

Marriagelessness and the Loss of National Greatness

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*M*arriage is a battlefield of ordinary heroism, and Americans have become deserters. We put off the fight and give up easily once it has begun. We spend our “best” years on ourselves, saying it will make us better partners, but trade in spouses for new ones. We blame the culture and the economy when our great-grandparents married and stayed married in more difficult circumstances. Sentimentalism blinds us to the obvious solution: Make marriage binding again. Marriage cannot do its work if it remains an impotent shell. And it will remain a shell unless it begins with a promise of permanence and we hold those who make such a promise accountable for fulfilling it.

The more I love humanity in general the less I love man in particular. In my dreams, I often make plans for the service of humanity, and perhaps I might actually face crucifixion if it were suddenly necessary. Yet I am incapable of living in the same room with anyone for two days together.

I know from experience. As soon as anyone is near me, his personality disturbs me and restricts my freedom. In twenty-four hours, I begin to hate the best of men: one because he's too long over his dinner, another because he has a cold and keeps on blowing his nose. I become hostile to people the moment they come close to me.

But it has always happened that the more I hate men individually the more I love humanity.

—Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

In the United States today, the share of never-married adults has more than tripled since 1970, rising from 9 percent to 35 percent.¹ The institution of marriage—if it can be called an institution—has collapsed. At the same time, the meaning of the institution has changed. Has it collapsed because its meaning changed, or did its meaning change as a way for society to come to grips with its collapse? And what effect does its collapse have on national character and national greatness?

Marriage: From “Other-Regarding” to “Self-Regarding”

This change in the meaning of marriage may be roughly characterized as a change from being an *other-regarding* union between a man and a woman for life, for the sake of children, to being *self-regarding* for an individual’s self-actualization. By an “other-regarding institution,” I mean one in which membership in the institution changes a person’s identity such that the person equates his or her well-being with that of the institution and that of others within the institution. By a “self-regarding institution,” I mean one in which well-being is taken to be the same as it was before membership.

While in an other-regarding institution, each member evaluates himself with respect to whether he or she serves the well-being of the institution, in a self-regarding institution, each member evaluates the institution with respect to whether it serves his antecedently identifiable well-being. This paper asks whether marriage can function as other-regarding if it is not taken to be permanent.

Also, does the change in the meaning of marriage from other-regarding to self-regarding tend to improve character or to weaken it? It is not very common today to assess marriage in relation to its effect on character. Yet marriage remains the most effective, commonly available path for learning the practice of living for and with another. In theory, it should lead husbands and wives to become the sorts of persons that they promise to be when they wed.

Marriage demands daily toleration of the other who “disturbs me and restricts my freedom,” as Dostoyevsky’s character laments. And an attitude of daily toleration of the person nearest to us tends to become a habit that overflows into other areas of life. Tolerating shortcomings in a spouse

makes it easier to accommodate the needs of children, accept more readily the annoyances of one's neighbors or coworkers, or persevere in a civic organization whose members may seem inept, grating, or foolish. Marriage habituates its members to love one person in particular and, from that practice, to love a few others too. Viewed this way, marriage may seem a nearly indispensable training ground for some essential social virtues.

The Effect of Divorce on the Meaning of Marriage

But can marriage play such a role if it is not viewed as truly permanent? Once the possibility of divorce is granted, spouses effectively subordinate the union to personal well-being as they evaluate their personal happiness and levels of satisfaction with an eye on the exit. Marriage becomes transformed into a *self-regarding* arrangement. At the same time, the good of any who depend upon that marriage, such as the children, is also subordinated to this private sense of well-being. Such a practice may, like its inverse, overflow into social life. Might not this view of the closest bond lead to assessing neighbors and coworkers too according to whether they contribute to one's private sense of well-being?

Denying the permanence of marriage robs marriage of its character-building power. Participating in marriage with a view to exit may foster self-regarding habits, however unintended, which change the meaning of marriage and change its effect on character. No one gives up valuable goods without some appreciable gain. Marriage with a view to exit (self-regarding marriage) creates no essential change in how a person assesses his well-being before and after. So why commit to exclusivity, foreclose options, and potentially be weighed down with children for something that implies no real change?

In fact, the contemporary retreat from marriage can be seen as a direct result of the liberalization of divorce.

