

# What's At Stake

**Address of Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley, O.F.M. Cap., Archdiocese of Boston**

**Summit of October to Save (SOS) Marriage**

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"Love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage," and in some sectors of modern society, love and marriage are becoming as obsolete as that outmoded form of transportation. The Boston Globe a few years ago, under the rubric "Goodbye Ozzie and Harriet," reported that only 7 percent of American households had stay-at-home moms and working dads. Even in times of prosperity, our economy is not family-friendly.

The same report documents the fact that only 36 percent of US households are comprised of married folk, and the other 64 are made up of single parents, couples who cohabitate, widows, and so forth.

By the same token, the divorce revolution has taken its toll on family life. Between 1960 and 1990, the number of children who experienced the divorce of their parents increased from less than 1 percent to more than 50 percent, and today, over a third of children are being born out of wedlock.

Divorce was touted as a means of greater equality for women. Actually, divorce has contributed to the feminization of poverty.

After a divorce, mothers and children typically experience a 73 percent decline in their standard of living, while men experience a 42 percent increase. In 90 percent of divorces, the responsibility for raising the children falls to the woman. No wonder the woman in The Irish Dail said, "A woman voting for divorce is like a turkey voting for Christmas."

Violence against women and children has also increased dramatically with the breakup of the family. According to the surgeon general, the home is often more dangerous for women and children than the streets. On average, 57,000 women are violently assaulted each year by their husbands, 216,000 by ex-husbands, and 200,000 by their boyfriends. The risk of physical and sexual abuse of children has escalated, often due to the absence of the biological father and the presence of boyfriends and other transient males.

The sad statistics of American life in today's world add up to a typical family with a higher degree of instability, more stress, and greater personal turmoil than is commonly recognized. Often chemical solutions are used to solve spiritual problems, and separation is used to solve interpersonal problems.

Believers who are "married in the Lord" and those who consider marriage a sacrament have a special duty to salvage society from the free-fall spiral that threatens civilization itself. The grave

problems that beset our world today will not find their solutions around the great oak conference tables in Geneva, New York, or the Oval Office, but around the dinner tables where loving parents share their lives, their faith, their friendship with their children at meal times, when families come together to be nourished by prayer, by conversation, by being together.

Pope John Paul II has said in his "Familiaris Consortio" that the first and fundamental contribution of the family to society is the "very experience of communion and sharing that should characterize the family's daily life." By becoming what it is meant to be, the family is the first and most efficacious school of socialization which takes place through their welcoming of each other, their disinterested availability, their generous service, and their deep solidarity.

The Holy Father has written in his letter to families, "It is not an exaggeration to reaffirm that the life of nations passes through the family -- and through the family passes the primary current of the civilization of love."

But the institution of marriage, so crucial [to] the raising of children and sound family life, is in crisis.

The cost to society of the breakdown of marriage is substantial. According to one government estimate, the cost of faltering child development approaches \$1 trillion a year, by feeding a demand for welfare services and by contributing to a multiplicity of social problems, including poverty, crime, addiction, poor health, lower educational achievement, job instability, depression, and suicide.

There have been federal programs to deal with virtually every ill-effect of the breakdown of marriage, but none has dealt with the root cause, and none promote marriage itself.

On Sept. 17, a study was published about the breakdown of marriage in Australia that says it is costing taxpayers there \$3.6 billion a year. A similar study in Britain done this year estimates the economic cost of the breakdown of the English family is costing \$42 billion a year, which translates to \$11 a week for taxpayers. And, of course, those fiscal statistics just represent all of the human suffering behind them.

The ideal way for children to be socialized and raised is in a stable marriage of a man and a woman. Many single parents and grandparents are doing an outstanding job raising children in the most adverse circumstances. However, I am sure that if we ask those single parents and their children what is the best way to raise children, most would agree that a stable marriage between a man and a woman is the optimal basis for raising children.

The unique contribution which marriage makes to the welfare of society has won for that institution privileges and prerogatives that bolster marriage, in the service of child-rearing, and for the common good.

The nature of marriage as a lifelong union of man and a woman, who enter into a total sharing of themselves, for the sake of a family, is not simply a religious teaching. Marriage predates the

founding of our government. Indeed, it predates the founding of our church. Marriage is not a creation of the state or of the church, and neither has the legitimate authority to change its nature.

To dismiss people's legitimate concerns about the institution of marriage as simply unjust discrimination against homosexual persons is to dismiss the centrality of marriage for the well-being of society. The concerted campaign of Hollywood and TV to reshape public opinion into accepting same sex marriages has been a great disservice to the American people.

As for Catholics, the same catechism that demands that people of homosexual orientation should be treated with every respect and with compassion, and their rights should be defended, also defends the unchangeable nature of marriage.

One of the reasons for the social fabric coming unraveled is that we have placed an exaggerated emphasis on the preferences and conveniences of individuals, elevating these personal preferences to the level of rights and entitlements, to the detriment of society.

Any redefinition of marriage must be seen as an attack on the common good. The weakening of the institution of marriage has already had too high a social cost. Our concern must be to strengthen marriage and create a climate that will be supportive and indeed promote the traditional paradigm of marriage.

We are part of a pluralistic society and in no way pretend to force our religious preferences on other people. But neither can we be intimidated by those who see our defense of the common good as simply mean-spirited, narrow-minded, or intolerant of other people's supposed rights.

The rights of children and indeed of the community demand that we support family life by protecting the definition of marriage. Nothing will strengthen family life and society like a strong institution of marriage, and nothing weakens family life and society like a weak institution of marriage.

I would urge all the members of our community, regardless of their religious persuasion or their sexual orientation, to realize what is at stake and to oppose any attempt to alter the definition of marriage.

I am not so naive as to think saving the definition of marriage is enough to undo all the harm suffered by society, caused by a weakened institution of marriage. I would hope that those who promote same-sex unions will not be so naive as to fail to recognize the impact that redefining marriage will have on American culture, which has already suffered too much because of the deterioration of family life.

Strengthening marriage in the face of widespread cohabitation and the galloping divorce rate needs to be the concern of every citizen. Radically redefining marriage will simply serve to intensify the assault on marriage and the American family.

Thank you for your commitment to marriage and family life, and God bless you.

