TEACHING SOCIOLOGY OF THE FAMILY FROM A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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In today’s post-marriage culture, young people can benefit from the Church’s teachings on marriage and the family. In this paper, I discuss how to teach a college-level sociology of the family from a Catholic perspective. Cynical attitudes toward marriage and their behavioral outcomes (i.e., “hook ups” or short, sexual liaisons) make teaching challenging. However, students still express a desire for long-term, happy marriages and want to hear a hopeful message about marriage. The benefits of drawing on current theological and social scientific research while still adhering to magisterial teaching on the family is emphasized.

The state of the family has been a central focus of the pontificate of John Paul II. Many Catholic scholars have expressed alarm regarding the state of the family, noting increasing rates of cohabitation, divorce, and pre-marital childbearing, etc. – all signs that the family is in decline. While social scientists have noted the economic and material costs of family breakdown (National Marriage Project, 2004; Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Whitehead, 1996), the pope has discussed the spiritual costs of government intrusion into – and lack of support for – the family, which he calls a “community of life and love” (1998/1981: 163). Furthermore, he points to the breakdown of the family as a main factor behind the culture of death (2001/1995). Importantly, social scientific research indicates that family decline extends beyond the structural breakdown of the traditional nuclear family, to the level of attitudes regarding what constitutes a normative marriage and family life. Thus, some social scientists assert that our society has entered a “post-marriage” culture, in which many people consider marriage to be irrelevant, or even harmful, to individual well-being and happiness (Glenn, 1996; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). These considerations underline the importance of spreading the Church’s teachings on marriage and the family. In this paper, I’m going to talk about how to teach a college-level sociology of the family class.

The challenges of teaching today’s students
A couple of factors make teaching a Catholic sociology of the family especially challenging. The first is that the average college
student was born in the early to mid 1980s, and thus was raised in the post marriage culture. In contrast, most college instructors were born prior to the 1970s, and thus experienced traditional family life of the 1950s and 1960s, either as adults or as children. Thus, while the average instructor remembers a time when a stable family life was normative in the United States, most university students have been raised in a culture in which marriage is widely considered to be merely one lifestyle option among many, equally viable options, including cohabitation, single parenthood, same-sex unions, etc. (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

This causes two related problems. On the one hand, students are often offended by empirical data showing the financial, health, and social benefits of marriage because they interpret it as a negative appraisal of individuals living in alternative family situations. For example, students who were raised in divorced, single, or cohabiting families may feel personally attacked when instructors present research findings showing that as adults, children raised in non-traditional homes experience poorer quality interpersonal relationships, don’t go as far in school, make less money, etc., than children raised in intact homes (for summaries of this research, see Doherty et al., 2002; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). On the other hand, students may be so far removed from even the idea of a stable, happy home life that they have difficulty comprehending the material presented. This latter problem is often overlooked because lack of disagreement is easily mistaken for acceptance. In reality, seemingly acquiescent students may be missing the depth of what the instructor is trying to communicate. This can be seen in subtle differences in how students and instructors define key terms. For example, students may agree that marriage calls for sacrifice, but while the Catholic instructor defines sacrifice as total self-gift, careful probing may show that students conceptualize sacrifice as a mutual exchange (“I’ll make a sacrifice if he makes a sacrifice”). Thus, students may view marriage more in contractual terms than in familial terms of shared life and sacrificial giving (Sorokin, 1942). For individuals growing up in our secular culture, the notion of giving totally of oneself without demanding anything in return may be simply incomprehensible. Helping students to understand the radical nature of the Church’s teachings on marriage is a special challenge for teachers.

Another challenging aspect of teaching family sociology for the Catholic instructor is that students are often cynical regarding the possibility of marital success. Studies show that while young adults want to marry, they doubt that they will be able to establish one, lifelong marriage (National Marriage Project, 2004). Studies of children from
divorced families show that while young people don’t like their parents’ divorce, they often feel resigned to the situation, and hopeless regarding the ability of their own generation to be more successful in marriage (Marquardt, 2001; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). One consequence of this pessimism is that students are increasingly relying on quick, no-commitment sexual liaisons (“hooking up”), rather than trying to build lasting relationships during their high school and college years. Indeed, studies show that they spend a great deal of time planning their careers and financial future, and relatively little time planning for marriage (Marquardt, 2001). The cynicism of students is compounded by family scholars who ridicule the desire for a stable, two parent family as unrealistic, or even as oppressive to women and minorities (Coontz, 1992; Stacey, 1996). Even the solid empirical findings of the past 40 years demonstrating the detrimental effects of divorce are being reframed or explained away by family scholars who shift focus to the “resilient” child who does well after his parents’ divorce, or who present family hardship as “character-building” (Hetherington, 2002).

These dating practices and anti-marriage attitudes, so common on college and university campuses, may undermine the long-term ability of students to establish happy, long-lasting marriages. However, surveys show that students still believe that marriage is important and still want to marry (Glenn, 1996; National Marriage Project, 2004). One indication that students have not accepted attempts to redefine the family is that despite 30 years of anti-marriage propaganda, young people persist in defining “family” as the traditional nuclear family of two married parents and their biological children. For example, studies show that children in stepfamilies typically do not define the stepparent as their “real” parent, even when they have more contact with and are better treated by the stepparent than by their biological parent (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). In my years teaching the sociology of the family, I’ve also noticed that even students who seem pessimistic about marriage still hope they will “beat the odds” and become happily married themselves. The desire for stable marriage in young people seems unquenchable, and indicates that students are hungry for information that will help them establish happy, successful marriages.

