

Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time October 10, 2010 C

THE CASE FOR GETTING MARRIED YOUNGER

The following article by John Van Epp appeared in the September 2010 issue of *US Catholic*.

It was the end of my junior year of college, and I was considering marrying the woman of my dreams. My father questioned the wisdom of marrying so young (even though he was even younger when he married my mother), but I reassured him that we had come to deeply know and love each other over the last two years and that we wanted to go through life together, starting right away. I explained that we did not want to become “established” and then get married; we wanted to go through that adventure together.

We married the summer before my senior year with little money, a tiny apartment, and endless dreams of our future. Thirty years later, my wife and I are still thankful that we made the decision to grow up together through our 20s.

But my father’s apprehension in 1980 has become the trend of this new millennium. In fact, a recent Wall Street Journal article pointed out that some sociologists argue that “early marriage” is the No. 1 predictor of divorce. They encourage young adults to explore their identity, work, and love by delaying marriage and parenthood until their later 20s. They warn that those who fail to postpone these family transitions miss out on better career opportunities, make poorer choices on partners, and develop more marital problems.

Today the perception is that marriage takes more than it gives and brings a good chance of ending in divorce. It shouldn’t surprise anyone that the median age for one’s first marriage has shifted from the early 20s in 1980 (my decision was the norm at that time) to 28 for men and 26 for women today.

It seems intuitive that age would bring maturity, stability, and better decisions, which would result in more lasting marriages. However, there are a number of risks that work against these later marriages and question the wisdom of this social trend to delay marriage into your 30s.

The starting point is a reconsideration of the claim that early marriages contribute to higher rates of

divorce. There was a study conducted in 2002 by Tim Heaton that did find high rates of marital instability associated with young marriages, but the risks were with teen marriages. The impact that age had on predicting marriage outcomes leveled off around age 21 with age making little difference for those who marry between 21 and 30.

Furthermore, there may actually be increased risks associated with delaying marriage to the end of your 20s or into your 30s. For instance, waiting to get married often leads to more premarital sex, premarital cohabitation, and premarital births, which are all associated with higher rates of marital instability. In addition, there is a smaller selection pool as you reach your early 30s (by age 30, 75 percent of the population are married). At that point, the chances of achieving a quality relationship lower because of the difficulty with finding a suitable partner.

These risks are often overlooked because of a prevalent attitude today that is quite dangerous and misleading: what you experience in one relationship has no bearing on what will happen in a subsequent relationship. You could call this “relationship compartmentalization,” where each relationship occurs in its own compartment without any effect on another.

I like to refer to this attitude as “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.” Obviously, this cannot be true because what occurs in relationships, no matter how insignificant, carries some measure of influence on you, the way you think, and what you take into your next relationship. As scripture says in what is both an encouragement and a warning, “You reap what you sow”.

A sobering example of this was found in the research on women by Jay Teachman from Western Washington University. He showed that premarital involvement with just one sexual partner other than the person a woman eventually married tripled the risk of divorce as compared with those who had only had sex with their husband.

A second example of present relationship decisions affecting future relationship practices was a study that found a clear connection between the number of sexual partners before marriage and the likelihood of marital

unfaithfulness; each additional sexual partner before marriage resulted in a significant increase in the risk of having an affair after marriage.

These are just two examples from an extensive body of research that supports the continuity of relationship experiences. And yet these research findings seem to get lost on library shelves without reshaping the current practices in our dating culture.

Several researchers examining the attitudes toward first marriage of 800 young adults ages 19 through 26 use the term “marital horizon” to talk about what young adults think is the ideal age for getting married. They found that having a more distant marital horizon was directly related to more risky premarital beliefs and behaviors.

Today more than 65 percent of married couples say they cohabited before marriage. Yet there is no evidence that living together before marriage will improve the quality of your marriage or lower your odds of divorce. However, most do not realize that those who live together with just one partner other than the one they marry may increase their risk of divorce by 15 percent.

The point is that one’s attitude toward marriage during the dating years will affect relationship practices. And what happens in relationships today will affect any future marriage. For better or for worse, the principle that “you reap what you sow” holds true.

How can we support marriage and stop the rising age of marriage? Societal attitudes will have to change, but that starts with individuals deciding to date in ways that will honor their future spouse and marriage.

Reggie walked into my counseling office when he had just turned 23 years old. He was the personification of the current dating attitude that marriage was nowhere in sight and hooking up had no future consequences. However, the accumulation of his highly accelerated and sexually charged relationship had left him feeling empty and alone.

After several months of exploring his past relationship patterns, he decided to delay sexual involvement until he married and to build more serious friendships and romantic relationships with his goal of having a fulfilling marriage on his horizon.

