

Modern marriage: 2017

It would have been unthinkable at the time most current PFGM couples were married (more than 35 years ago) that countries today would be voting to approve same-sex marriage.

Some defendants of 'traditional' marriage will not accept this modern movement because they claim marriage has always been between a man and a woman. This definition is only partly true, because in some cultures marriage has been between a man and more than one woman (polygamy). This and other factors in the history of marriage that make more sense of why same-sex marriage is being considered a right.

Throughout most of history, marriage has been an alliance (arranged) between families or clans. While romance has been a factor, realistically this has been something that grew into a marriage, rather than it being seen as being integral to it, until the middle of the nineteenth century. The church, for example redefined marriage after Vatican 2, as a covenant. For centuries, it had been defined as a legal arrangement or contract. It has been suggested that Westerners marry the woman they love, and Easterners love the woman they marry! Excessive love between husband and wife was seen in some cultures as a threat to the solidarity of the extended family, because the priorities were care for parents, siblings and neighbours.

Marriage provided a safe and secure environment for the procreation and raising of children within a village or culture. There is a well known proverb attributed to African culture that declares, 'it takes a village to raise child'. Many similar cultures have never considered a family unit truly separate from the clan or the community.

Most cultures throughout history have been patriarchal, and the male took on rights that were denied women. In Israel for example, adultery was considered a sin, not so much because of the sexual nature of the act, but because it took away from a man what belonged to him. The commandment says, "do not covet your neighbor's wife, and you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field or his male servant or his female servant, his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor." (Deut 5: 21). At that time, the wife was considered one of the man's possessions.

Marriage has evolved through three general stages: marriage by force or capture, marriage by purchase or contract, and marriage by mutual love. The custom of purchasing a wife began with the desire to placate parents and avoid tribal warfare if adequate compensation were not forthcoming.

The modern day wedding roles of "best man", "maids of honour", "giving the bride away" and the "honeymoon" all had their origins in this history when the bride was either stolen or sold. Parents arranged her marriage and the bride was given to the groom. Elopement emerged as the only viable alternative to marriage by capture or purchase.

The transition from an agricultural to a market economy played a big role in the transition from family-arranged alliances to 'love matches'. Parents (normally the father) controlled access to inheritance of agricultural land, but with the spread of a market economy, many young people no longer needed to work on their parents' land nor did they need their parent's permission to wait for an inheritance.

In Japan, arranged marriages were almost universal until 1945. This changed during the post war American occupation, but still in 1960 70% of Japanese marriages were arranged. By 1990 the proportion of arranged marriages fell to 30%, but following the tsunami in 2012, they have increased to 40%. Many people reported how lonely they felt following the tsunami, and many young Japanese, unable to find someone they love, have decided that waiting for a love marriage is not satisfactory for them. Surveys in Japan have shown that the divorce rates for arranged marriages are lower than for love marriages, and satisfaction levels after twenty years marriage are also higher.

Personal relationship between husband and wife did not count for much in traditional marriage. For millennia, marriage decisions were dictated more by economic and political considerations than by love and personal satisfaction. This made marriage a very coercive institution, especially for young people, and for women in general.

Today by contrast, in Western culture people have unprecedented freedom about whether, when, and whom to marry, as well as about how to organize their personal relationships in and out of marriage.

Marriages are no longer based on the legal subordination of women and children, and many women have even attained economic equality with their partners.

Since the 1960's, there has been huge changes in the understanding of women's role in society and in marriage, and laws have been framed to protect her rights that were unimaginable in earlier periods of history. There has been a growing acceptance that men and women have equal obligations within marriage. Instead of being about unique, gender-based roles, most partners today think of their union in terms of flexible divisions of companionship, work, and mutual sexual attraction. Some do not consider children as an essential or even an important part of that relationship.

Since marriage has come to be seen not as being legally based on complementary, gender-based roles, the idea of gay marriage found a place. Author Stephanie Cootz says, "One of the reasons for the rapid increase in acceptance of same sex marriage is because heterosexuals have completely changed their notion of what marriage between a man and a woman is. We now accept marriage is based on love, mutual sexual attraction, equality and a flexible division of labour.

Some experts claim that the expectations of marriage partners today with such diverse high intensity needs, is almost impossible. In addition to this an increasing number of people today are raising children in a blended family, which adds to the challenges and demands.

Most Australian couples who married before the 1960's, were in their twenties and sometimes in their teens. While today there is a tendency among Generation Y's to marry younger than the generation above them, they generally have had several sexual partners before marriage. The average age at marriage has increased by seven years since 1977. The average length of marriages that end in divorce is 12.5 years and happens on average at age 43.

The concept of marriage as an optional life that one can move into and out of without diminishing the institution itself varies hugely from the traditional ideal, but data suggests that this is what marriage is today.

