

Pregledni znanstveni članek (1.02)

BV 72 (2012) 2, 195—203

UDK: 27-42-45

Besedilo prejeto: 04/2012; sprejeto: 05/2012

Tadej Strehovec

Marriages and Cohabitations from Theological, Demographic and Social perspective

Abstract: In the recent decades in Slovenia the frequency of cohabitating lifestyles has been increasing. The general public finds it difficult to define and understand why more and more people are not willing to get married and prefer to live in a non-conventional union. One of the reasons therefor could be the inadequate theological argumentation in the field of family life and the lack of credible research data honestly comparing the benefits of marriage and the disadvantages of the cohabitating lifestyle.

Key words: moral theology, cohabitation, divorce, marriage, children, family ethics

Povzetek: **Zakonska zveza in zunajzakonsko bivanje iz teološke, iz demografske in iz družbene perspektive**

V zadnjih desetletjih so v Sloveniji vedno bolj navzoče zunajzakonske skupnosti. V javnosti je težko opredeliti in razumeti, zakaj vedno več ljudi ni pripravljenih na sklenitev zakonske zveze in raje živijo v nekonvencionalni zvezi. Eden od razlogov za takšno stanje sta lahko pomanjkljiva teološka argumentacija na področju družinskega življenja in odsotnost verodostojnih znanstvenih podatkov, ki bi pošteno primerjali koristi zakonske zveze in pomanjkljivosti zunajzakonskega življenja.

Ključne besede: moralna teologija, zunajzakonska skupnost, razveza, zakonska zveza, otroci, družinska etika

Why is marriage so important for children, for adults and for society? In the last two generations there were more and more children who do not live with their own two married parents. The reason was in increasing of divorce, and more recently by large jumps in unmarried or cohabiting childbearing. At the same time different kinds of public debate about family structure and the meaning of marriages has generated a growing body of social science literature on the consequences of family changes.

Marriage has changed a great deal over the past two generations, including increased incidence and social acceptance of divorce, cohabitation, premarital sex, same-sex marriages, contraception, and unwed childbearing (The Wither-

spoon Institute 2008). Other important changes include reduced tolerance for domestic violence, a change in gender roles, and dramatic increases in the proportion of working wives. Yet when it comes to the benefits of marriage, research shows more impressive evidence of continuity than change or decline.

1. The changing understanding of family in the modern society

In Slovenia the number of household with two parents and their children (the conventional or traditional family) is more and more challenged by other forms of family lifestyles. Since the 1960s the invention of contraceptive pills brings women more autonomy over child bearing. The feminist revolution brought deeper notion of women (reproductive) rights and freedoms. From 1980 till 2010 there were about 200 % increase of divorce and more that 47 % decrease of marriages in Slovenia (Šter 2011). At the same time the level of cohabitation increased. According to the Statistical office of Republic of Slovenia there was the increase of child birth in cohabitating relationships for 222 % in last 15 years (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia 2012). So current tendency is in phenomena that marriage rates have fallen and levels of cohabitation and divorce have increased.

The family where children grow up provides the basic place of socialization and spiritual and intellectual growth. Today the family in different kinds of forms is subject of different pressures from unemployment, poverty, sense of insecurity, and changing economic environment. It is interesting that in such world good sexual and personal relationships between partners become more important than legal obligation as it is marriage.

In Slovenia the definition of family consists of two persons living in the same household. Usually it is the living community of parents (both or one) and children. The family is the community of one man and one woman who live either in marriage or in cohabitation. The majority of families are still consisted by married parents and children (237.000) but from 1991 their number decreased. The number of families without children slightly increased in last 10 years (125.000). About 25 % of all families are single parent with children. In last ten years the number of single mothers increased for one third and the number of single fathers living with their children increased for two thirds. Cohabitating couples already represent 10.8 % of all families in Slovenia (Dolenc 2011). If we take statistic from Eurostat, Slovenia is on the third place in European Union regarding the mother's marital status at the time of birth which is other than married and it is currently more that 55 % (Eurostat 2012). In the recent discussions regarding the controversial Family Code which was rejected on referendum in March 2012, there are same-sex registered partnerships in Slovenia as well. For example in year 2010 there were 9 same-sex civil partnerships registered: 4 between men and 5 between women. From year 2006 there were all together 48 same sex civil partnerships registered in Slovenia (Šter 2011).

