

How the Eucharist is the symbol of God's unfailing love

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ourselves. It is the world of love, of faith, of being part of something greater than ourselves. It is an echo of the divine within us. It needs to be expressed in some way. We are ready to accept as valid the mystical experiences we have that science cannot put under a microscope. Our union, or better, our communion with God is such an experience. We discover it in moments of silence, in contemplation, and in a very real sense, in adoration of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.

We have often been reminded of the dangers of the New Age, and rightly so. New Age practices give rituals, gemstones, crystals and the rest, powers that properly belong to God. However let us not reject the mystical search that lies behind the New Age. We, too, are drawn by the power of the mystical path to plumb the depths of God's love of us. Perhaps our own embrace of our mystical selves can be a tool of evangelising those whose mystical search stops short of God.

The Eucharist and Christian marriage

LET US bring all this into the heart of this Eucharistic Congress to reflect on the relationship between marriage and the Eucharist. I will try to impart what our most recent popes have said on the subject, the late Pope John Paul II and our present Pope Benedict XVI. I say "impart" because their thoughts are very profound and are the fruit of years of theological and academic reflection.

Pope John Paul II wrote in *Familiaris Consortio* in 1981 "that God in himself lives a mystery of personal loving communion". He goes on to say that if we are created in the image of God, we also have the capacity and the obligation of love and communion. To love, therefore, becomes the vocation of every human person, and in marriage especially, involving as it does, the human body as well as the human spirit.

Thus he sanctifies the intimate love and embrace of husband and wife in marriage as they give themselves totally to each other. This is the image of God's love for us, as St Paul taught.

The Holy Father points to the role of the Eucharist in the life of the family. Not only does the Eucharist nourish marriage and family life and deepen its union with Christ, it also includes the aspect of sacrifice, which is central to our understanding of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is a representation of Christ's sacrifice of love for the Church, and was sealed with his blood on the cross. The Eucharist is the source of

strength for couples who know without exception that committed love requires a spirit of self-sacrifice, freely and joyfully given.

The knowledge that Jesus' love for us involved the ultimate price empowers and motivates couples to fully commit themselves to their vocation as spouses and parents, no matter what the cost.

We turn to the exhortation of Pope Benedict XVI called "Sacramentum Caritatis" or the Sacrament of Love, meaning of course, the Blessed Eucharist. It could also mean the Sacrament of Matrimony, which is also a Sacrament of Love.

The Holy Father argues thus – If the Eucharist is the abiding sign of the covenantal love between God and the Church, that love is indissoluble - it will never be broken. It cannot be broken because God is always faithful to his promises.

Christian marriage must therefore be indissoluble if the love of God for his Church is to be compared to it. "What God has joined together let no one put asunder: (Mk 10:9)

The Eucharist, symbol of God's unfailing love, is also the symbol of the unfailing love of Christian marriage. It also provides the strength and the grace to nourish the marriage.

The Holy Father goes on to say that the force of this teaching reveals its "radical newness". It reveals how different Christian marriage really is compared to the diversity of human relationships we see around us. It is new in its permanence and in the quality of the union between husband and wife. We are speaking of God's original plan which was modified by Moses, as

Jesus said, because of their hardness of heart. Jesus restored the marriage bond as it was meant to be.

The hardness of the human heart has not changed much. Marriage continues to fail because of it. Sin enters and causes huge damage.

Nevertheless we must call people to a higher vision despite human weakness, and point to the Blessed Eucharist as the source of strength and grace, and the very presence of the healing Lord within the life of the family.

The pastoral problems facing the Church and its pastors when marriages break up are very real, says the Holy Father. At the same time the pastors must offer guidance that respects the truth, and urge people in painful situations to continue to attend Mass and to pray for an answer

that respects the truth, knowing that they have in our Eucharistic Lord a compassionate Saviour.

Fruitful marriage

THE respect of truth must extend also to the matter of children. Truth is not respected when couples defy church teaching on contraception. It sets up an inner conflict which undermines faith, and causes mistrust of Christ's mandate to teach on matters of human sexuality. It undermines one's own prayer-life and eventually our trust in God.

The wisdom of the world has chosen to ignore, even ridicule Catholic teaching on the matter of openness to children, and has taken a different and tragic path. Artificially separating sex from its possible consequences has led to the separation of sex from marriage itself and has led to the proliferation of casual unions, to the exploitation of young women, to false hopes that sexual activity will lead to love, and to the abandonment of marriage by millions of people around the world.

Faced with this, the Church can either compromise and face irrelevance, or continue to teach Christ's truth about marriage, life and love, and pray that the world will listen.

Let me tell you some of the things I have heard lately that have shaken me.