From the spiritual point of view, “unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it bears no fruit” (John 12:24). The Catholic Church drew on this imagery when it cautioned in 1965 that “man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.” Saint Augustine called this gift of self “heroic virtue”—heroic because it demands sacrifice as much as any field of battle does. Humanity in general does not call forth this heroism since humanity, by Dostoevsky's account, makes no real demands. Real demands are made by persons with whom we live for more than two days because we bind ourselves, and understand ourselves to have bound ourselves, to

living with them for all our days. Fleeing from such demands through the legal and cultural liberalization of divorce, America has become, as it were, a nation of cowards.

The individualism that bedevils America is not inherent in our Founding but in our floundering. As W. Bradford Wilcox has written:

By the time the 1970s came to a close, many Americans—rich and poor alike—had jettisoned the institutional model of married life that prioritized the welfare of children, and which sought to discourage divorce in all but the direst of circumstances. Instead, they embraced the soul-mate model of married life, which prioritized the emotional welfare of adults and gave moral permission to divorce for virtually any reason.²

The path to a restored national greatness, it would seem, is found in giving up this disorder in its root manifestation and restoring the institutional power of marriage so that it can resume its role of healing the selfishness of the human condition. Accordingly, an in-principle reconsideration of divorce ought to be part of any new conservative agenda.

Marriagelessness: The State of Things

“Marriagelessness” here refers loosely to a condition in which men and women, single or living together, are not legally bound to continue a domestic society once it has been established, because no court of law or community will hold them to their promise to be one. Therefore, marriagelessness also refers to the “view to exit” mentality implied by the lack of formal commitment.

Marriagelessness includes at least two types of phenomena. The first is that marriage does less of the work that it should—training us to become better, tying us to our children, providing for domestic tranquility, and contributing to national greatness. The second is that people stop participating in the institution: later marriages and fewer marriages. Either this trend “just happened” unaccountably, or, like any good institution, once marriage became warped by rules or practices that damaged its integrity, people stopped participating in it.

For instance, if democratic elections cease to live up to their character of being free and fair, people, if they have a choice, will tend to stop voting because they believe their votes make no difference. When religious institutions are not serious about God, people will tend to stay at home, since attendance makes no difference. Just so for marriage. If it makes no difference, and if it doesn’t make you different, why marry?

Indeed, the share of prime-age Americans (ages 25 to 50) in a *current marriage* has fallen from nearly 90 percent in 1970 to nearly 50 percent today. The rest are mostly never-marrieds at 35 percent; smaller fractions are separated, divorced, or widowed.³ Since the number in a current marriage includes some remarriages, fewer than half of American adults can be counted as *belonging to a permanent domestic union*. And the median age at which men and women first marry is at a century-long high of 30.4 for men and 28.6 for women.⁴

Another way to get at marriagelessness is the number of Americans living alone. Approximately 37 million Americans, nearly 10 percent, live in one-person households—a whopping one-third of all households.⁵ Compare this to 1950 when just four million Americans, about 4 percent, lived alone.⁶ Or to 1850 when just 74,000 Americans, less than 1 percent, lived alone.⁷ “So essential was marriage-based family life,” Andrew Cherlin observes, “that the New England colonies passed laws forbidding people to live alone.”⁸

Today, marriage functions to mark the end, not the beginning, of a journey of self-discovery—it is, at best, a capstone event after a sequence of school, higher education, job, career, travel, and maybe even home ownership. Americans are three to four times more likely to say that a “job or career they enjoy” is essential to a fulfilling life (57 percent of males, 46 percent of females) than they are to say that “being married” is essential to a fulfilling life (16 percent of males, 17 percent of females).⁹

Male Labor Force Participation. Marriagelessness is also reflected in the way that a growing number of prime-working-age men—potential husbands—live their lives. Male labor force participation has been falling for decades from highs near 90 percent in 1950 to a mere 68 percent today.¹⁰ Historic numbers of men are neither employed *nor even looking for work*, particularly young men who should be at the beginning of their careers. Nicholas Eberstadt writes that “prime-age male non-workers...report spending many of their waking hours watching and playing on screens—over 2000 hours per year on average. Almost half...report taking pain medication on any given day (which should raise a red flag for those worried about the opioid crisis).”¹¹

Many argue that the reason for this is that there simply are not enough jobs for men to fill, but this explanation fails. For one thing, variation in job growth and economic performance over time seems largely uncorrelated with the rise in worklessness among prime-working-age men. For another, married men and non-native-born men are participating in the labor force at rates that are similar to those of the general population in the 1960s—and about 20 percentage points higher than their unmarried and native-born

peers. A final blow to the not-enough-jobs thesis: During the same period, female labor force participation doubled from 30 percent to 60 percent.¹² Jobs are there, but men are not filling those jobs.