There are many different factors which could be the reason of such rapid changing of the family structures:

- a. Changing understanding of traditional social institutions like family, educational institutions, church, state and the (media) promotion of new forms of informal housing, personal freedom, emancipation of women, etc.
- b. Changing perception of religious and moral message, which in Slovenia arises mainly from the Catholic faith. One of the major reasons for such phenomena was the persecution of Church after the 2nd World war and its exclusion from schools, media and public life.
- c. Universal access to the contraception. In 1968 pope Paul VI systematically addressed the effects of contraception. He underlined the long-term negative consequences of contraceptive use like in negative demographic effects; negative consequences for women's physical health, positive impact on prostitution, pornography, the disintegration of matrimonial and family community as well as the negative impact on marital fidelity. Analysis of the situation in the area of contraceptive use in Slovenia indicate a connection between increased use of contraception as well as the almost simultaneous decline in marriage and fertility, and the increase of divorce.
- d. Redefinition of the concept of family. In recent decades in the West different ideas about the various forms of family lifestyles arose. Specifically the non-marital, same-sex, divorced, remarried, recombined etc. »families« are expected to be equally legitimate and »acceptable« as the conventional family of married man, woman and children. Despite the empirical fact that only the traditional family could sustain population growth, the promotion of new non-conventional family lifestyles was done during the last 50 years. That has a negative impact on fertility and demography (Popenoe 2008, 37). Due to unstable relationships, poverty, violence, etc. these kind of family lifestyles are less open to procreate life as married conventional families.
- e. Finally the reduced ability of younger generations to make a formal marriage contract and preference to live in informal housing (cohabitation).

One of the reasons for changing family styles could be in the current media pop culture (TV, Internet) where nontraditional family lifestyles are not enough promoted. It could be said the same for the role of schools which do not provide basic knowledge and information regarding marriage, family, motherhood and fatherhood.

Today now social questions arise in the field of families: What exactly is the meaning of family? Is marriage founded in human nature defined during a long human history or it is a just a social construction which could be ideologically changed? Which are the main arguments to support the redefinition of marriage or to keep it in conventional or traditional way? Why less and less people would like to marry and what is the real advantage of cohabitation? In the pluralistic

modern society there are many beliefs and traditions regarding the family styles. One of the oldest traditions on family, marriage and parenthood is based on the theology of the Catholic Church.

2. The catholic understanding of marriage and family

The Christian understanding of sexuality, marriage, and family has been influenced by the Old Testament. The marriage as an institution is primarily concerned with the establishment of a family, rather than promoting the individual fulfillment of husband and wife. Christianity influenced the meaning of marriage and family life with spiritual perspective and to deepen the relations between marriage partners and between parents and children. In the first centuries the Christians liturgical meetings took place in the homes of Christian families. The family became one form of the church. In this apostolic church, children were included in this spiritual community. They were baptized together with their parents, took part in the worship life of the congregation, and received Holy Communion with their parents.

Roman Catholic doctrine identifies the family as the social and moral center of the community. The family, according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2000), is »the original cell of social life« (art. 2207). The guiding principle of church teaching, the stability of the family, does not admit divorce, which was prohibited by Jesus Christ. Until Vatican II and the teachings of John Paul II church long defined the family as a hierarchical structure headed by the father, in recent documents rejects the traditional subordination of women in the family in favor of equality of dignity and responsibility between men and women.

