Family Matters
and the USCCB

Pamela Smith, SS.C.M.

Smith reflects on significant documents approved by the bishops of the United States at their November 2006 meeting. She identifies ways in which these documents are both helpful and challenging for pastoral ministry.

The superficial role-modeling of screen and sports stars, the seemingly moral relativism portrayed by mainstream media, and the denominational multiplex displayed before Americans each day by often fundamentalist religious broadcasters provide the backdrop for repeated efforts on the part of the U.S. bishops, worldwide synods, and recent popes to address issues of family life. In November 2006, the U.S. Catholic bishops again offered clarification, challenge, and reflection on family life in three senses: family as basic unit of society and domestic church; eucharistic family of the church; and human family in the face of terrorism and conflict.

“Married Love and the Gift of Life”

Not surprisingly, the bishops affirm the unitive, procreative, and sacramental character of marital love. These notions are older than the iterations of Gaudium et Spes, Humanae Vitae, or Evangelium Vitae. What seems new in

Pamela Smith, SS.C.M., Ph.D. is past associate dean and director of Lay Ministry Programs at SS. Cyril and Methodius Seminary, Orchard Lake, Michigan. Her publications include nine books and a recent article, “Thinking with the Church and Its Moral Theology,” in James Keating, ed., Moral Theology: New Directions and Fundamental Issues (New York: Paulist, 2004).
“Married Love and the Gift of Life” (USCCB) are several emphases and cautionary notes.

From a theological perspective, strong strains of the developing “theology of the body” are found. When this document speaks of the “body language” of marital relations, it clearly presumes not only relational “conversation” but something revelatory. The revelatory aspect is implicitly a communication of God's love, one to the other, a commitment to “communion with God,” and a creative participation in the coming-to-be of the future. The bishops’ reflections presume dimensions of marital love that are protological and eschatological but also fully immersed in the works of earthly justice. Couples are cautioned not only to be fruitful and multiply in the conventional sense but to exhibit a love that is “complete and fruitful when it is open to others, to the needs of the apostolate, to the needs of the poor, to the needs of orphans, and to the needs of the world” (John Paul II). The self-gift of each partner is also expressed in eucharistic language as “total giving of one’s self, body and soul, to one’s beloved.”

These various expressions exemplify the bishops’ familiarity with, and enthusiasm for, the “theology of the body” propounded by Pope John Paul II, which has been explicated by writers such as Christopher West and Janet E. Smith and treated in seminars across the country. The bishops show a sensitivity to a growing interest in and appreciation for “embodiment” (see Nelson) and bodily expression as creative communication and divine connection. Treatment of the human body and its sexual powers as beautiful, powerful, communicative, and sacred is refreshing in a culture where body dynamics continue to be paraded and exhibited in ways that startle and sell, but hardly edify. The challenge the bishops level at several points in this document is to avoid anything which would “falsify” or compromise the language of the body and its rich potential.

Interestingly enough, there is extensive treatment of Natural Family Planning in this statement. This document offers more than the usual references or passing nods to NFP. It dwells on the rights of couples to make conscientious decisions about family size and the timing of births. It applauds the cooperative efforts that NFP requires and the dialogue and mutuality which NFP can affect and enhance in a marriage. These positive notes precede the predictable cautions about “the contraceptive mentality.” The bishops mix a heavy endorsement of NFP and conscientious planning for children with a reemphasis on oft-repeated cautions. Pastors, pastoral counselors, teachers, and catechists can note that a pragmatic
acceptance of artificial contraception and reproductive technologies among the people in the pew is often the result of ignorance of what these do and what they mean. “Married Love and the Gift of Life” invites teachers and leaders to continue to evangelize and educate about what really goes on and what really is symbolized when people choose to make use of a panoply of contraceptives and the laboratory mechanisms of fertility. The bishops offer insights on symbolism and practical information in the mode of service to human awareness. The approach in itself is refreshing. So, too, is the very conciliatory tone of this document. It comes across, simply and clearly, as an invitation to think again.

An opportunity that is missed here (as it has been quite consistently in magisterial documents on sexuality and the dignity of life) is the potential alliance, on this one point at least, with strains of ecofeminist thought. Since the early 1990s, writers like Ariel Salleh, Carolyn Merchant, Catherina Halkes, and Petra Kelly have been cautioning women that “technocratic” solutions to population issues and “reproductive freedom” are unhealthful for women and for the planet. Explicit and implicit endorsements of natural means of family planning have issued forth from these writers. Whether or not they are ideologically sympathetic to other magisterial teachings, it seems that the growing interest on the natural, the organic, and the environmentally sound might easily be tapped in the bishops’ statements on family and life issues in general.

