

WHY DO COUPLES GET MARRIED?

Many couples now co-habit and there is even a demand for heterosexual couples to be allowed to enter into civil partnerships rather than civil marriages. However David Cameron, the U.K. Prime Minister, and others are suggesting that marriage, civil or religious, provides for greater stability rather than living together without marriage.

In a recent letter to the Church Times (22nd. February 2013) the Revd. Angela Tilby wrote that "(society is harmed) if marriage is not encouraged amongst couples who are living together, since those who don't marry may not have the same commitment to each other as those who do, and that unmarried parents are also less likely to continue to live together than those who marry."

In this article, I hope to reinforce this message of social stability through marriage on behalf of the Church of Ireland Marriage Council.

The history of Irish marriage is very different than in Britain since in previous generations couples have married much younger and have stayed together – sometimes in unhealthy relationships – through thick and thin. This is mainly due to that promise made in the marriage ceremony – "for better or for worse, till death us do part", but also due to loyalty, and pride and what would the neighbours think if they separated.

The other important factor was that most women had to give up work when they married in 1940s,1950s and even in 1960s and so were financially dependent on their husbands. This was fine if that husband was loving and giving and didn't try to control his wife through the household budget or other unhealthy methods. If that were the case their chances of leaving were very curtailed, and they felt trapped.

There was no civil divorce in the Irish Republic till 1997; there was annulment which was also controversial as to where it left the children; an Irish solution to an Irish problem?

So would this put young people off getting married? Perhaps it did when they witnessed abuse or were badly treated themselves by a parent. However the introduction of divorce meant that those unhappy couples could separate and divorce eventually if they wished and could afford it. Quite often young adult children were relieved when this happened but both preteens and teens would need counselling where possible. Divorce is a long process in the Irish Republic but, would mean that that person would have the option of marrying again, in a civil ceremony only, in the Roman Catholic Church, whereas in the Church of Ireland couples can remarry in church, following a divorce for one or both partners, but only after a full discussion around their previous marriage and causes of break-up, with their rector. He will give permission after seeking further counsel from the Bishop of that diocese.

Of course, there were, and still are, many happy couples who have remained married through the years and are now grandparents enjoying that rewarding role and important bond with the youngest generation.

However, in this generation of couples, both partners need to work and share the financial burden equally. This is usually very necessary, since they have a big mortgage to cover as well as a high cost of living, alongside childcare later on. Sadly for many

these days, one partner may be made redundant while the other, quite often the woman, holds down her job. Hence one sees more Dads wheeling prams or buggies and doing the supermarket shopping on their own. Whether they marry or not these are the realities of today in recession times where the bubble has burst in the Irish Republic.

So why do couples decide to marry? - and they do! - and hence come for Marriage Preparation before they celebrate their Big Day?

Of those couples I have met who come to me for a Marriage Preparation Course, on a one to one basis, 98% aprox. are already living together and a small number of couples may have a child or two already. The majority are hoping to start having a family once they are married. The average age of couples I have met who are getting married is 30 years. Some in their mid-twenties and some mid to late thirties. They have already made a commitment to each other in setting up home together, and have ironed out the teething problems of who doesn't stack the dishwasher right or put the toilet seat down. Also they usually have a good system going for household chores.

Most couples have good financial arrangements, and agree to share the burden and budgeting that is very necessary in today's recession. It is a very important area for each to feel independent and not controlled by the other. This discussion encourages them to have a joint account for the utility bills and their mortgage - if they need one and are fortunate enough to get one - while keeping their independent accounts as well so they can spoil themselves and each other when appropriate. The "spender" comes to realise she/he needs to pull back and the "saver" not to be the "parent" in needing to manage their partner.

We discuss the changes when children come along, and how the cost of childcare may impinge on their lifestyle. Some would-be Mums/Dads may opt to take time out from their careers for two or three years. This a big decision, because that parent, usually the woman, would not want to feel dependent on their spouse, or afraid to ask for money to spend on themselves and not just the children and home. She would also miss her colleagues and the buzz of being in a job or career she loves. This is also a great sign of the commitment of each partner to their marriage and having a family together; not just thinking of themselves but of the security and love children need.