The family, moreover, is child-centered; traditional Catholic teaching makes the primary end of marriage the procreation and rearing of children. Only recently have Catholic theologians begun to speak of mutual love as an end »equally primary«. In the encyclical *Casti Connubi* pope Pius XI spoke about the meaning of marriage, contraception and eugenics. During the Vatican Council II the family was understood as one form of domestic church based on marriage (*Lumen Gentium*, *Apostolicam Actositatem* and *Gaudium et Spes*). In 1968 the pope Paul VI presented the official position of the Church regarding the birth regulation and responsible parenthood (*Humanae Vitae*). Later pope John Paul II spoke again about family as domestic church, the importance of the value of marriage (*Familiaris Consortio*) and family as a center of civilization of love (*Letter to Families*) which was upgraded with the so called *Human rights of family* (Charter on Rights). Infertility as a challenge for some married couples was addressed in the *Donum Vitae* where some forms of infertility treatment were permitted. About the dignity of women and social role of women pope John Paul II spoke in the document *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

»The family has central importance in reference to the person« and is seen as the vital cell of society and first of the seven matters of social concern addressed in *Compendium of the social doctrine of the Church* (Pontificium Consilium de

lustitia et Pace 2005). The most recent Catholic social teaching about family and marriage could be summarized as life which is willed by God, when he created man and woman in His own image (*imago Dei*) and instructed them that the main aim of marriage is to be fruitful and to fill the Earth. The marriage is a lifelong commitment to parenting that means the raising and education of children. Cohabitation, divorce and adultery are forbidden due to the common good. Procreation is the result of human sexual love which should not be interfered by contraception or in vitro fertilization. From the personal point of view the sexual intercourse between spouses is the sign of mutual respect and love which strengthening the relation between them (Hornsby-Smith 2006, 153–154). The sexual impulse is one of the most powerful forces in human life and it could be destructive or constructive. In the institution of marriage this force could be directed in proper positive way. In the catholic theology the marriage is seen as a sacrament that means as a visible sign of the Jesus Christ presence in the world. The preconditions to conclude the sacrament of marriage are described in the Canon Law. In the recent same-sex marriage debates in Slovenia it is important to underline that officially the Church has strongly condemned discrimination against gays and lesbians while at the same time prohibits the so called same-sex marriages.

Marriage is something special from other personal relationships in conveying a full union of husband and wife. That means in the legal, emotional, financial, sexual, spiritual, and parental level. Marriage is the beginning of a relationship between a man and a woman, who pledges their sexual fidelity to one another, promise loving mutual care and support, and form a family that welcomes and nurtures the children that may spring from their union. This understanding of marriage is present in Europe and America for most of the last two thousand years. It springs from the biological, psychological, and social complementarity of the male and female sexes. This covenant of mutual dependence and obligation, solemnized by a legal oath, is strengthened by the pledge of permanence that husband and wife offer to one another—always to remain, never to flee, even and especially in the most difficult times (The Witherspoon Institute 2008, 5).

For Church the marriage is the social and religious institution designed to control the power of sex drive for procreation, and fulfill of human life. It prevents the potential harm to individual, families and societies. Sexual infidelity and promiscuity lead to broken families, the spread of sexual diseases, greater poverty for women and children, and emotional trauma among family members leading in some cases to violence and even murder and/or suicide. Broken or single-parent families are more likely to produce emotionally damaged children, who in turn are less successful in forming their own families and more likely to fall into pathological or anti-social behavior patterns: violence, drug and alcohol addiction, criminal behavior, failure to succeed in school, suicide and mental health problems.

3. Marriage, family and cohabitation: The evidence from social and biological sciences

Today it is difficult to justify the conventional sense of marriage and family only at the level of theological and anthropological discourse. It is important to use the scientific language of social sciences which in modern society could justify the benefits of marriage and family life. The researches focus on different aspects of marriage and cohabitation: family, economics, education, physical health and longevity, mental health, emotional well-being and crime, and domestic violence.