When we met again four years later, he had just become engaged to Renee and thought it would be good to meet together and make sure their relationship was ready for marriage.

In one of our sessions Renee asked me if I thought Reggie’s past would affect him in their marriage. In other words, was it too late for Reggie? I told them that we are creatures of habit and Reggie made changes in

his romantic relationships that created new habits and patterns. He “sowed” four years of new habits that will reap better results in his future marriage than if he had continued his previous lifestyle to the edge of his relationship with Renee.

Romantic relationships before marriage should be enjoyed—but this can be done in ways that benefit a future marriage. There is hope, promised in scripture and backed by research, for both the Renees and Reggies in the world. But it takes a commitment to attitudes and behaviors beneficial to marriage long before the wedding bells ring.

Feedback

The reason young people should wait to get married is ...

After the mid-20s they begin to sort out what is important in a spouse, spirituality, family, work ethic, and so forth.

Father Gregory Chamberlin, 71 Evansville, IND

If you don’t feel like an adult on your own, you have no business combining your life with another adult.

Name withheld, 23 Clinton, MD

Sometimes you’re not mature enough to get married or have kids. You need to be financially stable and ready for commitment. *Jordan Stratton, 14, Kansas City, MO*

I’ve seen too many young couples grow apart or give up their personal goals and dreams in order to keep the relationship together, which causes unhappiness and resentment later on.

Angelique Flores, 33, Long Beach, CA

The reason young people shouldn’t wait to get married is ...

Earlier marriage allows the spouses to grow and mature in their careers and spirituality together, which will make them more compatible.

Helen Lee, 20, New York, NY

There’s too much temptation if they choose to wait too long. *Name withheld, 30, Independence, MO*

Years of singleness can make selfishness a habit that is hard to break. *Name withheld, 23, Princeton, NJ*

Young adult Catholics don’t live in a vacuum, of course—most are influenced by what’s going on in society. When it comes to marriage, however, that influence is mostly negative.

In 2007 the National Marriage Project's annual "State of our Unions" report focused on the future of marriage and, in particular, the attitudes and practices of young adults.

The statistics are stark: The U.S. marriage rate suffered a 24-percent drop between the early 1990s and early 2000s. In the same period non-marital cohabitation jumped 49 percent and the non-marital birthrate climbed 24 percent. In 1987 just 17 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds did not agree that they had "old-fashioned values about family and marriage," and by 2007 that number was 31 percent.

And an annual study of high school seniors found that, in 2005, more than 55 percent of teenagers accepted out-of-wedlock childbearing as a "worthwhile lifestyle," close to 60 percent agree or mostly agree that living together before getting married is usually a good idea, and only about 35 percent say they agree or mostly agree that most people will have fuller and happier lives if they choose legal marriage rather than staying single or just living with someone.

In some ways, these bleak statistics may work in the church's favor. Julie and Todd Zasada have been married 12 years and have three young sons. Although they're both cradle Catholics, they only started going to Mass regularly after they were engaged because they wanted to get married in the church. After their kids were born, however, Sundays became harder to get through, and "it became a reason not to go," says Todd, 36 then, four years ago, "Our marriage hit the rocks, and we were in uncharted waters," says Julie, 33.

Both came from families with divorce, and they didn't feel they had the role models or the tools they needed. "When we looked around at our friends and relatives [who had gone through divorce], we didn't see enough happiness in separation," says Todd. "We knew we didn't want that." Instead, in a last-ditch effort, they turned back to the church. After they joined a parish, Julie stumbled across a daylong workshop on the theology of the body, and "everything came together."

"When we started embracing what the church taught, our marriage started to flourish," says Julie. "It's been better than I ever imagined." Now the Zasadas co-chair the Catholic Family Institute at their parish, St. John the Evangelist, near Merrillville, Indiana. They're also a presenting couple for Retroville, a program for couples in trouble marriages, and recently became certified to teach Natural Family Planning. "We're trying to fight for marriage. It's a lonely struggle at times. There's very little in our popular culture that supports being together when times get tough."

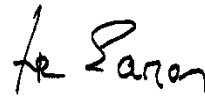
Todd says his own views have taken "nearly a 180° turn" in the last few years. "We practiced contraception. We had sex before marriage. A lot of the things regular culture said were OK, when we thought about it, we couldn't come up with a good answer for what we thought before."

Julie has likewise been transformed. While her former thinking on church teaching was "It's not for me," now, she says, "Whatever the church teaches on marriage, I want to learn it and I want to live it."

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Consider sharing this with your children or/and grandchildren.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Aaron". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.