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## HOW MARRIAGE CAN BE SUCCESSFUL

**BRENNINKMEIJER-WERHAHN, A. & K. DEMMER, eds. (2013) *Close to Our Hearts: Personal Reflections on Marriage* (Münster: LIT) 21 cm, 232 pp., ISBN 978-3-643-90339-6, €24.90.**

Our age does not seem to be an age of marriage. Although living with a partner (either in marriage or cohabiting) is still the preferred way of life, fewer and fewer people tend to get married, and they do so increasingly later in life; they get a divorce more easily, and more and more often after long years spent with their spouse. This latter phenomenon is, of course, related to the fact that in modern, aging societies what is called the ‘classic’ phase of life (when parents live with their children in a common household) is becoming shorter and shorter relative to the parents’ lives, and life spent together after the children have left home is often longer than the period spent with them was, a phenomenon not common before.

Despite all the significant changes we experience, studies indicate that the subjective importance we attribute to partners has not changed, while several differences between countries have diminished. However, research suggests that our expectations towards our partners have even increased, and, especially in the case of younger age groups, these ideals are hard to meet, which often leads to relationship breakdown. Especially data from Germany support that fewer and fewer people, especially (young and more educated) men, are willing to take on the responsibility of starting a family (‘Umfrage: Familiengründung’ 2013). Among other factors, this fear of commitment, experiences of relationship breakdown and changing expectations have raised an increasing number of issues that make the question how marriage can be successful ever more difficult to answer. No ‘magic recipe’ has been found yet, although large numbers of people are in a desperate quest for points of orientation and practical guidance on how to be successful in their relationships.

The book under review is a kind of testimony, often in a very literal sense. It is a mix of theoretical, scholarly and practical, often highly personal insights which exhibit two basic characteristics: they all try to communicate some message about the important ‘ingredients’ of a successful marriage on the one hand, and the importance of Christianity in this regard on the other. The book is an edited volume and claims to contain not only academic studies but also personal accounts and is meant to be a step towards an interdisciplinary understanding of marriage. The contributors are all internationally recognised marriage specialists, coming from a variety of academic fields and personal backgrounds. One of the editors, Aldegonde Brennkmeijer-Werhahn is the founder and director of the International Academy for Marital Spirituality in Brussels; the other, Klaus Demmer is a member of the Order

of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and Professor Emeritus for Moral Theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. The book is a publication of the International Academy for Marital Spirituality (INTAMS), a non-profit organisation founded in Belgium in 1989 by Hubert and Aldegonde Brenninkmeijer-Werhahn. INTAMS has members who are married laypersons and who are celibates, but all of them are dedicated to the study of and dialogue about the meaning and relevance of marriage in the context of contemporary society, being committed to the intellectual and cultural heritage of Christianity. One of their aims is to promote an interdisciplinary dialogue between theology and philosophy as well as the humanities and social sciences so as to contribute to the understanding of marriage in its various interpersonal, social, and religious aspects and in its intrinsic spirituality. INTAMS brings together scholars and research findings from different countries and cultural backgrounds, from all Christian traditions. Their intention to foster the integration of theory and praxis is clearly manifest in this publication.

The basic aim of the book is to 'show from a variety of perspectives that it remains profoundly meaningful to understand marriage as a shared path that leads to maturity' (BRENNINKMEIJER-WERHAHN & DEMMER 2013, back cover). Apart from the Preface, the Epilogue and an introductory piece on 'Sacramental Marriage' by Demmer (11–17), the chapters in the book are organised into four big thematic blocks, each containing five chapters. The four thematic blocks include 'Theological Focal Points', 'Anthropology of Marriage', 'Paths to Maturity in Marriage' and 'Biographical Perspectives and Experiences'.

Although I am a sociologist researching interpersonal relationships, including, naturally, family ties, and I also have personal experiences with marriage, I have gained a wealth of insight from the book. I have to admit my knowledge of theology is limited, and one can learn a lot about marriage as a sacrament, it being the domestic church, its resemblance to the triune God, it being a school of life and other more particular but still interesting aspects such as the theological value of married priesthood. We learn why the space between the couple can be called a sacred, holy space. Apart from the theological background of this sacrament, there are practical details of how to create and make this domestic church visible in our lives, in our homes. However, there are also other messages meant for the widest audience interested in maintaining long-term, loving relationships. How is it possible to 'live happily ever after', and what are the conditions of a good marriage, the 'revolutionary road', which requires openness and thus vulnerability and which demands a 'mutuality in self-giving and self-emptying' (202)? How does trust in each other facilitate the discovery of the other person? How is it possible to become a couple (through ongoing efforts) and yet (together) remain separate? How different can couples be in all respects (see, e.g., 'Time and Marriage' by Alfons Vansteenwegen, 149–155) and how can these differences still be managed and lived with? What about growing old together? Why is 'stickability'/perseverance very important in life in general and in marriage in particular?

In the third section 'Paths to Maturity in Marriage', one can especially read papers that can help one make one's relationship better by focusing on a number of key

issues. In the chapter ‘How Can one Salvage a Relationship?’ by Calvo Rocchetta (113–127), we are reminded that before looking for the suitable person, we ourselves should perhaps become suitable persons first. Crises are almost inevitable and should be viewed as opportunities for growth. Loneliness and monotony are identified as crisis symptoms and tenderness as indispensable for remedy. Ilse Cornu writes about relationship breakdown and urges greater realism and sobriety (‘A Gift for Life’, 129–138): to say farewell to our often fake ideas about the ideal marriage and to ‘say yes to a life together which is good enough’ (130). We should love one another ‘sufficiently’. Divine meekness, that is, love without conditions, is the divine love, which is not perfect but laborious. The topic of sexuality is presented in a very sensitive way. The equality but also the uniqueness of husband and wife are also often highlighted.

What I really liked about this book is its honesty about what a challenge it is, and how much effort it takes to maintain a good quality relationship (not only marriage, I must add) throughout the years! Often how illusionary and life-spoiling our unrealistic expectations are, and how unwilling we sometimes prove to be to work on our relationships, although it definitely seems indispensable. For those open to a religious message, the book also has a lot to offer about the additional value and meaning of a Christian marriage.

### References

‘Umfrage: Familiengründung ist den Deutschen zu teuer’ (2013) *faz.net* (1 Aug) retrieved 16 Jun 2014 from [www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/umfrage-familiengruendung-ist-den-deutschen-zu-teuer-12315053.html](http://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/umfrage-familiengruendung-ist-den-deutschen-zu-teuer-12315053.html).