



In this blog, Mark Molden, Chief Executive of MarriageCare, says “If we’re serious about unlocking the Common Good we need to stop hiding the key!”

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) suggests that *"The human race is a "community of communities"...The smallest community [being] the individual family, the basic cell of human society."* CST postures that *"a well-constructed society will be one that gives priority to the integrity, stability and health of family life."*^[i] It's why the question of this Commission is so important: What enables families and households to thrive and prosper?

We know that families come in all shapes and sizes but *"Despite technological advances, there is always a sperm and an egg, a nipple and a mouth – two bodies and two minds coming together."*^[ii] At the root of all our various family types is an intimate adult partnership, the couple relationship – married or not, together, or apart, known or unknown, healthy or unhealthy, fleeting or permanent. That can be an uncomfortable fact and a deeply painful reality for some and as a result, our pastoral sensitivities or political sensibilities tend to obscure the couple relationship from view. In doing so we rob our children and young people, families and households, of one of the most profound agents of the Common Good, foundational to a society in which everyone can flourish.

The labels of 'co-parent' or 'inter-parental relationships' neatly dodge the policy bullet and draw our gaze away from the couple relationship per se and its far-reaching impact on wider society. And the use of the word 'family' may implicitly include couples (married or otherwise, intact or separated) but ends up inevitably drawing the focus towards the parent-child and broader familial relationships. And those of us committed to supporting and advocating for the health of the couple relationship, leaders of relationship charities like me, are perhaps complicit in this. We've adopted the latest policy label – be it parenting, family, inter-parental – to secure necessary funding but also in the hope it might act as a trojan horse for our work to support couples when what was and still is needed is a transparent, unambiguous focus on the couple relationship - distinct from the family whilst recognising its immutable connections to the web of interdependent relationships that we call 'family'. And this matters because to avoid or airbrush the couple relationship from any discussion about families and households or, indeed, from the title of this Commission, overlooks a foundational opportunity to build the Common Good.

Family life exists, for better or for worse, because of the couple relationship and I would suggest that a society in which everyone can flourish – that has the good of all people and of the whole person as its primary goal - will be one that gives priority to the integrity, stability, and health of committed, intimate couple relationships as the basic cell of human society. Not at the expense or denial of other family and social relationships but perhaps as a first among equals and not a silent partner in our reflections on what enables families and households to thrive and prosper.

^[iii] Our policy making, our preaching, our pastoral care and spending priorities need to place the couple relationship centre stage, in sharp focus, in all its messy glory!

"Perfection is not the price of love. Practice is."^[iv] Relationships are messy and they're complicated and the hard work of tending to enduring love is not glamorous. But a living model of the Common Good is to be found in the shared life represented by a healthy couple relationship – where each partner, each spouse, acts together in different ways that all contribute to the goal of a secure loving relationship.

Few would dispute the suggestion that the quality of our closest relationships profoundly affects how we feel about ourselves. Good relationships and social connections keep us happier and healthier. Much less widely acknowledged however – although just as true – is the fact that the quality of our intimate adult partnerships, of couple relationships, has material and measurable consequences for our lives and those around us, affecting the emotional, cognitive and physical development of our children, our capacity to work and to be fulfilled in work, and our physical and mental health as we get older. The evidence is unequivocal and the impact on public health outcomes are far reaching.

The government has played a consistent role in relationship support since 1947. The post-war Denning Report recommended that public funds should be provided for 'a marriage welfare service' delivered through organisations like Marriage Care who had the appropriate social capital and community trust to enter this most private relational space. And that investment paid off leading to the creation and growth of national voluntary organisations committed to the quality and stability of the couple relationship, and the development of research, training, resources, services, and expertise.

The cost of family breakdown (by which we mean couple relationship breakdown!) to the UK has been estimated at £51 billion per year. That equates to more than half of what we spend on either pensions (£92 bn) or education (£87 bn) and more than we spend on defence (£37 bn)^[v] and yet government funding for relationship support is microscopic in comparison – less than 0.03% per annum.

The Department for Work and Pensions are to be commended for securing £33 million to fund the Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) programme and there are promising signs that couples may be able to find support through the Department for Education funded Family Hubs. But the RPC funding is £33m over 3 years and will be channelled through Local Authorities. That equates to £73k per annum, per LA, most of which will inevitably fund local government overheads or capacity building at the expense of the spectrum of universal in-person, webcam and digital support for couples that's so desperately needed. Tackling a long-term global cost of living crisis will need a range of policy interventions but one sure way to lessen its impact both materially and emotionally is the bulwark of healthy, stable couple relationships.

If we want to unlock the door to a society in which families and households can flourish, then let's stop hiding the key!

"To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything..."^[vi]

[i] THE COMMON GOOD AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING. A statement by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. 1996

[iii] Tell me the truth about love. 13 Tales from the Therapist's Couch. Susanna Abse

[iii] Of the 19 million families in the UK, the most common type of family is married couple families, of which there are around 13 million. The second largest family type is the cohabiting couple family at 3.3 million. Add to that 2.9 million lone parent families in the UK, 86% of which are headed by a female lone parent.

[iv] John M. Gottman, Eight Dates: A Plan for Making Love Last Forever

[v] <https://marriagefoundation.org.uk/cost-family-breakdown/>

[vi] Timothy Keller, The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God

Mark Molden was appointed as Chief Executive to Marriage Care in January 2013, Mark's experience spans the commercial, public, and voluntary sectors and he is passionate about helping couples form and sustain healthy marriages and relationships. The views expressed are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Archbishops or the Church of England

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