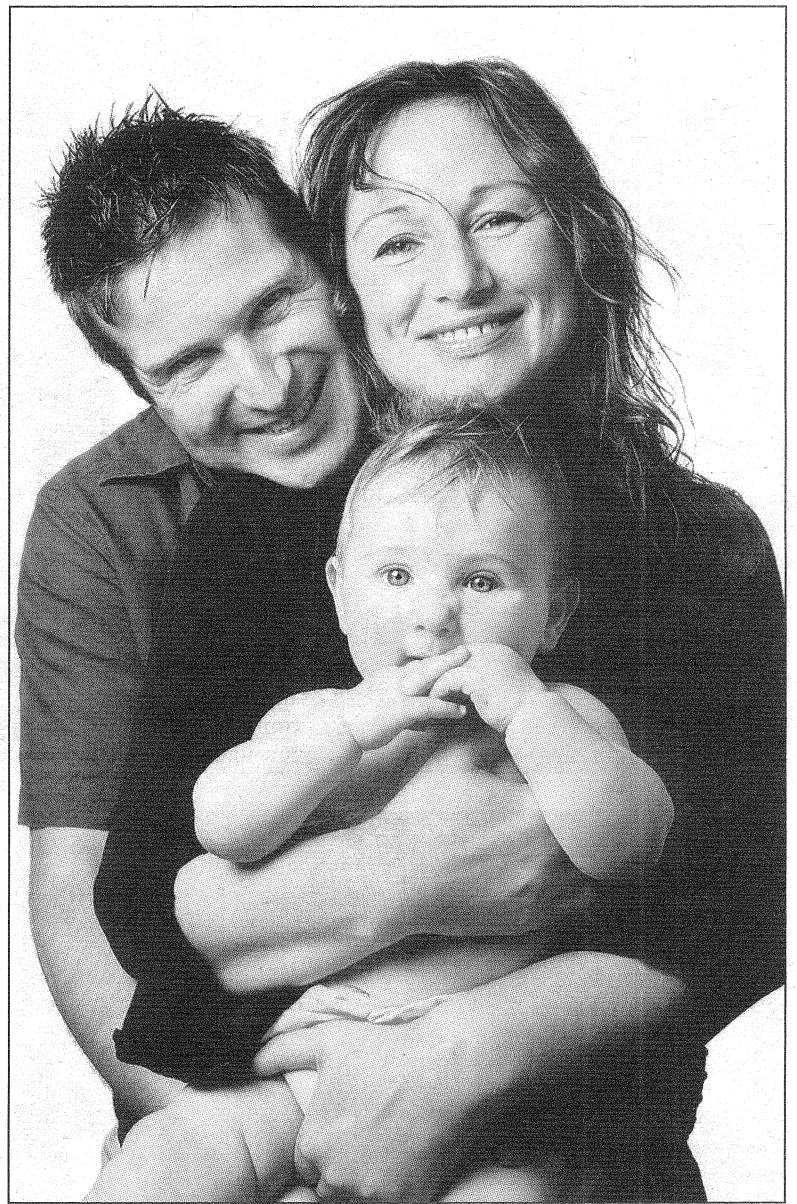
Around the Western world today there are educators pushing for an entirely new education programme for children. They are looking for support from education departments around the world and from the United Nations. In some countries it is already being trialled.

These teachers want to take over sex education from the parents because they want a complete break from the past. Teachers in one country I know

are now telling young people before puberty to become sexually aware and to experiment.

At puberty they are urged to become sexually active as soon as possible or they will grow up with inhibitions, fears of sex and will have psychological problems. They are to be fully instructed in contraception and abortion as ways of continuing to enjoy a full sexual life. They are told to prefer serial unions of choice rather than marriage, and to severely limit the numbers of children, as the world is overpopulated.

They are to be trained to deny gender differences of male and female as these are only social constructs. They are told that



homosexuality is a legitimate sexual outlet, and often preferable because children do not come from their sexual activities.

We might bemoan the tragic slide from traditional values, but what is happening today is far worse.

What we condemn is now being taught to children as the way to a happy sexually satisfied life.

This new paganism has arrived and without proper vigilance will spread throughout the world. Church leaders will no doubt protest when this new program is out in the open. They will need to be very courageous because the work of Satan is so pernicious that they may well face laws, already enacted in some countries, where it is against the law to propagate our own Catholic moral teachings.

The position is very serious, but we know that Christ has already won the victory over Satan and we go forward without backing down.

Immediate problems

ONLY a few years ago one could safely assume that our understanding of marriage was generally accepted.

Not so today. Things have changed radically. Increasingly marriage is being promoted as only one of the many options in human sexual relationships. Recent years have witnessed a sharp rise in cohabitation before marriage. These so-called partnerships are even taking the place of marriage.

Adding to this is the pressure to change the very definition of marriage from a union of a man and a woman to a union of two persons of the same sex. The ideal of Christian marriage is under great threat.

The much publicised romances and brief marital unions of so-called "idols" of screen and

television only contribute to the trivialisation of marriage. The availability of easy divorce undermines the strength of commitment that true marriage requires and encourages the view that marriage is no longer a permanent contract.

Consider the children

ONE must be concerned about the increasing number of children who are born out of marriage and those who grow up in single parent families, often without a father. When the relationship breaks down the father is generally the one who has to live away from the children. While such a situation calls for compassion and understanding, it is not ideal.

Given the stresses on modern marriage many children are sadly caught in the crossfire of hostility between their parents. This often does not cease if the marriage or relationship breaks down.

In the search for happiness in a second marriage or in a 'partnership', success is not guaranteed either for the spouses or for the children. The breakdown rate of second and subsequent marriages is higher than for first marriages. Children are the victims of adult behaviour.

Large numbers of children are taken into care by the state today because the family unit can no longer cope. The tragic damage to children who grow up in dysfunctional families affected by violence or drugs has been catalogued many times. Sadly, too, fostering does not always succeed.

Children manifest their distress in forms of mental illness, anti-social behaviour, and too often, tragically, in suicide.

Studies have shown that cohabitation before marriage

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