"Active Faith" in Christian Marriage: The Challenge of Family Systems

Joann Heaney-Hunter

The purpose of this paper is to examine the possibilities for creating an environment which nurtures "active faith" in marriage. I intend to do this by examining historical tradition on Christian marriage, and exploring behavioral science for its contribution to the subject. In particular, I will suggest some ways that family systems theory, with its understanding of healthy marriage and family life, can be a transforming element for the study of marriage today.

Marriage in Christian reality is a roaring lion with strength and vigor and health and dignity that challenges faithful and faithless alike to reach out for a better way of living together under the shadow of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Marriage is ultimately about our doctrine of God, no less. It is about the way we celebrate God's very heart and existence, his love stretching out to us as we enjoy each others company and go so far as to procreate successive generations who may become God's people on earth, where he reigns in glory and vulnerability. (Stevenson, 1987, p. 234).

These powerful images of Christian marriage challenge the church and the world. Marriage, the roaring lion which manifests God, stands as a sign and symbol to the world that God is alive and working in the hearts and homes of faithful couples and families. Ministers in marriage preparation and enrichment, however, state that many persons do not share this view of marriage. Marriages where both parties profess to be Roman Catholic end almost as often as any other marriages. (Glenn and Supancic, 1984,

2Joann Heaney-Hunter is Associate Professor of Theology at St. John's University. Additional information may be requested by writing her at: Department of Theology and Religious Studies, St. John's University, 8000 Utopia Parkway, Jamaica, New York 11439.

© 1997 Human Sciences Press, Inc.
Engaged couples frequently fail to understand how or why the church should be involved in their marriage plans, and some "active" Christians become angry when they must participate in sacramental preparation with or for their children.

The situations I have described above are unfortunate, because Christian couples and families who recognize the gift of their vocation possess the potential to transform themselves, the church, and perhaps even a corner of the world. As faithful couples live the reality of sacramental marriage, they serve as witnesses that God is present in the midst of daily life. By being Christ for one another, for children, and for the wider community, Christian married couples can transform such places as their homes, local churches, and even their corners of the world.

Christian marriage, however, while possessing the ability to transform, must also be transformed. How many of the couples described above live marriages that are "roaring lions" which point to the "essence of God"? In two articles, Michael Lawler (1991) notes that many couples cannot see their marriages in this way, and that some couples, because of their lack of faith, do not live sacramental marriages. He asserts that sacramental marriage requires not a minimum intention of faith, but active faith, lived out in the marriage. Moreover, he challenges the legal tradition of the 1917 code of Canon Law, which states that all marriages of baptized persons are sacramental, and proposes that the active faith of the participants is essential for a sacramental marriage. (December, 1991, p. 725). He states clearly: "...no amount of legal presumption will ever supply for lack of active faith for marriage partners. In marriage, we are dealing with adults who are required to have an active faith to participate in any sacrament, baptism as well as marriage." (July 1991, p. 353). He further notes:

It is only an explicit and conscious personal act of faith that makes her a believer in the primary sense of the word, namely, one who actually believes. It is in such active personal faith, and not just in the virtue of faith, that she cooperates with God in Christ and Christ in the Church in the transformation of secular realities, including marriage, into Christian sacraments. (p. 359).

In other words, if persons cannot demonstrate some active faith, they are incapable of entering into a sacramental marriage, because they cannot be a sign of Christ and the church to others. In Lawler's words: "Those who marry without active Christian faith, be they ever so baptized, marry without the Christian sacrament" (December 1991, p. 721).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the possibilities for creating an environment which nurtures "active faith" in marriage. I intend to do this by exploring behavioral science for its contribution to the understanding of Christian marriage. In particular, family systems theory, with its view of the good marriage and the healthy family, is especially important.