



Towards a Healthy Marriage in Malta

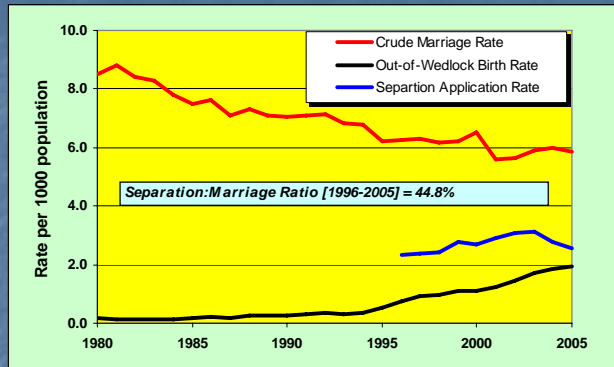
A Study Commissioned by Caritas (Malta), the Cana
Movement, and the Diocesan Commission of the Family
October 2007

Introduction

- Throughout the world, one is continually encountering divergent views on the identity of marriage, or to put it more explicitly, what actually constitutes "marriage".
- Sociologically, and sometimes legally, one finds a widespread acceptance of different forms of marriage structures.
 - cohabitation, lone parenthood, same sex partnerships as well as heterosexual marriage.

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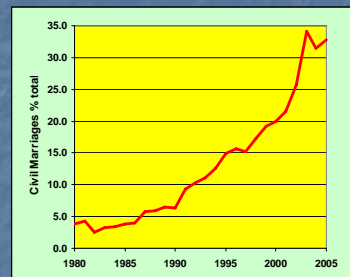
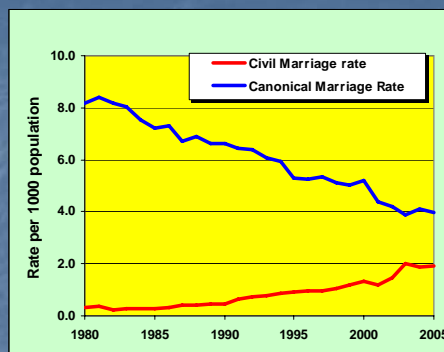
Demography



- Crude Marriage rate is decreasing
- Rate of Separation Applications is increasing: Separations : Marriage ratio stands at 44.8%
- Rate of Out-of-Wedlock births [= \pm co-habitation] is increasing

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Demography



- Canonical Marriage Rate is decreasing
- Civil Marriage rate is increasing:
Proportionately from ~5% in 1980 to ~35% in 2005
- An increase of 30 percent in 25 years

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Method

- **Qualitative research strategy**
- **Unstructured interview by a professional interviewer**
- **45 key opinion leaders in Malta and Gozo were reached**
- **Analysis of the results and conclusions**

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Research Team

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Team

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Working Definition of a Healthy Marriage



- “A formal and indissoluble union between two persons of different sex”

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Issue: Do you agree with the definition of a “healthy marriage”?

- Opinions expressed by respondents were varied:-
 - 6 respondents disagreed with the definition
 - 10 respondents agreed with the definition
 - Remainder made qualifications to their response
- A deeper analysis of the comments made however gives a wider dimension and there appears to be a good level of consensus among the opinion leaders.
 - “healthy” vs. “stable” marriage
 - No emotional element taken into consideration and use of “formality” concept

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Issue: Do you agree with the definition of a “healthy marriage”?

❑ Definition was considered by most to be unsatisfactory.

❑ Definition can be applied to both functional and dysfunctional formal and indissoluble unions between two persons of different sex.

❑ One interviewee asserted that “ultimately there is no clear definition of what a healthy marriage is about”,

❑ Another stated that “A healthy marriage requires the freedom of the couple who in entering such a union are willing to commit themselves to each other until the end. This commitment is only possible as a result of a love beyond the parameters which have been established by modern culture. The love that is required is a Christian love – self giving, self sacrificing, altruistic. This type of love does not limit itself to Christian couples, for it is the type of love required for any marriage.”