Researches demonstrate that family structure matters for children. The family structure that helps children the most, is a family headed by two biological parents in a low-conflict marriage (Anderson Moore 2002, 5). Marriage increases the likelihood that fathers have good relationships with their children. Fathers and mothers are affected by the absence of the marriage. Single mothers report more conflicts with children than do married mothers (Acock and Demo 1994, 67). Children from intact families have more close relations with their parents than children from divorced families (Amato and Booth 1997, 112). In United States 30 percent of young adults had poor relations with their divorces mothers compared to 16 % of children whose parents stayed married. The children relationships with their fathers are even at greater risk (Zill et al. 1993, 101). In general the children of divorced or never married parents have less stable relationship with fathers than do children from married families (Seltzer and Bianchi 1988, 671; Aquilino 1994, 310). It is interesting that divorce has more negative impact on relationship between children and parents than remaining in an unhappy marriage. Cohabiting couples usually resemble more to the single than married couples in terms of emotional well-being, physical and mental health (Pienta et al. 2000, 582; Horwitz and Raskin 1998, 505; Stack and Eshleman 1998, 532).

Children living in married families are more likely to score higher in reading comprehension as fourth graders (Marquardt 2005, 47). Such children are about 30 percent less likely to miss school. The effect of family structure on children's educational performance could be more evident in high school graduation rates. Children living in intact, married households are about twice as likely to graduate from high school, compared to children reared in single-parent families. One study found that 37 percent of children born outside of marriage and 31 percent of children with divorced parents dropped out of high school, compared to 13 percent of children from intact families headed by a married mother and father (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994, 20). Marriage influences the emotional health of children. Children from married families are less likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, alcohol and drug abuse, and thoughts of suicide compared to children from divorced homes (Marquardt 2005, 42). The same results could be find from the study of Swedish boys and girls in two-parent homes which were about 50 percent less likely to suffer from suicide attempts, alcohol and drug abuse, and serious psychiatric illnesses compared to children reared in single-parent homes (Ringback Weitoft et al. 2003, 294). Family structure influences the sexual deve-

lopment of girls. Only 5 percent of girls who grew up in an intact family got pregnant as teenagers, compared to 10 percent of girls whose fathers left after they turned six, and 35 percent of girls whose fathers left when they were preschoolers (Ellis et al. 2003, 819). The influence of family structure on boys is more significant. One study proves that boys reared in single-parent or step-families were more than twice as likely to end up in prison, compared to boys reared in an intact family (Harper and McLanahan 2004, 395).

Marriage has also significant benefits for men and women. Very often the financial advantages are mentioned. Married man earns between 10 and 40 percent more money than cohabitating or single man with similar education (Marquardt 2005, 32). Usually married couples spent money in more responsible way than others. Married adults have longer lives, less illness, less level of depression and less alcoholism and drug addiction. Many sociological studies show that cohabitating couples in comparing with married couples more often challenge with divorce (Adkins 2008); with more conflicts (Anderson Moore 2002), more risk for poverty (McLanahan 2000, 704; Rank and Hirschl 1999, 1061); suicide (Cutler et al. 2001; Johnson 2000, 80), mental illnesses (Hetherington and Kelly 2002, 111; Simons et al. 1999, 1027), less physical health (Angel and Lowe Worobey 1988, 50; Lundberg 1993, 1051), lower education (Jaynes 2000, 95), antisocial behavior (Harper and McLanahan 2004, 395), unwanted pregnancy (Hetherington and Kelly 2002, 116), shorter lifespan (Schwartz 1995, 1242), less stable relationships with parents (Gallagher 2006), more risk to get sexual transmitted diseases and to challenge with the infidelity in partner relationships (The Witherspoon Institute 2008, 14). Therefore the claims that all kinds of family life are of the same quality are unfounded and do not have evidence in scientific researches.

