

Marriage Care: How Can We Be a Synodal Church in Mission?

Marriage Care is an English Catholic charity established in 1946 to support Catholic couples whose relationships came under stress after the trauma and upheaval of World War II. “Accompanying” and “active listening” have been central to Marriage Care’s ministry of marriage preparation and relationship counselling since its inception. In the context of the Synod on Synodality, a small group of volunteer members, staff, and trustees of the organization undertook a process of reflection on marriage and the couple relationship in a synodal way. We publish here the document that summarizes their reflections, “How Can We Be a Synodal Church in Mission?”¹ We have retained the original formatting and footnotes, with only minimal adjustments to conform to our journal style, since we are merely reporting their findings for the convenience of our readers.

The organizers have provided a summary as an introduction:

We noticed that the church at least in its pastoral pronouncements seems to have difficulty in separating marriage from family so that often marriage is subsumed into “Marriage and Family Life” and obscured from view. Marriage Care, now acutely aware that marriage is just one option that couples can adopt in living their lives together, with or without children, is committed to offering a preparation consistent both with modern conditions and church teaching and a model of respectful, realistic counselling. We try to enlarge the tent so that all are welcome, or at least, not turned away.

Of the individuals choosing to marry in the Catholic church and prepared by Marriage Care, 51% identify their ethnicity as White British, 73% are baptised Catholics, and 18% are parents. The diversity of those accessing Marriage Care’s relationship counselling service reflect our mission to support the church and wider society and respond to the synodal call to go to the peripheries: only 17% are baptised Catholics whilst 64% are parents; the effects of parental breakdown, especially a bitter one, on children can be profound and long lasting.

¹ The document is available on their website: www.marriagecare.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Love-One-Another—How-we-can-be-a-synodal-Church-in-mission-FINAL.pdf.

In our deliberations we noticed that of all the sacraments, marriage hardly figured in the synodal documents, yet apart from the sacraments of Christian Initiation, marriage is likely to be the sacrament lived by most adult church members. However, even *Amoris laetitia* describes the couple's "call to experience conjugal love as an imperfect sign of the love between Christ and the Church" (AL 72). Where should that teaching figure in a marriage preparation course? We remain however indebted to *Amoris laetitia* and the Bishops of England and Wales's 2022 reflections on it.

We noted in the light of the abuse and cover up scandals that a model of the church as the indefectible "bride of Christ" was preventing it from coming to terms with its own stated designation: "the Church...is at the same time holy and always in need of being purified and incessantly pursues the path of penance and renewal" (*Lumen gentium* 8). We suggest that this same need of forgiveness and starting over is true for most marriages, some of the time. We grasped the dynamically reciprocal nature of the imagery of Ephesians 5,24-31 and suggest it will aid the church's self-understanding.

How Can We Be a Synodal Church in Mission?

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (*John 15:12*)

I. Introduction

1. Tradition has it that at the end of his life, after years of complex theological reflection, St John the Evangelist said less and less until all he would say in his sermons was: "Love one another." Synodality offers us, the Church, the People of God, an opportunity to emulate the simplicity St John attained and glimpse what a mission to "love one another", to "walk in love",² looks like in the concrete, messy, everyday realities of marriage, of the healthy, committed intimate couple relationship, *the* primary cell of human society – where "realities are greater than ideas".³

2. Marriage Care as a movement, having contributed to the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales National Synthesis Document (June 2022), has continued to reflect more deeply on the vocation of marriage based on our experience of accompanying couples since our inception in 1946. What is encouraging is that despite all the challenges couples face in living out this calling it remains robust and adaptable to the changing circumstances of society. However, if we are to promote the vocation of marriage, then that needs to include practical responses to the pastoral realities and lived experience of many, who, despite the difficulties, feel called to embody the "domestic church".

² Eph 5,2.

³ *Evangelii gaudium*, 233.

3. Our synodal journey within Marriage Care over the past two years has been one of listening, prayer, and reflection, tuning in to what leads us toward God and what away, and the realisation that in so many ways we have only just begun. This document represents the fruit of that journey so far and is offered in all humility and hope and trust that it will help shine a light on the pathway towards a synodal Church in mission.

II. *The context for couples in England and Wales*

4. In the Catholic Social Teaching tradition, we are encouraged to understand the lived reality of individuals and the communities around them (“see”) before discerning (“judge”) what works (“act”) are needed. By the same token, we need to “see” the concrete realities of marriage, of the intimate couple relationship, in order to discern how we can be a synodal Church in mission, in our local context. The following statistics provide a picture, albeit limited, of the context for couples in the UK, the context in which we work.