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Issue: Do you agree with the definition of a “healthy marriage”?

❑ Problem with defining a “healthy marriage” in contrast to a “stable marriage”.

❑ Several interviewees commented that their marriage was stable with normal “unhealthy” periods – the “ups and downs” in any relationship

❑ One respondent commented that the definition proposed “only makes sense if marriage is viewed in its Christian perspective as a union which Christ promoted to a sacrament... only then can we begin to understand and accept the indissolubility of marriage.”

❑ Another argued that “healthy marriage needs to be made up of healthy people... the backgrounds that the couple brings into the marriage” is of extreme importance.

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Issue: Do you agree with the definition of a “healthy marriage”?

❑ Definition gave no importance to the emotional element

❑ “A healthy marriage is alive in every aspect and not simply a formal arrangement between two sexes.” Hardly anyone would nowadays ignore this essential element in a “real marriage”.

❑ Concept of “formally” used in the definition considered of minimal importance

❑ “That which constitutes a healthy marriage has got little to do with formality.”

❑ The formal element is considered as “subjective” by one of the interviewees.

❑ “ my own personal preference is that of a formalized union of marriage as sacrament between two people of different sex... when it comes to a civil marriage, or rather to that which is more legalistic than sacramental, then I accept same sex marriage.”

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Issue: Do you agree with the definition of a “healthy marriage”?

❑ The opinion leaders who referred to the issue of sexual orientation were all in favour of a heterosexual sexual relationship

❑ However four do not exclude homosexual relations within a marriage structure. One of these specified that he/she would call this “a union” rather than a marriage.

❑ One interviewee commented that “my own personal preference is that a formalized union of marriage as sacrament There exists the reality of union between people of same sex ... we cannot ignore the fact that there are those who still seek some formal union. I am ready to accept that on a secular level, but I find difficulty at a religious level.”

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Issue: What is facilitating healthy marriages in Maltese society?

□ There was an enormous amount of detailed and inspired answers to this question.

□ The majority of answers centered on the positive influence of strong, traditional families and the influence of healthy role models [parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles], which together enhance a healthy marriage.

□ There is still a respect for the traditional values and the image of the Christian marriage; even though the Maltese may not be as close to the Church as they used to be.

□ The will to have children is also great, “and many still find the family as the best environment for childbearing.”

□ The low possibility of re-marriage in Malta, due to the absence of divorce, is also considered a significant reason for the maintenance of a healthy marriage.

□ Church support re Marriage Preparation Courses [Cana]; counselling services

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Issue: What is hindering healthy marriages in Maltese society?

□ A plethora of sophisticated replies

□ The highest amount of responses blamed the pressure of work and money as the main problem for marriage.

□ The woman working outside the home may have less time to devote to building a healthy marriage.

□ One person did acknowledge that by easing the financial burden the working woman can actually contribute to a healthy marriage.

□ One interviewee spoke of ‘accentuated careerism’ that tempts married men and women to put work ahead of family with terrible consequences.

□ Accommodation of newly weds is a major and serious headache and often a cause of tension between husband and wife - there is a ‘pressure to build a house and not a home’

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Issue: What is hindering healthy marriages in Maltese society?

- ❑ A high proportion of interviewees believe that the lack of God's presence in marriage is the greatest hindrance to a healthy marriage today.
- ❑ Young people especially are seen to have no sense of sacrifice and to be very fearful of commitment.
- ❑ There is a moral laxity in the moral world view that makes fidelity a minor issue and marriage is something that can be dispensed of.
- ❑ It is suggested that the media often presents a distorted reality of marriage to youths and that this has obvious and negative consequences on marriage in Malta.
- ❑ The consumerist rat race: "The economical consumption pattern as encouraged by the State itself is emphasizing much more the standard of living than the quality of life: these are not the same thing."

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Issue: What is the Maltese Church doing to enhance healthy marriages?

