

Theme: The Growing Rate of Marital Failure in Today's Society: Causes and Preventions_

Title: Deciphering the Sociological and Cultural Concepts Underpinning the Present Crisis in Marriage

By: Dr J. Teddy NGU - sirted@gmail.com

Good evening distinguished guests.

Let me begin with a question we all know but rarely say out loud: Why are so many weddings beautiful and trending on social media, and yet so many marriages are breaking?

In our churches here in Africa, we still celebrate marriage with dancing, with kola, with white dresses and choirs. But in counselling rooms, in parish offices, and even in WhatsApp groups, we are seeing something new: couples walking away faster and staying single longer.

Tonight, my role is not to offer all the solutions. Those will come from Prof. Atimati, Fr. Okogie, and Prof. Asuzu. My role is to help us understand the social and cultural forces that are placing pressure on marriage and Christian homes today.

The Catholic Church has always understood marriage as more than a private arrangement between two people. It is a vocation, a covenant, and a domestic church in which faith is lived daily. So, when marriages are under pressure, the crisis is not only sociological; it is spiritual, cultural, and communal.

To do that, we will look through three lenses: first, the sociological forces shaping modern choices; second, the cultural influences shaping African and Christian family life; and third, the trends these forces are producing in marriages today.

SECTION 1: THE SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

Sociology simply asks: how does society shape the way we choose and keep marriage?

1.1 Individualization

The dominant message of our time is: "You come first. Your purpose. Your happiness. Your brand." In many ways, the new trinity has become "me, myself and I". We have placed the self at the centre, and when the self becomes absolute, it quietly becomes a form of idolatry. For a Catholic audience, this matters because marriage is not a contract built around self-fulfilment alone; it is a sacramental covenant in which husband and wife learn, through grace, to make a sincere gift of themselves.

In traditional African society, marriage was about two families, continuity, community, and responsibility. In the Catholic tradition, it is also a sacrament: a visible sign of God's faithful love, ordered toward the good of the spouses and, where God grants it, the gift and formation of children. Today, however, marriage is often marketed mainly as a project for personal fulfilment.

The danger is this: when the marriage stops "fulfilling me," the logical next step in this mindset is to exit.

1.2. De-standardization of life

Our parents' generation had a clear path: finish school, get a job, marry, preferably in your early 20s, have children.

Today that path is broken. People finish school at 25, job hunt till 30, and then ask, "am I ready for marriage?" By then, expectations, fears, and alternatives have all multiplied.

The result is later marriage and longer singleness. People often acquire a strong independence before marriage, and when they marry later, they may have more work to do in unlearning the habits of solitary life.

1.3. Institutionalization of choice

Divorce, cohabitation, and single parenting are no longer hidden realities. They are discussed on radio, on TikTok, in families, and even in church WhatsApp groups. Some situations involve sin, some involve wounds, and some involve people trying to survive difficult circumstances. A Catholic response must therefore be truthful about the ideal of lifelong marriage while remaining pastoral toward those whose family stories are already complex.

Plan B's, in the event things do not work out are being prepared before people enter marriage.

When alternatives, especially deleterious alternatives, become normalized, permanence stops feeling like the only option. People stay in marriage only as long as it "works for me.", or triggers for Plan B are set-off.

Those are the structures. But structures don't act alone. They are carried by culture. And our culture has changed tremendously.

2: CULTURAL INFLUENCES IN OUR AFRICAN & CHRISTIAN CONTEXT

2.1. The Digital and Comparison Culture

Example 1: The Instagram Wedding vs. The Tuesday Morning

A young couple in Lagos or Abuja gets married. For 3 days their wedding is on everyone's status. Aso-ebi, drone shots, praise and worship.

By Tuesday morning, they are arguing about utility bills and whose mother will cook. But their phones are still showing them on honeymoon in Dubai.

Social media trains us to compare our behind-the-scenes with everyone else's highlight reel. And it trains us that if something is hard, you can swipe to the next one. That mindset leaks into marriage.