The data also suggests that, in this role, marriage remains a powerful social force. Divorce rates are at their lowest since 1976, but this has to be measured alongside cohabitating couples who never marry and without the same pull to remain together, end their relationship.

More choices mean new opportunities for success, but also new opportunities for failures, and new temptations to reach beyond one's grasp. We have solved many old problems, but in the process created some new ones. For example, on average, parents invest more emotional energy and financial resources in their children than ever before, but children whose parents cannot or will not make such investments face new vulnerabilities. Young people have greater mobility and personal freedom than in the past, but their independence can turn into isolation after they become parents.

Many of our problems arise not because we've changed too much but because we haven't changed enough. One big cause of marital stress and divorce is the failure of some men to change their household roles enough to match the change in women's work roles. Another cause, researchers are finding, is that couples tend to fall into traditional gender roles after the birth of a child, which can produce resentment in both parents. And one of the main dangers to children after a divorce is the old-fashioned notion of many men that their obligations to their kids end when they no longer enjoy the services and support of the children's mother.

Since love is considered as essential to marriage, in many cases, love has become a priority over marriage! This has led to an increase in divorces and the number of unmarried partners and single parent families is increasing. Some couples leave a marriage because of a lack of passion (intense love) which is a logical flow on from many modern expectations. Romantic or idealized love is a wonderful match for a couple committed to marriage, but it is not something that every couple can expect will be sustained. A marriage based on feelings will have many ups and downs, because feelings do exactly the same thing.

Single parents, cohabiting couples, gay and lesbian families, and divorced parents are now a permanent part of the modern picture. They need support systems to help them meet their responsibilities in healthy ways.

They also need clear-cut rules to prevent blatant unfairness when relationships end. Divorced and unwed parents, for example, need constructive advice on effective parenting. Young people need tested programs to help them develop the resistance skills to say no to pressured sex and the coping skills to handle their sex lives responsibly once they begin consensual relationships, in or out of marriage. It is not enough to educate people for marriage; we must also educate them for non-marriage.

In the past fifty years it has become the norm that both partners have employment, and often one or both is undertaking tertiary studies added to a full day's work. Life is very busy and there is less recreational time than in previous eras. Flexible working conditions allows some people to work from home which can help, but working at home at the end of a working day has also become a common reality because of access to computers and digital devices. Communication networking email, skype, text, Facebook etc crowds people's time even further.

Young parents are very attentive to the issue of child safety, so they drive them to activities whereas once kids would have managed this themselves from quite a young age. 'Helicopter' parenting adds greater pressure, in terms of the time it takes and the pressure it creates. Added to this is the reality that most children today expect to be entertained, so there is an endless search for activities to engage them.

The possibility of owning one's own home is a huge financial challenge for young couples, especially Generation Y who have practised spending their income 'on the moment'. They earn a good income but often change employment seeking 'a change' and because many of them remain living with their parents (sometimes with a current partner), even into their 30's, financial independence lags way behind their other forms of independence. Many young couples only face the harsh reality of finding a home after realizing that the opportunity of saving has been delayed by a decade of spending.

A critical reality of modern marriage is the length of marriage that a couple will experience if they remain together. In 1911, one hundred years ago, couples who remained married, were married on average were for 28 years before one partner died.

Today that statistic is 50 years. So a couple face almost twice as long together as they did a hundred years ago. Many couples who have lost the spark they had, remain together until their children are old enough to manage with them being separated, and it is not uncommon today to encounter 70 and even 80 year olds who divorce. Living in a culture that confirms that they do not have to remain married if they are unhappy, and being able to be financially independent if they do separate allows people to make these decisions that would not have been possible a century ago.

It cannot be denied that the consumerist throw away society we now live in contributes to a mentality of throwing away relationships if they don't work properly; if they can't be repaired and if another (newer and brighter) model presents itself. Meeting attractive people is much more likely than it was in the past simply because the work place or social scene were not the domain of as many married women fifty years ago as they are today. The supportive environment once pressured people to remain married to avoid scandal or family shame. That environment has shifted much more to the influence of peers, media including the portrayal of main characters in movies. If it seems 'everybody is doing it', the pressure is reversed. This is obviously more the case if their own parents have had a 'failed' marriage.

Testing the model by cohabitating has become almost the norm today, even to the point of sometimes having children together before committing or instead of committing to marriage. Many younger couples have an aversion to boredom and the stimulation they seek sometimes cannot be provided by any one person.