5. In 2022, the proportion of the population aged 16+ who were married or in a civil partnership fell below 50% for the first time. Couples living together but not in a marriage or civil partnership increased by more than a fifth – from 19.7% in 2012 to 22.7% in 2022 – equivalent to 5.4 million people in 2012 and 6.8 million people in 2022.⁴

6. There’s a growing Marriage Gap: 87% of high earners (over £43k) marry; only 24% of low earners (under £16k) marry. The number of children born to unmarried couples exceeds the number of children born to married couples.⁵ 90% of all parents who stay together until their children reach 15 are married. If current trends remain as they are, a child born today in the UK has more than a one in three chance of not living with both birth parents by the age of 15.⁶

7. The following demographics provide a profile of *individuals* choosing to marry in the Catholic Church and prepared by Marriage Care:

- They have a median age of 31;
- 85% are cohabiting;
- Only 51% identify their ethnicity as White British⁷;
- 73% are baptised Catholics;
- 18% are parents;
- 18% are low earners.

4 Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2022.

5 ONS, 2022: “Births in England and Wales: summary tables – Office for National Statistics” (ons.gov.uk).

6 *Family Resources Survey, 2012-2013*.

7 Compared to 81% of the population (ONS Census data).

8. And the demographic of *individuals* accessing Marriage Care’s relationship counselling service reveals a diversity of people seeking help through our mission to support the Church and wider society, to respond to that synodal call to go to the peripheries:

- They have a median age of 37;
- 72% are married⁸;
- Only 60% identify their ethnicity as White British;
- Only 17% are baptised Catholics;
- 64% are parents;
- 29% are low earners.⁹

III. *How can we be a synodal Church in mission?*

i. *Recognise that marriage is synodal.*

9. Married couples represent a synodal “domestic church” in mission from which the universal Church can learn.

10. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) speaks of marriage and ordination under the same heading, both as sacraments at the service of communion. They “are directed towards salvation of others... They confer a particular mission in the Church and serve to build up the people of God.”¹⁰ As such, marriage involves synodal ways of living, a coming together and journeying together, quietly undertaken by the largest vocation in the life of the Church. As St. Augustine observed, “...the first natural bond of human society is man and wife... For they are joined one to another side by side, who walk together, and look together whither they walk.”¹¹

11. The marital love that lies at the heart of the teaching in *Amoris laetitia* is the model for all loving relationships, a continuous lesson in learning how to love. Love lies at the heart of the healthy, committed, intimate couple relationship, a space in which the Holy Spirit is at work and is a gift of witness with all its fragilities, to the wider Church community and indeed to the whole of society. Learning to love is an ongoing journey for all people and especially so for those who seek to live out, as best they can, the promises exchanged in matrimony.

8 The proportion of people aged 16 or older in England and Wales who are married or in a civil partnership was 49.4% in 2022, Office for National Statistics (ONS).

9 Marriage Care client data, April ’22 – March ’23. Sample size: 4,766 individuals.

10 CCC 1534: “Holy Orders and Matrimony are directed towards the salvation of others; if they contribute as well to personal salvation, it is through service to others that they do so. They confer a particular mission in the Church and serve to build up the People of God.”

11 *Of the Good of Marriage* (St. Augustine).

ii. *Recognise marriage as distinct from the family.*

12. Given the centrality of marriage to the life of the Church, a serious, sustained consideration of the sacrament and its lived reality has yet to emerge in the synodal discussions and documents despite it being described as “the covenant...that lies at the heart of God’s design for creation.”¹²

13. 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. We know that families come in all shapes and sizes but “despite technological advances, there is always a sperm and an egg... – two bodies and two minds coming together.”¹³ These can be uncomfortable facts and a deeply painful reality for some, and as a result, our pastoral sensitivities tend to obscure the couple relationship from view and speak only of the family or parents.

14. The Book of Genesis reminds us that it is the couple and their marriage, which is the culmination of the act of creation. Therefore, the basic unit at the very beginning is the couple themselves, called to a relationship of equality and reciprocity, whether or not they have children. Pastoral activity though is often focused on providing schemes and resources for parents and children, with little or no regard for the essential witness of the couple and the support they might need. There are many couples where there are, for a variety of reasons, no offspring, and others who have finished raising their families, whose couple witness is, we believe, overlooked and undervalued by the Church.

15. Many couples often have a limited understanding of the beauty and complexity of married love, and this appears to us to be part of a wider cultural malaise across all constituencies within the Church that reinforces the notion that marriage is second best to other forms of vocation.

iii. *Recognise God in all things.*

16. Many couples find the distinction between “sacramental” and “natural” marriages confusing. If God is present in both states, albeit in different ways, how do we help the couple to recognise and respond to that reality?