2.2. Economic Pressure and the "Provider Burden"

In many African homes, a man is still culturally expected to "have arrived" before marriage: house, car, stable income. A woman is often expected to "add value" while also managing the home. With inflation, rent, school fees, and family expectations, these pressures can become crushing. Many delay marriage for five to seven years. Others enter marriage already exhausted, indebted, and

uncertain about how to carry the burden together - as neither might “have arrived” or is able to “add value”.

When money is tight, we fight. And when we fight without a shared spiritual anchor, we blame each other instead of the pressure.

2.3. Shifting Gender Scripts

Our mothers were often taught resilience: “endure, pray, keep the home.” Many women today are also taught: “be independent, have your own income, do not accept disrespect.” There is truth and danger in both messages when either is taken in isolation. What we have often failed to develop is a Catholic script for partnership: one in which husband and wife practise mutual respect, shared responsibility, sacrificial love, and reverence for each other’s dignity.

2.4. Secularization of Values Even Inside the Church

We still say, “what God has joined together,” but in practice many young Christians now use the language of the wider culture: “I’m not happy,” “I need peace of mind,” “This is not serving me.” Of course, happiness matters; the Church does not ask anyone to ignore suffering or abuse. But a Catholic vision of marriage asks a deeper question: are we growing in holiness, fidelity, patience, forgiveness, and self-giving love? The Holy Family reminds us that love is not measured only by comfort, but also by trust in God and faithfulness in difficulty.

Happiness has replaced holiness as the main measure. And feelings, by nature, rise and fall.

So, when you mix these concepts and influences, what trends are we actually seeing?

3: CURRENT TRENDS WE CANNOT IGNORE

3.1. Later marriage and longer singleness

Many committed Christian young people are 32, 35, and still waiting. The waiting room is full of anxiety, desperation and sometimes compromise.

3.2. Cohabitation as "prayerful testing"

I have heard it among some unmarried couples: “Sir, we are just staying together to know each other before God.” Others say, “You cannot buy a new car without test-driving it.” But a person is not a car, and marriage is not a consumer transaction. For Catholics, cohabitation cannot replace discernment, chastity, prayer, family wisdom, and proper preparation for the sacrament of Matrimony.

3.3. Two waves of marital breakdown

Wave one often appears in years 1–5. Couples struggle with unrealistic expectations, weak conflict skills, poor communication, and the difficulty of surrendering the independence they had before marriage.

Wave two often appears in years 15–25. Couples may not be fighting loudly, but they have quietly grown apart. The pressures, compromises, and unresolved wounds that were managed in the early

years begin to surface. Without renewal, prayer, communication, and shared purpose, the centre can no longer hold.

Example 2: _The Church Leader's Son_

A church elder's son marries a choir member. Everyone claps. Two years later they separate quietly. Why? No one taught them how to fight fairly, how to manage in-laws, or how to put God at the centre when attraction fades. They had a ceremony, but not a formation. The optics of the union looked good – especially to and for the parents, and the church community, but not the couple. Everyone got excited about the wedding but cared less about the welfare of the marriage. Not enough energy and time spent on pre-marital coaching.

So if this is the weather, what do we do with this information?

4 WHY THIS MATTERS FOR PREVENTION

We cannot fight what we cannot name.

4.1. Cultural literacy: Couples need to understand that the pressures they face are not unique to them. They are part of the wider social weather affecting marriage today.

4.2. Community, not isolation: Marriage was never meant to be two people against the world. We need mentors, small groups, older (hopefully wiser) couples to inspire and guide.

4.3 Skill + Spirit: We need both. Psychology gives us tools for conflict. Theology gives us the reason to stay when tools are not enough.

Marriage will not survive on romance alone. It survives on covenant, and covenant needs a culture to support it.

Conclusion

Beloved, sociology can describe the storm, but it cannot anchor the ship.

That is why I am grateful this colloquium brings together theology, counselling, and psychology. The next speakers will show us how to build homes that last, not just weddings that trend.

May God help us to be wise readers of our times, and faithful builders of Christian homes.

Thank you.