That is, unless they're married. "Even after controlling for age, ethnicity, and education," Eberstadt tells us, "married men are decidedly more likely to be in the workforce than men who have never married."¹³ One reason for this gap may be that marriage tends to propel men into action. Rather than living listless, unproductive lives, married men begin to feel responsible for their wife and children, attendant with motivation to get to work. With marriagelessness, however, comes a greater share of workless men and higher levels of addiction, recklessness, and other wayward behaviors that might be curbed or checked by a "nagging" wife.¹⁴ Ernest Hemingway asked in *The Sun Also Rises*, "Don't you ever get the feeling that all your life is going by and you're not taking advantage of it?" So many unmarried men could relate.

The Rise of the Single Young Female. Young women likewise exhibit lifestyle patterns that are generally incompatible with family life—or at least incompatible with marrying young. While their male peers are playing video games and opting out of the labor force, women are more likely to finish school at every level: high school, college, and beyond.¹⁵ Women earn more of the doctoral degrees granted in the United States, and they outnumber men in graduate programs 1.5 to 1.¹⁶ All of that education takes time and contraceptive technology because prolonged celibacy hardly appeals.¹⁷

Marriage and childbearing, then, recede into an ever-distant future. More than a decade ago, Kay Hymowitz noted the rise of the "single young female" (SYF), a global phenomenon marked by "delayed marriage, expanded higher education and labor force participation, urbanization" and disposable income for "leisure and consumption, often enjoyed with a group of close girlfriends: trendy cafés and bars serving sweetish coffee concoctions and cocktails; fancy boutiques, malls, and emporiums hawking cosmetics, handbags, shoes, and hotels; and, everywhere, the frustrating hunt for a boyfriend and, though it's an ever more vexing subject, a husband."¹⁸ Hymowitz's sharp-eyed description of the "all-about-me" lifestyle adopted by so many single young women comports with observed trends. Today, we would have to add: The SYF spends several hours a day scrolling and posting to social media, cultivating her image, social status, and digital identity.¹⁹

It's Not the Economy. Some have argued that the decline in marriage rates may be traced to financial challenges rooted in the modern global economy.²⁰ Young people, lamenting the "high cost" of marriage, delay getting married or forsake it altogether. Yet when interviewers probe deeper, it is often revealed that young people's reasons for delaying or forsaking

marriage extend far beyond worries over finances—they rather express deep doubts about the possibility of forming a happy and stable marriage.²¹ It begins to look as though expressed concerns over the economic unfeasibility of marriage are more like rationalizations. The irony is that married persons consistently outpace the unmarried in economic well-being.²²

At its root, marriagelessness is a global reality largely detached from the vacillating swing of economic circumstances. Pew scholars note that the phenomenon has “taken hold in most other advanced post-industrial societies,” and “female age at first marriage rose from the 1970s to the 2000s in 75 of 77 countries.” Pew adds that “these long-term declines appear to be largely unrelated to the business cycle. The declines have persisted through good economic times and bad.”²³ Americans during the Great Depression married at higher rates than Americans do now.²⁴ Money doesn’t explain marriagelessness. Rather, something changed in our practice of marriage.

Individualism in America. Still other commentators have pointed to a deeply ingrained individualism within the American spirit, highlighting its presence in the Founding era. But if something like rugged individualism has always characterized the American temperament—a “frontier mentality,” as Johns Hopkins sociologist Andrew Cherlin has put it—that individualism was a feature, rather, of the household and not of the individual man or woman.²⁵ American individualism back then meant that a household was viewed as having independence from the community and the state.

The “frontier mentality” and household “self-reliance” did not presuppose that a man or woman was sufficient *apart from the family*. Legally, households were united in the person of the husband, the doctrine of “coverture.” The individualism that might have been faulted was a family-ism of a kind, or a household-ism: not an actual individual-ism. Cherlin notes that “within the family, there was little individualism. The husband and wife were engaged in a joint enterprise, struggling to subsist in the New England climate.”²⁶ Men and women adapted themselves to roles suitable for their shared survival: The self was subordinated to the mission of the family.

