

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 3/4, 2009

Introduction

A man was talking to a friend about his home life. He said: "I have a wonderful marriage. There's only one problem, my wife's memory." The friend asked: "You mean she forgets things?" The man said "No, the problem is she remembers everything."

Today's *readings* are clearly about marriage. However they are about more than that. Klaus Westerman, a respected commentator on the Book of *Genesis*, says today's *first reading* illustrates the truth that ordinarily we can only become *fully human* by living in community. Marriage is the most *fundamental* form of community life, but this passage applies to community life in general. In fact, as Vatican II stated, just as the inner life of God is that of three Persons living totally for each other in perfect unity, so we, who are made in the image of God, grow and flourish as human beings by committing ourselves to others in community life. The growth that we get by living as members of a community is called *the common good*. The neglect of the common good is one of the greatest threats to marriage today. So I want to say something about it.

The Common Good

The common good is the good that each of us gets by being part of a particular community, and that we can get *only* by being part of that community. Suppose all of us are stranded on a desert island, and the only way we can get off the island is by having a big seaworthy boat. So we form ourselves into a boat-building society. We give each person a particular task to do, like cutting down trees, making rope, and so on, and we draw up a work schedule. The common good of that boat-building society is the boat. That is the good we can get only by being part of that society, and it requires some personal sacrifice from us. So it is with every human community. Each community has its own common good which the members receive only by making the sacrifices required of them in that community. In this sense the community we call marriage brings its members a particular human good they would never have otherwise, a good that ideally enables them to develop into better humans.

The Modern Attack on the Common Good

There is a widespread mentality today that is a terrible threat to the common good, and therefore to marriage. It is called *individualism*, and it consists in pursuing only our *purely private wants*. It is at the heart of the political movement known as neo-conservatism. No one has expressed that individualistic spirit more clearly than former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who made the outrageous statement: "There is no such thing as society. There are only individuals."

Here is a story to illustrate the spirit of individualism. Many years ago, two things happened about the same time.

In Detroit the head of General Motors made a speech in which he said: "What is good for General Motors is good for the nation." In Brooklyn, Jackie Robinson, the first black player in major league baseball, was moved by his team from third base to left field. When asked what he thought of this move, Jackie said: "What is good for the Brooklyn Dodgers is good for Jackie Robinson." The difference in attitudes is clear. The head of GM displayed individualism, while Jackie Robinson defended the common good. Apply that difference in attitudes to marriage and the results are clear. If a person enters marriage seeking only his or her private good, that marriage is in danger of collapse. If people enter marriage instead ready to sacrifice individual wants for the sake of their union, they will enjoy a common good, a new kind of life. This is what the Book of *Genesis* calls becoming two in one flesh.

Our Life as Members of the Church Can Help us Recover a Sense of the Common Good

The author of the book of *Genesis* goes to some length to show that *both* Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden. He wants to emphasize that it was the entire *human community* that took a wrong turning here. We are born into that human community, and so from the day of our birth we absorb the wrong attitudes that are the result of that wrong turning. We grow up with attitudes of selfishness, for example, that we absorb from that community.

When we were baptized we were received into a new and different community, the Christian community, in which the Risen Christ lives. Within that community we receive the guidance and the helps to live a radically different kind of life, a life in which we seek not our purely private good, but the common good of each group to which we belong, including marriage. When we live that different kind of life we really are salt for our earth and light for our world. This is one of the principal reasons why we confess our sins to a priest. For when we pursue our purely individual wants and act in self-centered ways, we betray the common good, we let down the other members of our faith-community. So we need to make peace both with that community and with Jesus Christ, who is present in that community. We do that when we confess to the priest, who represents both the community and Christ.

Conclusion

Married life requires the sacrifice of many private wants, but it gives in return a share in a whole new kind of life. Whether we are married or not, all of us participate in many communities: the political community, our work community, perhaps a school. In each case, there is a great common good we can get from each of those communities, but only by making the personal sacrifices required in order to participate fully in the life of those communities and so to help them achieve their goals.