

# The New Builders of a Marriage Culture

by Colleen Carroll Campbell



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“The future of the world and of the Church passes through the family.”

When Pope John Paul II wrote those words in his 1981 Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*, the institution of marriage was under attack.

The debut of the birth control pill two decades earlier had combined with an emerging hippie counterculture to ignite the sexual revolution. Radical feminists denouncing marriage as a form of slavery had successfully convinced many women that marriage was a bad deal they should avoid or escape.

Men, too, had been encouraged to see marriage as a “trap” and to take advantage of the so-called sexual liberation of women by being as promiscuous as they pleased. American government and the courts accelerated the sexual revolution by legalizing abortion on demand, discouraging marriage, and encouraging single parenthood. Illegitimacy had lost its social stigma, homosexual relations had come out of the closet, and no-fault divorce had become the law of the land.

Caught in the crossfire of these cultural changes were America’s children, who paid a steep price for the sexual liberation of their parents. Marriages ended and families collapsed. Fathers left their wives and children and started over with new wives and new children. Single mothers worked double shifts, struggling to support the children they no longer had time to care for at home.

Television became the nation’s babysitter and moral educator, teaching a new generation that greed is good, sex is a contact sport, and marriage is a contingent commitment that has nothing in particular to do with procreation. Marriage, an institution that Americans once considered the only socially acceptable way for men and women to share sexual intimacy and a household, had become just another “lifestyle choice”—and a ridiculed one at that.

## Hope for the Family

Pope John Paul II saw these developments for what they were: direct threats to the very foundations of the Church and Western civilization. From the beginning of his pontificate in 1978, the Pope has worked to defend marriage and the family by offering young people a compelling alternative to the secular culture’s skewed views. He used his many encyclicals and his theology of the body to illuminate the true meaning of marriage and sexuality in God’s plan.

“[M]arriage and the family constitute one of the most precious of human values,” the Pope wrote in *Familiaris Consortio*. “According to the plan of God, marriage is the foundation of the wider community of the family, since the very institution of marriage and conjugal love are ordained to the procreation and education of children, in whom they find their crowning.”

The Pope has long held that love is the fundamental and innate vocation

of every human person, and man and woman were created to share the very gift of themselves with each other. For that reason, the Pope says, the sexual union of a man and a woman must be a “total self-giving”—a union that occurs within the covenant of marriage and one that remains open to children. Men and women who defy this “law of the gift” are acting against their very nature. They are using their bodies to tell a lie—a lie that can destroy their marriages, their families, and the culture in which they live.

Today’s young adults have experienced that destruction firsthand, and many of them have come to see the Pope as a prophet, a leader they can trust to tell them the truth about who they are and how they should live. Though his message is a radical departure from today’s conventional wisdom about sex and marriage, a growing number of young Catholics are embracing that message and sharing it with others.

### Theology of the Body

A case in point is Christopher West, a young Catholic author and graduate of the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Washington, DC. West credits the Pope’s theology of the body with changing his life, and he now travels across the country sharing that theology with others. He has no difficulty finding an audience. Young Catholics and a growing number of young Protestants are discovering the theology of the body and applying it to their lives. Young adults have formed study groups in more than 20 states to pore over the Pope’s work, and several have launched websites that allow them to discuss it online. “TOB [theology of the body] completely changed our world,” wrote one young man, when explaining on an Internet message board why he and his wife had launched a theology of the body study group for college students. “My guess is that everyone who experiences the revelation of theology of the body will not be able to contain the joy and enthusiasm that we have experienced. So we just need to be vessels for the Holy Spirit to work through.”

The Spirit already appears to be working through the young men and women who have embraced the Christian truth articulated by Pope John Paul. These young Catholics, many of whom were raised without any significant formation in the Catholic faith, are now rejecting the hedonism of the secular culture, practicing celibacy before marriage and chastity thereafter, and building their marriages and family lives around their mutual faith in Jesus Christ.

They practice Natural Family Planning, welcome children lovingly, and often opt to homeschool their children to give them a solid formation in the faith. Many of these “new faithful,” as I call them, are also boldly defending the sanctity of marriage in the public square, using the wisdom of the Church and natural law arguments to defend its time-honored understanding as the union of one man and one woman in life-giving love.

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### Battling the Culture

These young Catholics face an uphill battle, of course. As our nation debates the oxymoronic possibility of “gay marriage” and many Catholics ignore the Church’s teachings on sexual ethics, they often feel outmanned and outgunned in a hostile culture. The authentic understanding of marriage as a procreative, permanent, public commitment is more endangered than ever in our nation, and its defenders are routinely ascribed sectarian motives or labeled “homophobic.”

But these defenders of marriage have the truth about the human person on their side. Armed with that truth, and with the rich understanding they have received from their Pope, their Church, and their own experiences of practicing marital fidelity day after day, these young Catholics have more than a fighting chance of rebuilding an authentic marriage culture in America. ■