Alexis de Tocqueville’s portrait of marriage in Jacksonian America supports Cherlin’s account. “Of the world’s countries,” he wrote, “America is surely the one where the bond of marriage is most respected and where they have conceived the highest and most just idea of conjugal happiness.”²⁷ Rugged individualism of the Founding era inhered in this type of familism. To wit, James Wilson in his *Lectures on Law* places at the center of his discussion “Of the Natural Rights of Individuals” an account of permanent marriage as “the true origin of society.”²⁸

Contrast this early American feature with today's cult of marriagelessness. "The shift from [role playing] to [the new] self-[focus] was part of a broader increase in expressive individualism in American culture," says Andrew Cherlin, "the kind of individualism that involves growing and changing as a person, paying attention to your feelings, and expressing your needs."²⁹ He continues:

Expressive individualism encourages people to look inward to see how they are doing, and it encourages them to want personal growth throughout adulthood. It is not incompatible with lifelong marriage, but it requires a new kind of marriage in which the spouses are free to grow and change and in which each feels personally fulfilled. Such marriages are harder to keep together, because what matters is not merely the things they jointly produce—well-adjusted children, nice homes—but also each person's own happiness.³⁰

As Cherlin sees it, *married* adults now define and experience well-being outside of reference to gifts of time, attachment, and sacrifice for others. Adults are practically and legally self-regarding as opposed to other-regarding—even *in marriage*. Spouses may be bound to one another for the sake of the conveniences of daily life, but no court of law will hold them accountable when they find that personal growth impels them to a new and different partnership or to single life.

Not surprisingly, then, marriage is not doing the work it has traditionally done. Training helps only if a coach gets an athlete to do something he wasn't going to do otherwise. Likewise, marriage as a social institution does its work only when it keeps men and women bound to a "man [or woman] in particular" when they might have done otherwise. It does so for the sake of social order, mediated through the well-being of children who suffer short-term and long-term damages when their parents split up.³¹ These damages are no less acute when incurred as adults—there is no magic age after which divorce fails to levy its due.³²

Childlessness. Marriage today is also a lesser institution because its other-regarding character has been transformed by the correlate of "marriagelessness," which is "childlessness." By this I mean that children are not expected as a normal, necessary consequence of the intimate life once reserved for marriage. Instead, children are seen, like marriage, as a matter of choice and a means to individual happiness, which results in a less child-oriented society. Since other-regarding marriage is the only human institution ordered to the procreation and education of children, childlessness in turn prompts marriagelessness. For if sexual

unions have no necessary connection to children, then there is no social imperative that sexual unions be clothed in a life-changing, habit-forming institution. And the loss of that habit-forming institution has had evident ripple effects all throughout American life, from labor markets to religious participation.

The phenomenon of “childlessness” is reflected in American birth rates, which have been declining for decades. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that the total fertility rate in the U.S. “has generally been below replacement since 1971 and has consistently been below replacement since 2007.”³³ In 2020, the United States recorded its lowest total fertility rate ever at 1.64 lifetime expected births per woman.³⁴

Falling fertility is not just an American problem. Western countries most affected by low fertility can expect to see their populations decline by more than half by the end of the century. Population sizes can be expected to fall in varying degrees throughout the industrialized world in the next several decades. From the U.S. to Europe to Asia, the consequences of childlessness will be stark: Entitlement systems will go broke; nations will age; economic dynamism will fade;³⁵ and children will grow up more isolated—with fewer siblings, classmates, relatives, and neighbors. We will see quite clearly the economic and social costs as fertility rates fall across the globe.

But falling birth rates are not the most striking expression of childlessness. Household composition tells an even more compelling story. In 1960, married-couple families with children represented 44 percent of American households.³⁶ Today, they make up only 19 percent of households, while one-person (adult) households, which early Americans considered a blight, surged from 13 percent in 1960 to 28 percent in 2017.³⁷ Overall, household composition in the U.S. has shifted steadily from family to non-family households, the latter more than doubling to 35 percent of all households.

Marriagelessness marks a series of worldwide trends, among them rising age at first marriage, lower marriage rates, falling birth rates, children raised without both biological parents, and the many trends that reflect the demotion of the centrality of the child in American society. We are no longer a “marriage people” because we no longer value children above lifestyle and wealth. We value more highly our own isolable personal growth and freedom in the sense of absence of constraint. It is not only a spouse who may be obnoxious by Dostoevsky’s implication. The child, too, “disturbs me and restricts my freedom.” The child is “too long over his dinner” and “has a cold and keeps on blowing his nose.”

