couples:

"Let them not omit the prudent advice of their parents with regard to the partner, and let them not regard this advice in light manner, in order that by their mature knowledge and experience of human affairs they may guard against a disastrous choice, and, on the threshold of matrimony may receive more abundantly the divine blessing of the fourth commandment: "Honor thy father and thy mother".

The Real Role of the Parents

It is hard, indeed, for a boy to submit unconditionally to his elders' wishes, especially if he belongs to the creative type so keen in developing his own character without any outside influence. But it is equally difficult to convince the parents that certain "controls" do exist and must be applied here; that their power over the children has a limit, too. The main issue at stake, therefore, is to draw a dividing line, to define clearly and unmistakably the extent of the parents' authority when it comes to determine the vocation, to select a mate for the children. This much can be safely said in this regard: the right of persons to marry is a natural and sacred right that can be denied to no one unless otherwise prevented by law from doing so.

Children, especially those under age, are bound to secure parental consent and ask for advice whenever plans for a future marriage are being set. Although it is a precept of natural law to render honor and reverence to parents, neither the advice nor the consent of the parents is required for the validity of marriage, because children, independent of the parents' wishes,

have a right to their own bodies. And it is precisely the exchange, the mutual giving and acceptance of this right that constitutes the essence of the matrimonial union. Therefore, even the minor who enters into marriage without first securing parental consent and assistance is bound by the same obligations and enjoys all the rights and privileges of a truly married person. In fact neither ecclesiastical nor divine laws ban such unions, once the free status of the parties has been otherwise established.

Since want of parental consent constitutes no objection to the validity of the union it becomes obvious that the duty of the parents is limited to guide, to counsel the children, but beyond this they have no right. The decision to marry, to remain celibate or to join the religious life, is an individual and strictly personal decision that in no way could be dictated on the child. These are sacred principles that ought to be safeguarded at all cost. So it is unwise for parents and unfair to children to select a mate for the youngster and present it to him with a stern "here, son, is the girl I want you to marry; here, my daughter, is your future husband". Marriage, the choice of a state of life is an extremely serious matter, and important things in life are not done that easy way. Perhaps there is much to be said in favor of prearranged marriages. A wise parent's choice may in the long test of the years prove to be as satisfactory as it could be the selection of the young, impulsive, emotional child. All these advantages notwithstanding, the right of the child must prevail over and above any human interference.

How to Influence Children

By this time some of our readers may have developed the idea that there is not much left to the parents to do except, perhaps, to counsel the child and then wait and pray for the youngster to make the right decision. Well, this is true, especially if the intervention of the elders comes in too late. However, parents count with many other means to influence the child's selection of a mate without taking away from him a personal responsibility. Wise parents, writes D. Lord, choose the right people for their own friends, and then see to it that their children meet the children of their friends. Wise parents create a wholesome and intensive social life in their home; they invite to their home the sort of people they want their children to meet.

Quietly but persistently the parents hold up ideals that will guide their children in the choice of a partner for life. Tactfully they condemn traits that spoil happiness: vulgarity, bad temper, disparity in education, selfishness, inequality of social position. More than once a wise mother has broken up an unsatisfactory association by giving the child the maximum opportunity to know the beloved, inviting the person to the house, gently insisting that the son or the daughter see a lot of the beloved making it possible to see him under trying circumstances. The wise parent does not resort to unspoken opposition. Such opposition is usually of no avail because it comes too late. The parents' duties towards the child can be met only by their creating and fostering ideals, choosing satisfactory companions and presenting ample opportunities for the children to see for themselves what qualities they should seek in their partners.

Problems Demanding a Prompt Solution

Some parents, especially mothers, labor under the obsession that it is their duty to have their children married off or else they regard themselves as true failures in life. Following this line of thought they use all subtle and even perverse ways to force mostly their daughters into a union they would have never chosen for themselves. Thus they eventually emerge as the people responsible for many unhappy lives and cheerless homes.

Still some others will raise hell before giving in to the child's natural and justifiable desire to marry. In so doing they do accomplish little or nothing at all, except, perhaps, to make the child look like a puppet eternally attached to the mama's apron string or to place him into a tragic situation with no other alternative but this: "to elope or not to elope".