Teaching a Catholic sociology of the family

So, how do we teach a Catholic sociology of the family? The first, and overriding consideration is that we must remain within the bounds of magisterial teachings with regard to faith and morals (Barilleaux, 1998; Krason, 1996). The period since Vatican II, and especially the pontificate of John Paul II, is particularly rich in
teachings on family life, including sexuality, pro-life issues, contraception, parenting, and gender roles (Pope John Paul II, 1988; 1994; 1995; 1997; 1998/1981; 2001/1995; Wojtyla, 1981). Adhering to the teachings of the magisterium is not a limitation of the freedom of social scientific inquiry (Krason, 1996). Rather, guided by the Holy Spirit, magisterial teachings serve to broaden intellectual horizons and are a rich source of insight into family life. In addition, while always remaining within the bounds of magisterial teachings, we should also draw on current theological and social scientific material. One example is the work of theologians who, citing the famous passage from Ephesians in which St. Paul likens the marital relationship to the relationship between God and the Church, have suggested that the family images the Trinity (Hahn, 2002). Among other things, this image has important ramifications for conceptualizing gender in marriage. It suggests that just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons constituting a single Godhead, marriage also consists of a distinction-within-unity, in which each person is a complete, whole human being who becomes unified with the spouse in marriage. This conceptualization corrects the impression of many that marital unity means that each spouse is incomplete without the other – a half-person who needs the partner to attain wholeness. Instead, a husband or wife becomes more fully him or herself, as a gendered person, in relationship with the spouse (Pope John Paul II, 1994; McCarthy, forthcoming).

A second consideration in teaching a Catholic marriage and family class is that the social science should be built on a foundation of philosophy, especially a realist philosophy (i.e., Aristotle) that posits an objective reality independent of the observer (Krason, 1996). There are a number of advantages to doing this. First, philosophy leads us to ask the “big” questions. Some of the more obvious questions in a marriage and family class are: what is marriage? What is family? How is sexual difference manifested in marriage? In an age when social constructivist assumptions dominate the social sciences, we often neglect to ask these basic questions. Second, realist philosophy posits that man has a nature and an ultimate destiny. This perspective provides a framework that directs the class beyond mere statistical descriptions of family life to consider man’s ultimate end. What kind of family is best suited to man’s inherent nature? How does marriage and family help persons to attain their final destiny? One example of work done in this area is the application of Aquinas’s theory of virtues to marriage and family (Jeffries, 2002a; 2002b).

A third consideration is that we should not simply disregard the methods and procedures of secular social science (Krason, 1996).
What John Paul II said about philosophy in *Fides et Ratio* also applies to the social sciences: they are autonomous disciplines with their own theories, methods, and procedures. While the secular social sciences contain much that is contrary to Catholic teaching, especially in the area of marriage and family, they also contain a great deal that is consistent with and elucidates Catholic social thought. For example, there is a great deal of social scientific data testifying to the negative effects of divorce on adults, children, and society as a whole (for a summary see Hetherington, 2002). While these empirical findings support the Church’s prohibition of divorce, they also raise an additional consideration. That is, how should the social scientific and faith elements of a Catholic marriage and family class be jointly presented? Again, referring to the Pope’s discussion of the relationship of theology and philosophy in *Fides et Ratio*, one can say that the faith considerations must precede and provide a context for the social science. This may seem a minor point, but the ordering of material has a surprising effect on how it is interpreted. For example, the Catholic instructor should start a class on divorce by discussing the Church’s teaching on the indissolubility and sacramental nature of marriage. Then, the social scientific findings on the effects of divorce should be presented to show the natural consequences of failing to follow those teachings. The reverse ordering – the empirical findings followed by the Church’s teachings – gives the impression that one should follow the Church’s teachings in order to avoid the negative effects of divorce. This taps into a utilitarian mindset that is contrary to the Church’s teaching on the self-donating, sacrificial nature of marital love.

Finally, as instructors of Catholic marriage and family, it is important that we not allow the claims and arguments of anti-marriage critics to define or limit our subject matter. Social scientists have been addressing the breakdown of the American family at least since the Second World War (Leclercq, 1941; Schmiedeler, 1947; Zimmerman, 1947). Students are aware of social changes occurring in the family – the push to legalize same-sex unions, the high divorce rate, the prevalence of single-parent families, etc. – and are aware that these changes are controversial. Thus, the instructor can’t simply present the teachings of the Church on marriage and family, but must also address the claims of those who advocate alternative family arrangements. Students want answers regarding controversial family issues; indeed, one of the benefits of the Church is that she possesses the fullness of truth, and thus can satisfy students’ desire for understanding. However, there is also a danger of the class becoming overly focused on addressing problems in the family. One potential problem is that the
instructor can become trapped in the mental framework of anti-marriage critics, thus compromising his or her presentation of the material. For example, in an effort to counteract excessive individualism in marriage (i.e., the tendency to focus on satisfying individual needs at the expense of couple needs), an instructor may overemphasize marital unity, neglecting the distinction-within-unity that characterizes the husband – and – wife relationship, and failing to communicate that each spouse is a full person in relationship with the partner (Leclercq, 1941; McCarthy, forthcoming).

**Conclusion**

Young people desire to know the truth about marriage and the family – a desire that is not satisfied by secular social science. Despite thirty years of anti-family propaganda from cultural and educational elites, the desire of young people for traditional family life seems unquenchable. Indeed, the persistence of this yearning provides some of the best evidence we have that the need for a stable family life is constitutive of human nature. As Catholic social scientists, we possess the truth given us through the teachings of the Catholic Church. We are thus in a unique position to counteract the effects of the culture of death, and to give young people hope for their future family life.

**References**


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