Institutional Marriage: Heroism of the Ordinary

When Cherlin described the emergence of expressive individualism in marriage, he contrasted this form with an earlier practice of marriage that he called traditional or *institutional*. Institutional marriage was marked by the shared commitment of spouses who take on parts—or *roles*—in the joint acquisition of the common goods of marriage. A common good is a good shared by a community, not diminished by their sharing it, which cannot be had without the other members of the group. When the good they share and produce together is also their reason for coming together, that common good is an identifying common good. It marks out the purpose or essence of that community.

Institutional marriage understood children to be the identifying common good of a marriage. Though spouses might fall in or out of love (proverbially) with each other, they will never cease to be the pair that generated their children. As Aristotle noted long ago, “children seem to be a bond of union (which is the reason childless people part more easily); for children are a good common to both and what is common holds them together.”³⁸

The roles and norms favored by traditional marriage, especially permanence and exclusivity, exist to protect the identifying common good of marriage: children. Permanence is for *their benefit* first. “A central finding to my research,” Judith Wallerstein wrote of her 25-year study of the adult children of divorce, “is that children identify not only with their mother and father as separate individuals but with the relationship between them. They carry the template of this relationship into adulthood and use it to seek the image of their new family. The absence of a good image negatively influences their search for love, intimacy, and commitment.”³⁹ Parental divorce is an attack on the very core of a child; the damage gives rise to decades of hardship long into adulthood. Lovers may possibly part without doing irreparable damage, but parents do not have the same opportunity.

Sexual exclusivity is also for the benefit of children first. Mothers and fathers who form extramarital attachments threaten the permanence of their union, risk having children with partners alien to their children, and compromise the emotional stability of their home via anger, jealousy, or sadness. To be sure, these norms are not without cost: giving up the opportunity to pursue partnerships that promise greater emotional rewards and the satisfaction of parts of us seemingly neglected. No married person is unaware that his or her felt needs change with age, maturity, and experience.

But institutional marriage unrelentingly demands that we put kids’ needs first. Husband and wife agree to live for each other *for the sake of*

future “others” who need the two-as-one. The bond between them, formed for the sake of their children, is another common good—they do live for each other, and that communion is a shared good. But living for each other is not the *identifying* good of marriage, since the *living for* that we associate with marriage—a romantic emotional-sexual attachment—cannot on its own provide the reason for the form of marriage that is most favorable to children: a permanent and exclusive union.

Human experience attests that romantic attachments have their ups and downs. Therefore, living for each other *for the cause of romance* generally cannot sustain permanence. But living for each other *for the cause of children* can—and usually does—sustain the emotional satisfaction that partners need, if the long view is taken, and spouses, with community support, are willing to give up short-term satisfactions for long-term success. Most couples that stay together through tough times are happy again within five years, no worse off than those who split up.⁴⁰ Their children are happier and more well-adjusted too.⁴¹

The primacy of long-term commitments over short-term emotional satisfaction is more vivid if one considers that self-sacrifice for a noble purpose is admired, celebrated, and honored in every human culture. The apex of this notion is captured in the Gospel: “Greater love has no man than this: to lay down his life for his friends,” says the Lord (John 15:13). But there is something else in the heroic act: *the willingness to accept the burdens—not of one’s own choosing—attached to the heroic act*. The athlete is admired for his achievement precisely because of the difficulties borne for the sake of excellence. Athletes do not choose the difficulties; they accept them as challenges as on a field of battle, and when they persevere and triumph, we rightly admire their success.

What matters is that intentions alone—to be a great athlete or a great mother or father—are not enough. Most people cannot manage even a small personal resolution—like daily exercise, reading, or prayer—if left to the ups and downs of emotional inclinations. Those who succeed do so with mechanisms for accountability—memberships, apps, friends, and partners. Books about habit formation make national bestseller lists year after year, demonstrating that people are searching for help to gain even relatively straightforward habits.⁴²

But in matters of great importance—how we spend our lives in relation to God and our family—self-help books would be a pitiful answer to human frailty. Rather, institutions provide for what we lack by offering us rules and norms, not of our own choosing, *necessary* to live nobly. Institutional other-regarding marriage did just this. The law and social norms put divorce

off limits, “protecting us” from our worst selves in weaker moments, helping us through to victory in the long run. True, very few people would willingly embrace the grief of feeling put off by a romantic partner for years on end, but everyone desires to celebrate a silver or golden wedding anniversary with children and grandchildren thanking us for the warm shelter of a faithful home. Reality says that most won’t get through to the latter without bearing some of the former. Marriages are not better and children are not happier than they were before the American people accepted the notion that divorce as an exit would save us from troubles. What might have seemed a good trade-off for a small minority of marriages begins to look disastrous as a new conception of marriage for society as a whole.