This conduct is utterly unreasonable, not to say unfair. The problems that arise from this rather selfish attitude of the parents are various and complex. Is it reasonable for a mother to refuse her only daughter permission to marry, just because she dreads being separated from the child? Are parents right in forcing their elder child to stay home in order to pay back expenses contracted by the family during his school days? Have the parents a right to expect from their children some years of service to help their schooling brothers and sisters? What is the obligation of the child to help his parents? These are a few of the problems demanding a prompt solution.

There are parents, both mothers and fathers, who just dread being separated from their children. Logically, therefore, when the time comes for the child to decide on his own state of life, a storm of opposition is raised intended to thwart the youngster's plans. In the absence of true, cogent reasons, excuses and pretexts coming in all forms and shapes are offered in an effort to influence the child and bring about a change of mind. Some mothers will beg the daughter even with tears to put off the marriage for a while so that she can stay at home a little longer. Not seldom, fathers too will resort to countless arguments to convince the son to give up any thought of marriage or of a vocation at least for a few more years. The child owes it to the elders as a sign of obedience, as a token of gratitude to those who have done so much for him. . .

All this is true. In fact a child can never repay his parents for whatever they have done for him. But parents need not over-stress this point. Not at the risk of undermining sound and definite principles ruling the parent-child relationship at this stage of life. For nature itself has set a timetable for the youngster to satisfy certain vital, biological urges. There is a time for him to decide on his vocation, a time to love, to marry. . . Long, unnecessary waitings going beyond this limit fixed by nature will surely endanger the future, and perhaps frustrate forever the child's natural quest for happiness. This being so, children will do well in disregarding the elders claims.

By this time parents should realize that they will not stay here forever: that they live for the succeeding generations. Thus, children should be encouraged to look forward, to their own children. It is now the mother's, the father's turn to look backwards, to a past of sacrifice and hard labor joyfully undertaken for the sake of the children. It would be utterly unfair for the parents to spoil at the eleventh hour this unblemished life-record of theirs just for companionship sake. If at the moment of truth selfishness prevails, the elders will pass away leaving behind not a happy generation, but a group of embittered bachelors and forlorn old maids.

Are children supposed to pay back for the expenses incurred during their schooling? There is a growing tendency today among certain type of families to demand from their children an almost peso for peso payment for education that has been given to them. One would think, observes D. Lord, that the

education that parents made possible for their children was a loan. The truth is that the education of the children is an obligation of the parents. So they have no right in demanding an exact money return for every centavo they have spent.

In this country, moreover, this same problem is usually projected in a somewhat different but definite way. There exists a praiseworthy practice, mostly among average and low income families, to send to school one of the children, commonly the eldest, with the understanding that upon graduation, he or she will help in the schooling of at least one brother or sister. This sort of arrangement calls for the cooperation of the whole family. All efforts, most of the income of the family and savings are somehow channelled to this objective. In some way, the child ends up a career with a standing commitment to his parents, brothers and sisters. Seemingly the entire family has a claim over him, a claim the youth should by all means acknowledge and try to honor. However, while affording schooling opportunities to a brother or sister, the youngster must not be placed in jeopardy. The standing demands of the family should in no way frustrate the child's natural rights and justifiable ambitions. Over and above all family commitments, the youth must attend to some private needs of his own that come first in a line of priorities, a future to look at, perhaps a partner waiting for, a family to take care of. . . . The parents and the brood should take time out to ponder first on these natural claims before demanding from him an exact return of the money spent for his education. The family should rather feel fully repayed with the splendid yield of their investment, a career man, the honor of the clan, an asset to the fatherland.

To what extent are children obliged to support the parents? There are cases in which aged, penniless, helpless parents depend exclusively on the support of the children for a decent livelihood. In such instances children will do wrong in getting married while leaving the old folks to starve. Justice demands that the brood care for the destitute parents in these years of scarcity and distress. This is a sacred obligation incumbent upon each member of the family and so it requires the cooperation of all. It is through this mutual and disinterested cooperation that the problem can be given an adequate and fair solution without sacrificing the opportunity for marriage of one of the children.