4. Conclusion: The family values have important place in modern society

Slovenia as part of European Union is one of the three countries with the most negative demographic future. At the moment more than 300.000 children are missed to maintain the number of the population. The decrease of fertility in last 40 years could be linked with the transformation of family life and promotion of non-conventional households which are less fruitful. In the catholic theology the value of marriage and family is not the matter of gender roles, emancipation and human rights. It is the question of the quality of adults and children lives and from the point of view of the Church the question of long term survival as well. The social experimentation on family life could be part of personal freedoms and preferences but for the well-being of children is of very importance that society promote the value of conventional marriage and family. Such lifestyle is the only type of family life which could create long-term survival and prevent social and economic crisis. At the same time the families based on marriage are more stable, healthy and economically more favorable for children, adults and society. Therefore

the promotion of family values at all level of education, in media and with the suitable family policy it is very important. From the theological point of view the factor of faith should be more included in the research of family life. It is believed that practicing members of religious communities have higher number of children, better relationship between husband and mother, less risk for divorce and better health. Therefore further research on this field will be of the most welcome.

References

- Acock, Alan C., and David H. Demo.** 1994. *Family diversity and well-being*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Adkins, Kate S.** 2008. Implications of violent and controlling unions for mother's mental health leaving. The Ohio State University 2008. [Http://crcw.princeton.edu/workingpapers/WP08-14-FF.pdf](http://crcw.princeton.edu/workingpapers/WP08-14-FF.pdf) (accessed 21.12.2008).
- Amato, Paul R., and Alan Booth.** 1997. *A generation at risk : growing up in an era of family upheaval*. Cambridge, Mass, & London: Harvard University Press.
- Anderson Moore, Kristin, Susan M. Jekielek, and Carol Emig.** 2002. Marriage from a child's perspective: How does family structure affect children, and what can we do about it? *Research Brief*. Washington, DC: Child Trends.
- Angel, Ronald, and Jacqueline Lowe Worobey.** 1988. Single Motherhood and Children's Health. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 29, no. 1:38–52.
- Aquilino, William S.** 1994. Impact of Childhood Family Disruption on Young Adults' Relationships with Parents. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 56, no. 2:295–313.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church.** 2000. 2nd ed. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana; Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference.
- Cutler, David M., Edward Glaeser, and Karen Norberg.** 2001. Explaining the Rise in Youth Suicide: Working paper no. 1917. *National Bureau of Economic Research*. [Http://www.nber.org/papers/w7713.pdf](http://www.nber.org/papers/w7713.pdf) (accessed 20.3.2008).
- Dolenc, Danilo.** 2011. Households and families, Slovenia: 1 January 2011 (final data). [Http://www.stat.si/eng/novica_prikazi.aspx?id=4029](http://www.stat.si/eng/novica_prikazi.aspx?id=4029) (accessed 22.4.2012).
- Ellis, Bruce, et al.** 2003. Does Father Absence Place Daughters at Special Risk for Early Sexual Activity and Teenage Pregnancy? *Child Development* 74:801–821.
- Eurostat.** 2012. Live births outside marriage. [Http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/product_details/dataset?p_product_code=TPS00018](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/product_details/dataset?p_product_code=TPS00018) (accessed 22.4.2012).
- Gallagher, Maggie.** 2006. If marriage is natural, why is defending it so hard? Taking up the challenge to marriage in the pews and the public square. Review of reviewed item. *Ave Maria Law Review*, no. 2. [Http://www.avemari-alaw.edu/assets/documents/lawreview/articles/AMLR.v4i2.gallagher.final3.pdf](http://www.avemari-alaw.edu/assets/documents/lawreview/articles/AMLR.v4i2.gallagher.final3.pdf) (accessed 20.3.2008).
- Harper, Cynthia, and Sara McLanahan.** 2004. Father absence and youth incarceration. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, no. 14:369–397.
- Hetherington, E. Mavis, and John Kelly.** 2002. *For better or for worse: divorce reconsidered*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Hornsby-Smith, Michael P.** 2006. *An introduction to Catholic social thought*. Cambridge, UK & New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Horwitz, Allan V., and Helene Raskin.** 1998. The Relationship of Cohabitation and Mental Health: A Study of a Young Adult Cohort. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 60, no. 2
- Jaynes, William H.** 2000. The effects of several of the most common family structures on the academic achievement of eight graders. *Marriage&family review* 73, no. 1/2:73–97.
- Johnson, Gregory R., et al.** 2000. Suicide among adolescents and young adults: a cross-national comparison of 34 countries. *Suicide&Life-threatening Behavior* 30, no. 1:74–82.
- Lundberg, O.** 1993. The impact of childhood living conditions on illness and mortality in adulthood. *Social science & medicine* 36:1047–52.
- Marquardt, Elizabeth.** 2005. *Between two worlds: the inner lives of children of divorce*. New York: Crown.
- . 2005. *Family structure and children's educational outcomes*. New York: Institute for American Values.
- McLanahan, Sara, and Gary D. Sandefur.** 1994. *Growing up with a single parent: what hurts,*