The marriagelessness culture believes in general that other-regarding institutions restrict and constrain, like the crabby fellow quoted above in *The Brothers Karamazov*. On the contrary, such institutions exist to help us achieve precious common goods and, in so doing, to achieve a paradoxical “ordinary” heroism. This is why other-regarding institutions hold us to rules and norms. It is also why such institutions bind us to one another; there are no other-regarding institutions made up of solitary persons. The reason is that heroism requires fellow soldiers; you cannot be a hero all by yourself, not for lack of wanting, but for lack of someone to save. The ordinary heroism of marriage saves children from a lifetime of suffering and our spouses from a lifetime of regret.

Other-regarding institutions make the everyday heroism of the ordinary possible. Untethered to the great institutions of Western civilization—especially marriage and religious establishments—our naïve efforts to love and save each other get mired in foolishness, self-deception, and pride. What would we think of a son or daughter who wanted to defend the country from a foreign invader but refused to join the armed forces? Or, on a more mundane level, if a young person wanted to become the world’s number one tennis player but eschewed hiring a coach or joining a team? Suppose finally that a person wanted to succeed at loving just one other person for life—the “particular man” in Dostoevsky’s story—yet without making any kind of binding commitment? Each of these is a failed enterprise before it begins—not only failed but foolish because the resources needed to accomplish the task are missing from the outset.

So it is that these great institutions are rather like the battlefield of the ordinary heroes and heroines—where small acts of faithfulness to norms transform us and we succeed at heroism when we had no right to succeed. The solitary Peter, deliberately setting himself apart from the others, who doubted their strength, said: “I will never deny you Lord!” and then he

floundered on account of his own inadequacy. But Peter in the “institution” of the early Church could become the hero he imagined he could be and endured martyrdom in Nero’s persecution.

Marriage is another great institution in which spouses can live for one another according to rules and norms they did not get to make up. This sort of field can make heroes of the weakest member—any mother or father can do it—by way of binding commitments and follow-through. It may be more demanding than imagined, but through lifelong marriage, a young person can expect to succeed at living the heroic aspirations of youth.

Make Marriage Binding Again

If marriage is a battlefield of ordinary heroism, Americans have become as if a nation of deserters and cowards. We put off the fight and give up the battle too easily once it has begun. We spend our “best” years on ourselves and console ourselves by saying that it will make us better partners, but then we trade in our spouses for shiny new ones. We blame the culture and the economy for our failures when our great-grandparents got married and stayed married in more difficult circumstances, at younger ages, and without savings. And we post pictures of those same grandparents on social media with sappy tags like #truelove—lamenting how hard it is to get married.

But our sentimentalism blinds us to the obvious solution: Make marriage binding again. At least we should recognize where the false step was made and begin searching for good places to set a path to renewal. Marriage cannot do its work if it remains an impotent shell. The essayist G. K. Chesterton quipped: “Marriage is a duel to the death, which no man of honor should decline.”⁴³ And it will remain a shell unless it begins with a promise of permanence and we hold people to account for what they have promised.

In 1880, Pope Leo XIII, who would go on to write *Rerum Novarum* a decade later, desperately warned European nations to resist the temptation to liberalize divorce laws: “Truly,” he wrote, “it is hardly possible to describe how great are the evils that flow from divorce.” He continued:

Matrimonial contracts are by it made variable; mutual kindness is weakened; deplorable inducements to unfaithfulness are supplied; harm is done to the education and training of children; occasion is afforded for the breaking up of homes; the seeds of dissension are sown among families; the dignity of womanhood is lessened and brought low, and women run the risk of being deserted after having ministered to the pleasures of men.