Time magazine reported on Nov 18th, 2010 that in 1970, 70% of American adults were married, including 66% of 20-29 year olds were married. In 2011, 50% of adults were married and only 25% of 20-29 year olds. Australian statistics reflect this trend, despite the arrival of many migrant families who carry a strong tradition of marriage and family. 55% of married couples in Australia were married in Australia. The remainder were born overseas. The median age for marriage in 2013 was 30 years of age and 76% of people who married had been cohabitating before their marriage. This figure was 80% in Surveys indicate that the richer and more educated you are, the more likely you are to marry.

Surveys also indicate that Generation Y have many doubts about marriage but the majority would like to be married! The cost of a marriage ceremony itself and of establishing and maintaining a home deters many of them. What will be their attitude to marriage?

Given that first marriages are occurring at around 28 years of age for women and 30.1 for men, it will take five to ten years to determine whether they will be different from Generation X and current trends. Generation Y are the first generation to experience both parents working as the norm, and they are the first generation to experience divorce and solo parenting on such a large scale. Unlike Gen Xers they have experienced close relationships with their grandparents. They are beginning to experience the reality of national debt and the difficulties and unlikelihood of stable employment. This will no doubt lead to delays, lack of financial means, or refusal to marry, as it did with the Builders generation (1901-1925)

Marriage remains the dominant partnership model for adult Australians although the number of marriages celebrated by a minister continues to decline. In 2103 marriage celebrants were involved in 72% of marriages. This figure was 56% in 1995. It has been pointed out that in this modern age, neither men nor women need to be married to have sex, companionship, professional success or respect or even children — yet marriage remains popular in many countries.

More than half of the respondents in an American Pew Research Centre poll said that marital status is irrelevant to achieving happiness, career goals, financial security or a fulfilling sex life, but when it comes to raising children, more than 75% said this was best done in a marriage. Despite this, in the USA, 41% of children born in 2013 were born out of wedlock and 25% of children lived in single parent homes . In the UK in 2012, 47% per cent of children born had unwed mothers compared to 25% in 1988 and 11% in 1979. In Australia 34% born last year had unmarried parents. This figure was only 19% in 1988. In New Zealand, teenage brides made up 32% of all brides in 1971, compared with just 3% in 2011.

When Prince William, became engaged to Katherine Middleton, he did things a little differently. He chose someone older than he is (by six months), who went to the same university he did and whom he'd dated for a long time.

Although she is not of royal blood, she stands to become the first English Queen with a university degree, so in one fundamental way, theirs is a union of equals. In that regard, William and Kate reflect the changes in the shape and nature of marriage that have been growing throughout the Western world for the past few decades.

With so many countries already having voted to approve same-sex marriage, the definition of marriage in most Western cultures is clearly far removed from the capture or pursuit and arranged marriages of an earlier time. Following the Vatican Council, the Catholic church began to emphasize the dual purpose of marriage – the procreation of children and the mutual affection of the couple. This second characteristic is what people in Western culture today expect of marriage. With so many choosing this kind of relationship without expecting or wanting children, the modern definition of marriage for those seeking a committed union is seen by same-sex couples as inclusive of them.

On June 26th, 2015, Justice Anthony Kennedy closed his statement overturning the US ban on gay marriage by saying, *“No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people be-come something greater than once they were. As some of the petitioners in these cases demonstrate, marriage embodies a love that may endure even past death.*

It would misunderstand these men and women to say they disrespect the idea of marriage. Their plea is that they do respect it so deeply that they seek to find its fulfillment for themselves. Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization’s oldest institutions.”

This decision is a reminder of the reasons why it was requested. If marriage is about love (and not ‘arranged’) is the definition too narrow? The Church holds its own position and Pope Francis believes that a healthy secularism paired with a strong law that grants above all a religious freedom is the key to a successful and peaceful state, while states tied to a single religion don’t have a future. *“States must be secular. Confessional states end badly. That goes against the grain of History. I believe that a version of laicity accompanied by a solid law guaranteeing religious freedom offers a framework for going forward.*

We are all equal as sons (and daughters) of God and with our personal dignity. However, everyone must have the freedom to externalize his or her own faith. If a Muslim woman wishes to wear a veil, she must be able to do so. Similarly, if a Catholic wishes to wear a cross. People must be free to profess their faith at the heart of their own culture not merely at its margins”.

When asked, “In a secular setting, how should Catholics defend their concerns on societal issues such as euthanasia or same-sex marriage? Pope Francis replied, *“It is up to Parliament to discuss, argue, explain, the reason for these issues. That is how a society grows. However, once a law has been adopted, the state must also respect [people’s] consciences. The right to conscientious objection must be recognized within each legal structure because it is a human right. Including for a government official, who is a human person. The state must also take criticism into account. That would be a genuine form of laicity”.* (Interview with Guillaume Goubert, 16th May 2016).

*How has your marriage changed? What do you find difficult?
What is good about marriage today? What is your biggest concern?*

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