17. As Catholics we believe that “grace perfects nature”,¹⁴ and that the assured grace and blessing of the sacraments of the Church does not exhaust the ways in which God’s saving grace is experienced. Whilst recognising, then, the difference between “sacramental” and “natural” marriage, there remains a need to seek to find ways in which the presence of God in all marriages can be experienced by

12 *A synodal Church in mission. Synthesis report*, 9.a) Women in the Life and Mission of the Church.

13 *Tell me the truth about love: 13 Tales from the Therapist’s Couch*, Susanna Abse.

14 St. Thomas Aquinas.

couples, whatever the status of their relationship, and in ways most appropriate to their situation. A place to start could be the blessing given to all couples at the conclusion of the marriage service.¹⁵

18. A synodal Church in mission can accompany couples from the “secure base” of faith in the presence and action of God, in all things, and the knowledge that he has created all people with an innate destiny and desire for union with him. A good or good enough healthy marriage or committed, intimate couple relationship, can meet our deepest needs and draw us towards God, and all forms of support for relationships that lead to increased loving, forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, and flourishing, is of God.

iv. Recognise that ideals can mitigate against learning to love.

19. For many, unrealistic ideals can work against learning to love wisely and well. “At times we have...proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families.”¹⁶ Married couples can be over-burdened by these unreal expectations and need a pastoral focus that is willing to see and cultivate the good in the messiness of their married lives.

20. Marriage is a vocation in which our human imperfections confront us daily, which is a sign of strength and a place of grace not an idealised way of living. Maturity, not perfection, is the goal.¹⁷ A good or good enough healthy marriage can be a gift of witness with all its fragilities and daily exercise of promise keeping.

21. Marriage is a starting place for understanding and contributing to the Common Good – the ability to live in communion across individual difference. All human beings are intrinsically different and it is often complementarity not similarity that makes relationships work. A couple can't have a healthy, committed, intimate relationship without difference, disagreement, debate, and difficult, painful, or uncomfortable feelings; and they wouldn't want a relationship without any differences, any disagreement, any debate, any difficult, painful, or uncomfortable feelings either.¹⁸ It's how these things are experienced and resolved that matters.

15 “...there is a need for further reflection on God's action in the marriage rite; this is clearly manifested in the Oriental Churches through the importance of the blessing that the couple receive as a sign of the gift of the Spirit.” *Amoris laetitia* 75.

16 *Amoris laetitia* 36-37.

17 Matthew 5,48: “Be *perfect*, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The Greek word here is *teleios* which the Vulgate translates into Latin as “perfectus”. It can mean ‘perfect’ but is more usually used to refer to maturity or wholeness. www.biblesociety.org.uk/explore-the-bible/bible-articles/what-does-jesus-mean-when-he-says-be-perfect.

18 “The 4 D's, 1996-2003 One Plus One Marriage and Partnership Research”.

v. *Recognise the realities of married love.*

22. A synodal Church in mission is one that reflects more on the realities of married love rather than solely a theory of married love. “The greatest mission of two people in a loving relationship is to help ‘fashion’ or shape each other to better reflect what they are called to be in God, just as God, out of love, fashioned Adam and Eve (Genesis 2,7). This life-long loving of one’s spouse for who they are, not what we want them to be, is a particular kind of mission which requires ‘the patience of a craftsman, a patience which comes from God.’” (AL 221)¹⁹

23. The first disciples were imperfect, and Jesus knew this. However, they were called and frequently helped along the way. The synodal pathway can help the Church journey with the imagery, and eschatological reality in Christ, of the indefectible and pure *alongside* a mature recognition that in its relationship with Christ there will be times and episodes, as in any marriage, when it falls short but without the covenant being abrogated.²⁰ “Every human family is marked by failure and the human family of the Church needs to learn how Christ’s love and mercy can be expressed and offered, faithfully and consistently, today”²¹ and yet the Church also has much to learn about how Christ’s love and mercy is already being expressed and offered through the everyday, faithful and fickle, consistent and changeable, realities of the healthy, committed, intimate couple relationship.

24. The Church, in a desire to protect marriage over the centuries, has often focussed on an ideal of marriage, rather than rejoicing in the concrete reality of married love with all its light and shadows. Rather than providing a cage for the couple what is needed is a framework for life and tools that will help them cultivate their own patch of God’s grace in their marriage. After all, “synodality is about the ordinary, daily life of the Church”.²²

vi. *Recognise the pastoral needs of couples where they are, as they are.*

25. The pastoral posture of unconditional positive regard²³ has enabled Marriage Care to walk alongside those “beyond the walls” of the Church, embodying the call of synodality to go to the peripheries, to “enlarge the space of your tent...”²⁴

19 “The Joy of Love: A series of reflections on themes from the Apostolic Exhortation Joy, Love, Mercy, Realities and Discernment, Mission”, 2022.