If any of them, however, volunteers to stay and care for the parents giving up perhaps marriage or even a promising career for the sake of the needy elders, then he is doing a worthy become wholly unnecessary whenever the demand for help and support is solely motivated by selfish reasons, personal convenience or greater comfort.

Aged parents who, notwithstanding the uneasiness and discomfort of their last days on earth, encourage the brood to look forward to a new home, a family of their own, have fully realized the meaning of parenthood and deserve to be commended for a job well done.

Breaking the Deadlock

Any attempt to break the deadlock resulting from the child's refusal to obey and the elders opposition to the union, must be based on the assumption that the youngster should never be deprived of his freedom and personal responsibility in making a decision. The want of parental consent should constitute no objection to the validity of a marriage. The issue centers exclusively on the licitness of the act when the parents reasonably refuse consent or ignore the whole affair altogether.

In many instances reaching a just and satisfactory decision based on the merits of the case becomes extraordinarily difficult if not totally hopeless. The following case could serve to illustrate the validity of this assertion. A young man twenty one years old, falls in love with a charming young girl of the same age who is about to finish her studies. Both agree to get married right after her graduation. The prospective bridegroom considers himself in a sound financial position to set a home and so informs his elders requesting permission to go along with the plans. The parents refuse point blank: "you are too young to settle down." The question now is this: does the young man deserve to be denied a permission he respectfully requests from his parents? Are the couple really too young? When the case was presented to a group of parents for discussion two solutions were offered: those above fifty favored the refusal of consent, while those below thirty were in favor of the union.

Obviously this diversity of views brings both parents and children to a standstill where the timely intervention of a third party becomes imperative. This person steps in and assumes

the functions of a conciliator. It could be a counselor, a priest or confessor, an experienced person whose mature knowledge of this kind of human affairs will make it worthy of the confidence of both contending parties. His function is limited to guide, not to suppress personal attitudes, nor to make decisions for the individual.

The counselor in formulating his sentence cannot dissociate the reasons advanced by the young couple from the dissenting arguments presented by the parents. The gravity of the objections brought forth by the elders cannot be justly weighed but in the light of those offered by the minors. It is not only the name and honor of the family that are at stake, but perhaps the reputation, the future of the child as well. The obligation he may have contracted should be considered, too. Economical and social differences seldom constitute a solid ground to warrant refusal of consent. The youngster is not marrying the family but the person. However, a fact cannot be overlooked, namely, that by marrying the person one marries into the family, and this family may in the last analysis turn into a source of trouble during marriage. Married life, on the other side, will surely offer many other occasions of strife, and so it does not seem necessary to begin by putting them into the wedding bouquet.

The possibility of greater evils, as in the case of an impending civil marriage or sinful concubinage does not necessarily justify the marriage of minors without parental approval. It is the counselor's concern to determine when a marriage should be carried out notwithstanding the well founded objections of the parents. In so doing he is forced to choose the lesser of two evils: the imminent danger of an unlawful union and a shameful life in concubinage over the lesser evil of disrespect towards the elders. In such cases the counselor will do well in overruling the parental objections even if based on solid, valid grounds.

There are instances, moreover, when the counselor may deem the parental dissent logical and just. Then all plans for a future wedding should be temporarily withheld, at least for a time while the elders, aware of the situation, refuse to yield to the youngster's demands. Such stern position has to be adopted mostly in countries where civil law upholds the parental right to object to the marriage of minors under the pain of nullity.

In all cases the youth should be properly trained to face situations of this sort. Obviously young couples need not take notice of parental objections when these are clearly unfounded. Whenever the parental dissent is based on good, sound motives, as it often happens, it will be wise as well as respectful, not necessarily to give into the elders insistence, but at least to give the matter a second or even a third thought. No man is a good judge in his own cause, and others, mainly parents, may have a clearer and fairer vision especially on these matters.

It takes two persons to establish a dialogue, but marriage conflicts between parents and children will seldom be solved without the realistic and unbiased intervention of a third person. Both parents and children need the advice of a counselor, and both will in the long range of the years benefit from his decisions. Marriage counseling cannot be and should not be one-sided. The youngsters must be properly and adequately prepared to face the problems and hardships of married life, but the role of the parents can in no way be disregarded if they want their children to live happily ever after.