Another omission that might be noted here is likely due to an Anglo-American assumption that couples freely have chosen one another as partners and that the importance of such free choice seems hardly worth mentioning. However, the summer of 2007 acquainted U.S. citizens with the fact that, within their own nation, certain cultures continue to arrange—and actively oppose—marriages of their children. “Honor killings” may well seem the relics of an earlier age, but we find that children’s attempts to enter into religiously or ethnically mixed marriages can still result in grave acts of violence. At the very least, it would seem timely for the bishops, who are concerned across the board with matters of prejudice and violence, to comment on the rights of individuals to choose their own life partners and to be free from fear of reprisals when they sincerely and in good faith proceed to do so. Similarly, it may also be timely to remind couples that domestic abuse ought not to be endured and that abusive situations can, with good reason, be grounds for separation, divorce, annulment.

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Without ever using the term, “Married Love and the Gift of Life” uses the notion of domestic church as the model of God’s relational love and frames its discussion in the spousal nature of the relationship between Christ and the church. The next document, the longest one coming forth from the November 2006 meeting, uses, at least in its concluding segments, the model of ecclesia docens and ecclesia discens, the church that both teaches and learns by listening.

“The Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination”

This longer document, with a considerable segment of pastoral guidelines, offers, not surprisingly, a reiteration of the traditional norm for sexual activity: a heterosexual couple freely bonded in a sacramental commitment which is open to new life. For more than thirty years magisterial instructions and declarations have responded to the gay liberation movement, and now to legislative initiatives, by reaffirming the church’s moral and sacramental doctrines.

This document, however, begins not with an immediate repetition of norms but with pastoral concern for “persons who experience same-sex attraction.” By its third and fourth paragraphs it demands adherence to respect for the “human dignity” of all and repeats previous condemnations of violence against homosexuals. The bishops restate the reasons why homosexual acts, no matter how lovingly intended, are incomplete, and they also reassert the well-known description of “homosexual inclination” as “objectively disordered,” defining this as meaning “an inclination that predisposes one toward what is truly not good for the human person.”

Here, however, they take a surprising turn—one which clearly shows a listening to the sensitivities of those who have received this message in well-publicized past statements. They hasten to add: “Of course, heterosexual persons not uncommonly have disordered inclinations as well.” They note that all sinful tendencies and predispositions—“such as those that lead to envy, malice, or greed”—are disordered and that “we are all damaged by the effects of sin, which causes desires to become disordered.” Without an attempt to speculate about the causality of same-sex attraction, the bishops place the impulse to act on it amid the broad category of human inclinations which subvert the personality and human dignity.

The bishops focus on sources of support for homosexual persons, such as spiritual direction, confession, and a sacramental life in general. A long segment of the document is devoted to pastoral care in terms of catechesis and church participation. The bishops seem to encourage “outing” of homosexual tendencies amid spiritual directors, friends, and family while discouraging “general public self-disclosures.” They admit a general alienation of the gay and lesbian population from the church and urge connection with “support groups noted for their
adherence to Church teaching,” specifically mentioning (in n. 44) Courage and Encourage. Special note is made of the care and concern needed by adolescents who may be discovering homosexual tendencies. Families are admonished “to help ensure that the bonds of love among family members remain intact” when they discover that a loved one has homosexual tendencies. While same-sex couplings are negated and such couples’ raising of children noted as “a serious pastoral concern,” some allowance is made for baptism of children in such households. It is acknowledged that these children may be brought up Catholic, but advice is given as to how baptismal documents should be recorded, showing “a distinction . . . between natural parents and adoptive parents.”

This rather lengthy reflection concludes with the model noted above, insisting that the church must provide for clear teaching but also that its “ministers listen to the experiences, needs, and hopes of the persons with a homosexual inclination to whom and with whom they minister.” As in “Married Love and the Gift of Life,” this statement grounds its discussion by adverting to the relational love of the Trinity and invoking the Holy Spirit as the spirit of love.

From a pastoral viewpoint, several omissions may be noted, and these bear considerable practical weight. One is the very light mention of HIV/AIDS. “General disclosures” that one carries this disease-complex are discouraged, while families of victims are encouraged to turn to the faith community for support. The reality is that when a homosexual in the family has contracted AIDS, their families deal not only with the ravages of the disease but also with the ravages of gossip and judgment, often from neighbors, work associates, and members of their own parishes. There is a need for sensitivity in such cases that surpasses simple calls for “compassion.”

While the statement “Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination” urges families to keep bonds “intact,” it does not address the reality that many gay or lesbian adult children may live long-term with committed partners. In decades past, now magisterially discredited writers such as John McNeil pointed out a problem that continues. There continues to be little moral distinction made between homosexual persons who live in stable relationships and those who engage in promiscuous, revolving-door behaviors. It is clear that the church gives no support to homosexual acting-out, no matter what the relationship might be. Yet
families find themselves treating the long-term partners of their homosexual children or siblings as in-laws. All this has to do with the multiplicity and diversity found both in close-knit and sprawlingly disconnected families.