20 Eph 5,22-33 describes the reciprocal relationship between human marriage and that of Christ and his bride, the church.

21 Bishops of England & Wales Reflection on the Synodal National Synthesis, “Seeking our Hearts’ Desire”, 2022, page 30.

22 Jean-Claude Hollerich, Archbishop of Luxembourg and Synod Relator.

23 Unconditional positive regard, a concept from Rogerian psychotherapy, is the practice of showing non-judgmental acceptance and warmth towards therapy clients.

24 Is 54,2.

26. Dialogue, sharing, forgiveness, consensus and openness to difference are all part of the couple's journey. At times this requires speaking boldly, at other moments listening with the heart and sitting together with differences. Marriage Care has been helping couples to respond to the difficulties in their relationships through our counselling service, or accompanying those preparing for marriage, by meeting people where they are and as they are. We accompany them, albeit in a limited way, provide them with tools, and respect that it is for them to make the journey together. Recognising that we are not the expert on their relationship lies at the heart of this approach, as that responsibility lies with the couple whom we accompany at certain stages of their relationship journey as they mould and reshape their unique model of married love across a lifetime and where "forgiveness becomes the word for divine love in the human context".²⁵

27. The person-centred attachment models used in our relationship counselling service are a means of developing a synodal model of dialogue for the couple within their relationship, helping the disillusioned and hurt to once again "listen carefully...and incline the ear of [the] heart"²⁶ and so discover together a new narrative for the future. We give couples the confidence to try again and to rediscover the person with whom they committed to a shared life. Our unseen work in the counselling room demonstrates the need to help all couples to participate in an intimate human relationship formation. We accompany couples in distress so that they can deepen their understanding of each other and "forgive the other person for not being God".²⁷

28. Learning to love well is a life-long adventure. At Marriage Care, we encounter couples where they are at any moment in time, always beginning with the realities of their shared life together. We as a Church need to offer a way of enabling couples to see how their relationship can be enriched and informed by faith rather than simply bound by a set of rules. This means having the courage to recognise the good in a couple's relationship and respond constructively to the variances – not least for couples where one comes from another tradition, faith background or identifies as having no religion.

29. On the subject of same-sex relationships, individuals themselves often feel stigmatised or excluded by the Church. In contrast, for many people, these are our loved ones, real people held by love within their families. In contrast to the compassion, love, and understanding within these families, the Church can come across as distant, cold, and judgmental. We know that God sees the good in people and ask how our Church communities, public teachings, and communication might reflect this more faithfully.

25 *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith*, Henri J.M. Nouwen.

26 *Rule of St. Benedict*.

27 Henri J.M. Nouwen.

IV. Conclusion

30. Marriage Care's mission, and indeed that of many of our friends and peers in the Alliance of Catholic Marriage Organisations²⁸ and other marriage ministries, reflects key aspects of synodality:

- Listening: the discipline and discomfort of enabling couples to dialogue safely at every stage of their relationship.
- Being present and working with couples who are disillusioned and dispirited to help them craft a new narrative.
- Accompaniment: reflected in our charism of meeting couples where they are on their journey, walking alongside them for a time to enable them to discover the tools to discern a new spirit of communication and collaboration.

31. This breadth of accompaniment of couples offers a “pearl of great price”²⁹ to the wider Church through the mission to support and champion marriage, and yet we offer this up knowing that our own synodal journey is far from complete, that more listening, prayer, and reflection is needed.

32. Our advocacy for recognising the synodal value of marriage and the committed, intimate couple relationship in all its everyday realities is also a mirror reflecting our own realities too. Marriage Care's contribution to the National Synthesis (June 2022) was the result of an organisation-wide survey issued to 522 volunteer members, staff, and trustees. A small group of 10 emerged from within the organisation who were keen to continue the synodal conversation and this document is the fruit of 7 “Conversations in the Spirit” spanning over nearly 2 years. The experience of active listening and speaking from the heart³⁰ has been profoundly moving, deepening relationships within the group and evoking a longing for the whole organisation to share in the experience of synodality, the experience of “a loving conversation”.³¹

33. In helping couples to learn to love well, and to practise love wisely and sustainably, we help them to learn to listen to the other, not to shy away from difficulties and challenges, and most importantly learn the narrative of each other.

34. And in helping Marriage Care and the Church to learn to love well, and to practise love wisely and sustainably, couples can help us to learn to listen to the other, not to shy away from difficulties and challenges, and learn the narrative of each other – together making a reality of that command to “love one another”.

Ends.

28 www.allianceofcatholicmarriageorganisations.org.uk.

29 Matt 13,46.

30 www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/en/EN_Step_6_Spiritual-Conversation.pdf.

31 *Listening Together: Meditations on Synodality*, Timothy Radcliffe.