Since nothing has such power to lay waste families and destroy the wealth of nations as the corruption of morals, it is easily seen that divorces are in the highest degree hostile to the prosperity of families and States, springing as they do from the depraved morals of the people, and, as experience shows us, opening out a way to every kind of evil-doing in public and in private life.⁴⁴

If Pope Leo was right, then divorce is the origin of the “marriage crisis,” not same-sex marriage, because its effect is logically and socially prior. The failure of much of the nation to embrace an other-regarding institution poisons the moral climate and distorts our understanding of all institutions. If people now believe marriage to be whatever kind of union makes them happy, it is surely because we long ago gave in to the fiction that marriages were disposable if they failed to make us happy.

There is only one path to recovery: Make marriage permanent again in all but the most serious cases of abuse and neglect.⁴⁵

In public law, it will be objected, there is no path to such a world. Perhaps it is time to revisit or revise state-level experiments like “covenant marriage.” As a more modest and doable starting point, conservatives of various religious affiliations ought to take up urgently the question of what divorce has to do with the impotence of marriage. Conservatives can be found debating all manner of political and economic theory—but “marriage theory” is nowhere to be found. For instance, national conservatives rightly praise lifelong family bonds and decry the “disintegration of the family, including a marked decline in marriage and childbirth,”⁴⁶ but conferences have yet to take up active discussion of divorce.

Marriage is the first society and the source of all other societies. It is a union of persons predicated upon the free consent of its members to be “limited” in service of a common good. As its identifying common good is children, marriage can be said to be a union of persons ordered to growth. Marriage is thus ontologically prior to political society and provides the rationale for growth in the free economy. That is, since marriages are meant to be fruitful, rightly ordered economies are meant to be likewise, making ample provision for a growing population. Therefore, political theory and economic theory will *necessarily* stumble without attention to the nature and character of marriage. What is its form? If individuals are free to exit—literally and not merely symbolically—the first society *at will*, can we expect anything other than destructive individualism in derivative societies? If childbearing is not the ordering principle of the first society, can we expect healthy birth rates and a thriving economy in derivative societies?

My thesis is *not* that we should find ways to better privilege marriage in law and public policy. Of course, we should do that. We should remove every known obstacle to marriage in tax codes, housing regulations, and so forth, and we should find better ways to honor the contributions couples make when they have children. But these questions are distinct from what I am arguing here, which is that liberalized divorce *itself* undermines the value of marriage, intrinsically and mechanically, so that marriage is less desirable for individuals, less functional for children, and less valuable for society. Can mere policy “nudges” overcome the effect of sterilizing marriage? It seems fantastical.

If not policy, then what? In the American context, the path to overcoming marriagelessness will likely begin at home so to speak, most especially but not exclusively, within self-identified Christian communities—from Baptist to Episcopalian, Latter-Day Saints to my own Catholic Church. Hardly any teaching of Jesus Christ is clearer: Let no one separate what God has joined together (Matthew 19:6). Yet there is *no meaningful sense* in which Christian churches hold their members to a higher standard for marriage. Remarriages after divorce are granted *with ease* in every major church in the nation. The Catholic Church, though formally opposed to divorce, informally abuses declarations of nullity, offering them so rampantly that Americans think an annulment is a “Catholic divorce.” There is no unity or clarity of teaching across churches or within them, and there is little that marks out followers of Jesus as any different. Echoing Matthew, one might lament that the salt has lost its saltiness (Matthew 5:13).

Real marriage—institutional marriage—is about the lifelong binding of two persons for the sake of some other persons, especially their children. Permanence is as essential to marriage as it is between a man and a woman, since permanence is what ensures marriage is for the sake of children and not for the sake of adult satisfactions. Real marriage can be rediscovered and lived again with the assistance of God and the leadership of living religious communities. Each generation has the potential to make a fresh start.

Conservatives should prioritize inquiry into the nature and causes of the *other wealth of nations*—marriage. First steps might include a program of robust religious liberty, including freedom for small communities to hold members to a higher standard of marital fidelity. Later steps might build on the first—but, as the permanent nature of marriage was instituted by God, state law and policy will be, wittingly or not, the follower of our religious practices and not the leader.

This, then, is the challenge: to seek national greatness through a rediscovery of the ordinary heroism of marriage—no small task in a nation

unaccustomed to being restricted in our personal lives. Each of us will be implicated in some way. So be it. To pull back from the task because it is difficult would be of a piece with what we are trying to correct. As another great Russian has reminded us, “the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts.”⁴⁷ We are all responsible for this disaster, but “there is nothing lost, that may be found, if sought.”⁴⁸

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