- The Maltese Church appears to be considered the main contributor through:
 - Development of the Synod Document on the Family reflecting greater awareness of the increasing problem
 - Marriage preparation courses
 - Counselling services inclusive those given by Emigrants' Commission
 - Support services to families facing current social problems such as battering, drug abuse, economic hardship, support for families with a disabled child
 - Sermons on Christian values in various fora – e.g. Mass, media
 - Sustenance on a personal level within the social environment in times of crisis
 - Support given by members pertaining to various Christian groups [including youth groups which instil Christian values at a formative age]
- **BUT - The Church support services towards promoting health marriages as perceived by Christian values MUST:**
 - Update Attitudes
 - Become more professional and modern in its approach, and make maximal use of media
 - Be more understanding to those who hold alternate viewpoints especially if these are victims of circumstances
 - Invest more in the structures aimed at promoting a health marriage

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Issue: What is the Maltese State doing to enhance healthy marriages?

- The Maltese State appears to be considered a poor contributor. It is seen as:
 - Providing financial support for those in need through Social Services
 - BUT this support is given also to couples in alternative unions, sometimes preferentially, e.g. co-habiting couples
 - Providing social worker support to deal with marital problems
 - BUT this is viewed as a reactive process to deal with problems after they arise and there are no true preventive services in that even "Mediation services" are basically aimed at smoothing out the breakdown process
 - Providing educational background in the PSO courses at government schools
 - However these are viewed as being inadequate and not effective
 - Promoting through legislation facilities to help the couples during landmark life episodes such as the birth of a child by ensuring maternity, parental and paternal leave options
 - The problems arising of these schemes are often left to the devices of employers or departments without these being given any support.
 - One respondent actually stated that the State was enhancing healthy marriages by moving away from dogmatic teachings of the Maltese church acknowledging and regularising cohabitation etc.

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Issue: What is the Maltese Society doing to enhance healthy marriages?

- The Maltese Civil Society appears to be considered in the main a non-contributor, if not actually working against.
 - On the whole still holds basic Christian values
 - But there is increasing acceptance of the permissive society being promoted by local and international media
 - Media "role models" may not always be exemplary in their life styles and sometimes forcefully give a biased slant to the message they transmit.

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Issue: What is your organization doing to enhance healthy marriages?

❑ This question engaged the interviewees in an existential and personal manner.

❑ A number of interviewees are Catholic members of a Church-oriented organization or mission (priests, lecturers in the Faculty of Theology or lay catholic movements).

❑ Not surprising that their organizations do support a healthy marriage.

❑ Interviewees are active in marriage courses and counseling aimed at preventing problems in marriages.

❑ Faculty of Theology has developed courses on the family and is interested in the idea of setting up an institute for family studies.

❑ Priests believe that by giving religious instruction and support they are enhancing a healthy marriage.

❑ Some suggested that the contribution of Church-owned media towards the enhancement of healthy marriage should be improved

❑ and that the Church establishments who are involved "examining" couples who ask for a sacramental marriage should do this exercise more carefully.

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Issue: What is your organization doing to enhance healthy marriages?

❑ Many interviewees who work in non-Church organizations/employment also believe that their organizations are active in supporting a healthy marriage.

❑ This support includes helpful child care facilities, flexible working conditions and counseling and support at work.

❑ In their opinion this indicated their organization's commitment in favour of healthy marriages.

❑ However, the majority of responses suggest that these organizations and employers are not actively promoting healthy marriages and they only do so in an indirect manner.

❑ They argued that a number of institutions/employers are supporting healthy marriages by living up to their mission, such as when a hospital cares for the sick, a social service department/agency take cares of disadvantaged children and the poor, etc.

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Issue: What else can your organization do to enhance healthy marriages?

❑ Few ideas were suggested as to how organizations may enhance healthy marriages

- ❑ The majority of the interviewees do not consider this to be their organization's responsibility.
- ❑ Many interviewees stressed that their organizations do not enhance and may actually be damaging healthy marriages.
- ❑ Directors and employers said that, at work, they do not want to impose any beliefs/ideals on others

- ❑ The Media was criticized for not doing enough to promote the concepts of a healthy marriage and for the negative influence it is having on married life by its choice of message.