Some couples I have asked about their feelings on getting married have said that it is like the "icing on the cake" giving them that extra layer of security in an already happy and loving relationship. Also they are able to look forward to coming through the different life-stage challenges as they grow older together, from being a young couple in love to becoming parents hopefully, and if they so wish. By working as a team they cope with all those different phases of parenting from babyhood to adult. Through all this period their hope is to keep their relationship strong with those essential ingredients of best friendship; trust, honesty, respect, consideration as well as love and romance. That is quite an ask of any couple!

The discussion in Marriage Preparation comes round to Communication, which of course has to be the most important area to encourage in a healthy relationship. This includes conflict resolution and listening to each other without a critical retort, or a need to be defensive.

Intimacy is also about good communication and many couples don't understand the importance of closeness, emotional as well as physical, as a part of intimacy. This allows a sharing of hopes, fears, worries and dreams which each needs to do regularly to relieve their various life stress - factors. Couple time at least once a week is encouraged, when they can relax together and have time out. Of course they also need to keep in touch with their friends and support each other in their interests and hobbies, so they can feel free to be themselves as well as happy when together.

I sometimes describe marriage as a boat where both partners are managing the sails and moving forward through heavy seas with their full trust in each other's capabilities and skill. As long as they work as a team they'll survive and come again into calmer waters. Christy Moore sings about this image in his song "The Voyage", which is often sung at weddings.

There are so many couple and marriage dynamics. Sometimes where a couple is remarrying; perhaps both have children already, may be divorced, widowed or widowered and have come through grief and loneliness from their first relationship. They may be protective of themselves at first but gradually they open up to each other and trust and love builds again in this second relationship. This gives them great joy and a wish to commit to what may be a very different marriage and perhaps a happier one. Their respective children need to be shown love and consideration and reassured that the new partner will never replace their parent but they hope to be friends, all in good time. This depends on the ages of their children and "blending" two different families may be difficult, requiring much sensitivity, empathy and tolerance, while the couple maintain their own self-respect and don't feel caught in an emotional web of demands and control. This can make a second marriage difficult if the ex-partner - usually the woman - stays in victim-mode and the new partner feels rejected and part of a triangle, where her husband is being controlled still by his first wife. Counselling is a good choice for these couples to help the husband to stand up to his ex-wife and remember his renewed commitment to support and love the new woman in his life.

In the case of a widow and widower remarrying, they may also find it difficult to overcome the reluctance of their young adult or teenage children to accept their new partner. In some cases these children may not have grieved fully for that parent who died and may still be angry and insecure in themselves. Reassurance, sensitivity and empathy is what is needed here; not to be in too much of a hurry or push that new partner on those young people. Also to let the latter know that the second wife or husband will never, and doesn't want to, replace or act as a parent with their step-children. It may help if those children have more time with their parent on their own and are kept in the loop regarding wedding plans. This can help them feel less rejected and more secure with less jealousy between the siblings in either family.

What about the importance of marriage in Church in terms of the sanctity and spiritual dimension? This is be very important to most couples preparing for marriage and apart from the romance of a fairytale wedding, the ritual of the marriage ceremony, and lighting one candle together is very symbolic of their union and becoming one in the eyes of God.

In the case of interchurch marriages, the couple decides which priest/rector they will approach and their marriage may involve both priests in whichever Church they decide. Thankfully, these couples find the process of marrying much more straightforward in present times. The Roman Catholic Church no longer requires them to sign the NeTemere decree, where they had to bring up the children in the Roman Catholic faith. They may still be asked to promise to do the latter to the best of their ability however which can cause difficulties for them and is discussed with the rector if necessary, to help them understand.

Civil marriage ceremonies are becoming popular now and perhaps there is more honesty in those couples who never go to Church to get married that way. Usually couples say they would like their children to have Christian moral values and would hope to attend Church more often when they have children themselves, and bring the children too.

In conclusion, I'm glad to see that couples are still getting married and the Marriage Council would reiterate that marriage is very important in keeping society stable and couples and children secure. No marriage is perfect but if couples avail of marriage preparation where possible and seek help should they need it, from a professional counselling service or a financial advisory service, one hopes that they will have the strength and resolve to rekindle that flame of love and commitment, as in their marriage vows, going forward in their lives together.

(Article by Mrs Deirdre Whitley, member of the Church of Ireland Marriage Council and qualified Counsellor)