Today’s reality is such that many Catholic families have family members whose relationships to each other and to the church vary in numerous ways. Family gatherings do not, cannot, and should not become occasions for pronouncements about the members’ living arrangements. Yet some members will worry that lack of comment gives the impression that “anything goes.” Thus, there is a whole notion of coming home and being home, which needs further exploration. Many, many Catholic families have widened their tents in terms of acceptance of multiple religions, diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, widespread regional differences with their attendant customs, and various domestic arrangements among their members. Sharing the family table is vastly different from sharing the eucharistic table, but many devout church members find themselves seriously vexed about how to relate in practical ways to all this diversity. The bishops’ document sounds at times as though it is addressing families who discover that one family member, because of sexual orientation, doesn’t quite fit the norm. There is no real acknowledgment that some Catholic families face and embrace a rainbow coalition—or potential dissolution—when they plan (rather than guess) who’s coming to dinner.

“Happy Are Those Who Are Called to His Supper”

Who is and who ought to be coming to dinner is the focus of this statement, subtitled “On Preparing to Receive Christ Worthily in the Eucharist.” This document, not quite so long as the previous one, bears the broad strokes of the Catechism, Ecclesia de Eucharistia (the 2003 encyclical by Pope John Paul II, “On the Eucharist”), and the very recent apostolic exhortation by Pope Benedict XVI, Sacramentum Caritatis (Sacrament of Love, 2007). The tone, though not necessarily the language, of the document reflects a sense of the sacrament as what Kenan Osborne calls “Eucharist of the Word, Eucharist of the Bread and Wine, Eucharist of the Altar, and Eucharist of the World” (Osborne, 114–24). This document presumes an Emmaus model of hearing and reflecting on the Word before blessing and breaking and partaking, but it places much more emphasis on the elements and actions of the eucharistic prayer. That is, perhaps, one of the surprises of the document. While adherence to the Word is presumed and Scripture texts are amply quoted, some ecumenical and invitational points could well have been made by highlighting what Scott Hahn (writing in The Lamb’s Supper) has called a transformative experience, which he had in attending, for the first time, a Catholic Mass: how surprisingly scriptural it is, through and through.

Of course, establishing or reaffirming the biblical basis of the eucharistic liturgy is not the central purpose of this statement. It seems, instead, to be a response to
the evidence of recent surveys, suggesting that numerous Catholics have lost track of foundational beliefs about the Eucharist. Thus, there is considerable emphasis here on the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist—the Body, Blood, soul, divinity aspect familiar to earlier generations. The term “transubstantiation” is simply and clearly defined, with little mention of the notion of mystery. In two paragraphs there is a strong catechetical recap of the nature of the Eucharist as sacrament and sacrifice, the action of the Holy Spirit in the Eucharist, the union with Christ inherent in reception of the Eucharist, and the participation in the life of the Trinity inherent in the sacrament.

Concern about the apparent casualness with which churchgoers approach Holy Communion has elicited here cautions about what kinds of actions and attitudes might cause a person to suffer a “lack of sanctifying grace” and thus not be fully “in communion with God and with the Church.” Sacramental confession is shown as the remedy for this lack, and a clear, succinct set of examples of alienating actions—grave sins—is set forth here, with the inclusion of a number of things, from sins against faith through sexual sins and fraudulent business dealings to abuse of others or willful neglect of needy parents. There is also a segment describing how “lack of adherence to Church teaching” may disqualify one from partaking of the Eucharist. This section, while it speaks in generalities, seems to undergird moves to exclude politicians who have espoused causes opposed to church teaching from receiving Communion. Similarly, matters that cause “public scandal” are seen as warrants for not partaking of the Eucharist. Interestingly, though, the onus is placed on the person who might be approaching the Eucharist rather than the minister of the sacrament. The statement enjoins individuals to understand when it is appropriate to “refrain” from receiving Communion rather than cautioning them that they might be denied the Eucharist. The guidelines for intercommunion seem, however, more geared to refreshing the memories of celebrants and those involved in ecumenical events. The broader latitude regarding the Orthodox, Assyrian Church of the East, and the Polish National churches are clearly based on an understanding of sacramental validity despite a lack of “full communion.”

What this document expresses is a profound eucharistic faith, grounded in Scripture and Tradition. It highlights the strong warrants for deep reverence for the Eucharist (including appropriate attire) and for a sense of privilege in its recep-

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tion. It describes a course of personal spiritual preparation and also insists that the Eucharist must bear fruit in “a truly Christ-like love for our neighbor that takes us beyond a narrow concern for ourselves and moves us to promote the common good and to uphold the dignity of every human person.” The document thus seems to function as review and reminder. As mentioned above, rather than breaking new ground or sharing new insights, it seems more bent on remedying a perceived lack of eucharistic sensibility among professed Catholics, a lackadaisical attitude in the face of a mystery of faith.

