



Georg Cardinal Sterzinsky

Marriage – Family – Pastoral Care

Introduction into the expert meeting

This expert meeting deals with the subject of “marriage – family – pastoral care”. This is the short and plain title covering the topics of our discussions today and tomorrow. There is no doubt about it, marriage and family are of great significance for and in pastoral care. With my opening statement I would like to outline this significance. It will be the task of the meeting to study how to translate this significance into practise.

1. Starting points

1.1 Marriage and family – Interrelated and yet independent realities of life

Marriage and family are two realities of life, being so closely connected that we used to take them as synonyms – especially in church language. However, for some time already, we have learnt that marriage and family today are no longer considered to be a natural union. Nonetheless, the Church for good reason insists on a close interrelation between marriage and family. “From a Christian point of view, the idea of relationship manifested in marriage is basically related to the concept of fertility, and fertility is a distinctive feature of marriage.” With these precise and yet strange terms Arno Anzenbacher described the connection of marriage and family in his lecture on the occasion of the study day on “Marriage and Family” of the spring plenary assembly 2008 of the German bishops. For Catholics, marriage and family belong together. Nevertheless, for theological considerations as well as for pastoral practise, it is advisable to regard marriage and family also as two independent realities of human life. Marriage as the bond between man and woman does not necessarily give rise to a family. Despite its orientation towards a family, it retains its distinctiveness. In theological terms, it has its own sacramental dignity which it does not forfeit even if no children are born. Marriage needs the care of the spouses themselves but also pastoral attention. Family is more than a desired side effect of marriage. Even the best pastoral care for marriage cannot simply replace a good pastoral care for family. Both will have to be given attention if marriage, family and pastoral care are to have a promising common future.

1.2 Marriage, family, pastoral care – Institutions in a state of upheaval: What changes and what remains the same

Marriage, family and pastoral care – if we take a neutral look at these three different realities, we see that they have one striking thing in common: All three are institutions which are going through a time of great upheaval and changes. This is why reflections and resulting action programmes for marriage, family or pastoral care cannot simply go on as before. As the respective dynamics are generally known, it will suffice to point to some key points here.

Today, partners enter into the bond of marriage under conditions which have fundamentally changed. People get married at a later age, and it is no longer a matter of course to get married – not even when a child is born. In a social environment strongly focussed on independence and freedom of action, many consider it old-fashioned to make such a binding commitment. So marriage has successively lost plausibility. Divorce rate is very high, while the average duration of marriage today is longer than in former times: If a marriage lasts, fifty or more years of married life are not uncommon. In addition, the expectations concerning marriage have changed. Marriage loses its importance as an institution providing maintenance. In their marriage people look for affection and fulfilment. For this reason, couples separate even after many years of marriage if they do not see any chance for a successful relationship. Young people who consider getting married often find themselves in a conflict between a longing for faithfulness and stability and a feeling of uncertainty as to whether their wishes may be realized at all. So Paul Ricoeur's description of marriage as the "highest wager of our culture" is even more valid today.

Many of these dynamics apply to the family in a similar and sometimes special way. In contrast to former generations, it has become but one alternative among many different forms of life. Due to its reliability and efficiency for the members of the family and for society it is highly appreciated, but because of the efforts and investments it demands, it is feared and avoided at the same time. Just as with marriage, young people hesitate. They start late with a family because embarking on a career and the search for the right partner may take a long time or because they find it hard to give up the independence of youth. At the same time people make greater demands on the family. In a society of education the family is expected to teach the children a lot. In everyday's pluralism the family is expected to offer orientation and support to its members. In a mobile society the family is expected to provide a feeling of closeness and support even far away from home. It is to present the concept of an unbiased acceptance of the individual as an alternative to the general pressure to perform in working life. In the advancing individualisation it is to integrate its members into a close community. So families today find themselves caught between expectations and reality, and parents can no longer refer to competences they gained in their families as „today so many things are completely different than in the past“.

So pastoral care for marriage and family has to deal with institutions having undergone severe changes. Pastoral care in general is in a similar situation. Much of what has been constant for a long time is affected by radical changes. This not only holds true for social framework conditions for instance when environments usually marked by their special denomination disappear or when the change in values shifts the importance of religion in the lives of people. Even the organisational structures of pastoral care are in a process of change, resulting in increased pastoral areas, to mention only one effect. Target groups, time units, resources, places and protagonists of pastoral care are all involved in these changes.

In view of so many dynamics and changes, many things have to be reconsidered and adjusted. But, with all these changes, we must not lose sight of the unchanging main concern of pastoral care: People want to live together as married couples and as families before God and the world. As married couples and as families they are on their way looking for the good and truth in their Life. The Christian community is to offer them orientation, support and solidarity. This will be the task of the pastoral care for marriage and family, taking into consideration the individual's strengths and abilities, as well as the problems, worries and needs married couples and families are confronted with.

1.3 Marriage and family – active cells in the parish life

However, married couples and families are not to be seen as „biggest worries“ of pastoral care. Least of all we want to speak of a mere providing or serving pastoral care. Especially married couples and families take an active part in pastoral offers for marriage and families. Be it married couples sharing their experiences in marriage preparation courses, or families participating in family circles, teams preparing services for babies and children, family catechists committed to the preparation for first communicants, or simply parents reminding their children of their service as altar boys, and couples giving a living example for others - they all render a valuable and reliable contribution to pastoral care in many fields of work. Especially in the already mentioned larger pastoral areas, the Church will increasingly depend on the assistance of committed families in order to uphold a church life or for example to give kindergartens and family centres run by the church a visible church character. Given this situation, a successful local pastoral care for marriage and family offers a great chance to make the Church present and attractive.