- what helps*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- McLanahan, Sara.** 2000. Family, state and child wellbeing. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26:703–706.
- Pienta, Amy Mehraban, Mark D. Hayward and Kristi Rahrig Jenkins.** 2000. Health consequences of marriage for the retirement years. *Journal of Family Issues* 21, no. 5:559–586.
- Pontificium Consilium de Iustitia et Pace.** 2005. *Compendium of the social doctrine of the Church*. London & New York: Burns & Oates.
- Popenoe, David.** 2008. Cohabitation, Marriage and child wellbeing: A Cross-National Perspective. Piscataway: The National Marriage Project. <http://www.smartmarriages.com/uploaded/Cohabitation.Report.Popenoe.08.pdf> (accessed 22.4.2012).
- Rank, Mark R., and Thomas A. Hirschl.** 1999. The economic risk of childhood in America: estimating the probability of poverty across the formative years. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61, no. 4:1058–1067.
- Ringback Weitoft, Gunilla, Anders Hjern, Bengt Haglund and Mans Rosen.** 2003. Mortality, severe morbidity, and injury in children living with single parents in Sweden: a population-based study. *The Lancet* 361:289–295.
- Schwartz, Joseph E. et al.** 1995. Sociodemographic and psychosocial factors in childhood as predictors of adult mortality. *American Journal of Public Health* 85:1237–1245.
- Seltzer, J.A. and S.M. Bianchi.** 1988. Children's Contact with Absent Parents. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 50:663–677.
- Simons, Ronald L., Kuei-Hsiu Lin, Leslie C. Gordon, Rand D. Conger and Frederick O. Lorenz.** 1999. Explaining the higher incidence of adjustment problems among children of divorce compared with those in two-parent families. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61, no. 4:1020–1033.
- Stack, Steven, and J. Ross Eshleman.** 1998. Marital status and happiness: a 17 nation study. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 60:527–536.
- Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia.** 2012. Živorojeni, rojeni v zakonski zvezi ali zunaj zakonske zveze, po starosti matere in vrstnem redu rojstva: Slovenija, letno poročilo. <http://pxweb.stat.si/pxweb/Dialog/Saveshow.asp> (accessed 22.4.2012).
- Šter, Darja.** 2011. Marriages and divorces, Slovenia, 2010, http://www.stat.si/eng/novica_prikazi.aspx?id=4003 (accessed 22.4.2012).
- The Witherspoon Institute.** 2008. *Marriage and the public good: ten principles*. Princeton, New Jersey: The Witherspoon Institute.
- Zill, Nicholas, et al.** 1993. Long-term effects of parental divorce on parent-child relationships, adjustment, and achievement in young adulthood. *Journal of Family Psychology* 7, no. 1:91–103.