What is not so strong here appears much more strongly in Pope Benedict’s exhortation Sacramentum Caritatis: the personal and interpersonal elements and even the “nuptial character of the Eucharist.” In Pope Benedict’s exhortation there is every bit as much concern for belief, preparation, and devotion, but there are also more elaborated evangelical and ecclesiological discussions, more practical considerations for sustaining a eucharistic life when priests are rarely available, and also a much lengthier treatment of the social and societal ramifications of a eucharistic life. While the bishops’ document is not intended to be an extended pastoral letter, it seems that some additional treatment of these various elements might have been helpful. More acknowledgment of the effects of the shortage of priests in many North American dioceses would seem to be altogether appropriate amid a discussion of the dispositions of those approaching the altar, especially in light of the emphasis on the importance of sacramental confession, not only for those in serious sin but also for those who wish to grow in virtue. So, too, would even greater emphasis on the outcomes—the orientation toward the common good and a commitment to social justice to be expected of a worthy recipient of the Eucharist. Assuredly, the emphasis is present in this document, but it seems that some opportunities are missed when the bishops call for “all Catholics to contemplate the Eucharistic face of Christ.” Somehow the connection with limping children, wounded soldiers, and veiled women on the streets of Baghdad isn’t quite made.

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The fact that those persons are a cause for Christian concern is, however, made in the letter also issued in November 2006 by Bishop William S. Skylstad, in his role as president of the USCCB. The themes of “dialogue” and “dignity” frame...
the discussion of the moral dilemma occasioned by military intervention and action in Iraq. This statement, issued in the aftermath of Bishop Thomas Wenski’s “Toward a Responsible Transition,” acknowledges the initial problem of “a brutal dictator,” Saddam Hussein, while it laments the consequences of U.S. and other nations’ intervention: loss of life, health, and livelihood, “sectarian violence and civil strife.” A culture in chaos is clearly what the U.S. bishops perceive in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion. What the bishops hope to see prevented is protracted “invasion and occupation.” The bishops also remark that they, with the Holy See, had serious moral reservations about U.S. intervention from the start.

Bishop Skylstad’s statement is not so much an assessment as to whether the conditions for a just war have been met as it is a reasoned appeal to peacemaking and to conscientious work for some sort of transition that assures civil and religious rights. There is a tone of helplessness and dismay, however—helpless recognition of the volatility of the region with its many religious and political factions; dismay at the atmosphere of terror, detention, and deprivation. The bishops, through Bishop Skylstad as spokesperson, opt neither for short-term, deadlined exit nor for an indefinite stay. What they do appeal for is some sort of balance that secures protection for shalom on behalf of the Iraqi citizenry.

It is somewhat surprising that concepts so key to the assessment of the justice or injustice of war are not applied here. There is neither mention nor question of proportionality, though it would seem entirely appropriate at this point to weigh whether the costs and harms justify prospective long-term benefits. There is neither mention nor question of jus ad bellum or jus in bello, the justice in going to war or in the conduct of it once it has begun. These, too, would seem right to question in light of the absence of evidence of stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction and also in light of atrocities that have occurred at the hands of “liberators.” Concern for the broad human family—Sunni, Shi’ite, Christian, military, noncombatant, imprisoned and takers of prisoners, families who have been affected by loss, injury, or loss of life or harm to property—all these are expressed here. But the core question of whether the United States should be in Iraq or should remain as a military presence is skirted. Thus, a more critical question, namely, whether one should accept or refuse a call to combat there, is never addressed.

It continues to be evident that Catholic leaders and teachers are at relative ease and have greater confidence in describing who should marry, how people should conduct their sexual lives, and who may worthily receive Communion. It is pos-

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sible, it seems, to answer such questions with considerable straightforwardness and clarity. We continue to have difficulty, however—and thus remain highly ambiguous and ambivalent—when it comes to questions about whether armed conflict, aggressive action, and military enforcement of the “rights” of people in a region not one’s own are appropriate or inappropriate, moral or immoral responses. As one who has done the former rather than the latter, this writer does not cease to wonder whether future generations will find our concept of family skewed because we found it far easier to participate in rosaries for life and rallies against abortion than to counsel our friends and neighbors to resist a call to active duty and to withhold tax payments in the case of yet another venture into battlegrounds. We continue, it seems, to focus on family in the narrower and more local rather than the broader and more global sense. This despite the fact that we follow a Lord who describes all who do God’s will as “brother and sister and mother to Me.”

References