Such initiatives and activities presuppose enthusiasm, appropriate framework conditions, and competent support. Couples and families will not commit themselves if they feel that their work will be of no avail or that it is already done by others. One pastoral issue for the future, that is also very important for marriage and family pastoral care, will be to allow and encourage commitment.

1.4 Marriage and family – in need of pastoral care

It would be neither honest nor realistic to reduce marriage and family to their usefulness for pastoral care. With its pastoral care the Church can do a lot to contribute to a successful marriage and family life. In many areas, the pastoral offers for marriage and families are known to be supportive, competent concepts based on experiences close to reality. There is a broad spectre of support the Church can offer to marriage and family ranging from courses to promote partner awareness to marriage preparation, marriage-, family- and life counselling, as well as family assistance. And there are many couples and families who are in need of these services.

But let us be honest: These services require constant efforts, a high quality and a realistic orientation. Good and helpful services are not yet offered to a sufficient extent. And there are still not enough couples and families who know of these services and the chances they offer for their life. Pastoral care for marriage and family must reach out to the people and offer them orientation and active support.

2. Marriage and family – pastoral fields of work

Marriage and family represent a large field of work for future pastoral care. But what will be the most important task? To answer this I would like to give our expert meeting three essential ideas to consider.

2.1 See what is successful – without ignoring problems

Sometimes we might think that there is a factional dispute in the pastoral care for marriage and family. There are some who underline that pastoral care must focus on those who have big problems in their marriage or family, on those who failed and finally on those who are desperate and unhappy. Single parents, divorced and those who remarried should be able to experience that the Church does not disregard them.

Others, however, stress that it is not right that pastoral care pays attention to people only when they are in a severe crisis. This is why we should not focus our pastoral care primarily on problems, we rather should see what is successful and concentrate our thoughts and activities on our resources.

We all belong to the People of God being on a pilgrimage. This must not be forgotten. We cannot make a distinction between people whose marriage and family are „o.k.“ and those who have not managed a successful marriage or family. In my opinion, it is important not to play these two groups off against each other but to strive for a good balance between both. What is successful has to be seen, appreciated and encouraged energetically. So there is no

reason for us to give up or to downgrade the role model of a family based on the bonds of marriage, as a vital, original and loving community of people. Nonetheless, we must not ignore the problems. People with problems and worries must not feel dismissed or neglected. Both aspects are inseparably related if we are to take the mission of the church seriously as it is described with the famous initial words of the Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council: „The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well.”

2.2 Give pastoral care a face and create appropriate structures

Growing pastoral areas and the structural reforms involve the risk that pastoral care on the spot becomes inscrutable for the people. Who is responsible for what? Who is the pastor and how can we recognise him? How do church structures differ from those of any public administration? Who conveys the trust and confidence that pastoral care is really about people? These questions have to be reconsidered and answered if we do not want to lose contact with the people or if we want to find new approaches. The more specific question with regard to the pastoral care for marriage and family is: What happens to or – and this is even more important - who takes care of a young couple asking for a church wedding ceremony? It might be that this is the first contact with the Church after years of absence! Will this be a new beginning or reinforce the previous distance to the Church? What is offered to families asking for fields of religious experience for their children? What characterizes the contact with the parish in connection with the First Communion? And, is there a person people can talk to when they feel depressed by their worries and doubts? For all these aspects we need people who feel responsible, are able to put themselves in the place of others, and with their personal commitment give pastoral care a face. It has become commonplace that the few priests and people working full-time in pastoral care can no longer fulfil these numerous tasks alone. If we want to find Christians doing voluntary work in this field, it will be very important to create and to maintain adequate structures which will promote their commitment. Important is the correct relationship of things to each other. First of all pastoral care has to be given a face and the necessary structures have to serve this purpose, not the other way round.

2.3 With Christ in mind

There is a great variety of tasks in marriage and family pastoral care and nearly unlimited opportunities to get involved. Pious talk usually is of little help for those concerned. A successful marriage and family as a community of persons often requires clear thinking and resolute action. And with regard to pastoral structures, organisation, coordination and communication are equally indispensable. As the pastoral fields of work mostly and primarily affect real life, we must not forget who has sent the Church and every single Christian: Jesus

Christ, our Head and Lord. In his mission and with his message to the people we take care of the souls. In preaching the kingdom of God, Jesus attached great importance to marriage and to children. This forms the origin and basis of every pastoral care for marriage and family.

Pastoral care should always remember this origin. This in mind, Christians can reach out to all people without being afraid of losing their particular and specific character. For “nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts”, to quote again from the first lines of the pastoral constitution on the Church.

3. The expert meeting

In the light of these ideas, what is expected from the expert meeting? When it organized this expert meeting, the commission for marriage and family of the German Bishops' Conference was well aware of the limitations for such a meeting to have an effect. Nevertheless, it is to get results.

3.1 Fresh ideas

The concrete examples and discussions may encourage to reconsider given facts and to complete them with new ideas.

3.2 Forward-looking

The indicated changes on many levels should be reasons not to be content with the status quo but to be critical and go into details: What questions do we have to address, what aspects do we have to consider, how do we have to approach couples and families so that our pastoral care is really forward-looking?

3.3 Follow-up

In the long term, this meeting will have an effect only if the resulting insights are spread, if new ideas are tested, and then again put on the agenda. We will have to think about how to put this into practice.

But now I wish all of us a successful expert meeting with rich and fruitful discussions and thoughts.