- ❑ The legal profession was similarly blamed for creating obstacles to healthy marriages.
- ❑ It was argued that the interests of society in general were not being safeguarded by the current marriage legislation, which, for example, does not sufficiently protect unemployed separated women.

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Issue: What can the Maltese Church do to enhance healthy marriages?

- ❑ The vast majority of interviewees said that the Maltese Church has an important role in supporting the traditional Christian marriage**
- ❑ A few feel that the Maltese Church should change her stance and become more tolerant of non-Christian marriages.**

❑ Persistent request for better and improved pre-marriage formation, especially through the courses offered by the Cana Movement and other means in order to both prevent and help solve marriage problems.

- ❑ increase the financing of marriage courses

❑ Ensure spiritual formation of those intending to get married.

- ❑ This ought to go hand in hand with a wider formation of Christian principles and values, especially in Church schools.
- ❑ Continuing spiritual direction at the grassroots level through home visits by parish priests.

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Issue: What can the Maltese Church do to enhance healthy marriages?

- ❑ The Church should give research into marriage issues a higher priority
 - ❑ Thus gains a better understanding of the current state of affairs and as a result support for provided to “a healthy marriage” would be both more effective and efficient.
- ❑ Three interviewees were hopeful that the Maltese Church would become more tolerant of alternative forms of marriage, by changing its current views of marriage and embrace all people.
- ❑ Others argued that the Church must not talk down to married people neither in her courses, nor in preaching and statements on marriage.
 - ❑ Reference was here made to the subject of “working mothers” who should not be seen as being an obstacle for a healthy marriage.

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Issue: What can the Maltese State do to enhance healthy marriages?

- ❑ Interviewees offered many suggestions though which the State could support a healthy marriage.
 - ❑ Many complained about perceived high inflation and rising property prices
 - ❑ suggested that subsidies should be given so that this problem could be faced with greater serenity of mind.
 - ❑ An interviewee claimed that while the economy has grown, the quality of life of the Maltese has decreased with families having no time together to enjoy the important things of life.
 - ❑ Several have proposed that the State should provide more support facilities for childcare and care for elderly parents to ease the burden on families who cannot cope with multiple tasks.
 - ❑ More marriage-friendly work practices and opportunities, such as tele-working should be encouraged.

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Issue: What can the Maltese State do to enhance healthy marriages?

- ❑ Present fiscal legislation is not marriage-friendly
 - ❑ there are clear instances when cohabitation more cost-effective than marriage.
- ❑ State could invest more in the provision of counselling and social worker services to marriages which are in danger.
- ❑ Could introduce pre-nuptial preparation for those couples choosing a civil marriage.
- ❑ State should stand up in favour of a Christian marriage by defining 'marriage' in line with the Christian roots of the Malta and by giving in to pluralistic, politically correct measures.
 - ❑ a minority argued that the State should accept non-traditional marriage structures

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Issue: What can the Civil Society do to enhance healthy marriages?

- ❑ Some interviewees were also keen to suggest how civil society can boost healthy marriages.
 - ❑ Civil society must not be complacent in the presence of frequent attacks on the values of a Christian marriage.
 - ❑ It should not fall for the bait of consumerism which is a threat to any marriage.
 - ❑ More education on Christian values and the exposure of benefits of healthy marriage both to the couple and to society.
 - ❑ Media to promote, rather than demean, family values.
 - ❑ Make available more affordable and professional marriage counselling.
 - ❑ Banks should adopt a social role and assist married couples to easily obtain home loans.
 - ❑ Organisations should pool their resources to better respond to State legislation that deals with marriage and family issues.

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Issue: What can the United Nations Organization do to enhance healthy marriages?

- ❑ The United Nations is an international actor.
 - ❑ Few ideas proposed as to how the UN can help
 - ❑ Should stress development, education and health in all countries, which boosts the living standards and thus help families and marriages.
 - ❑ Educational programmes adopting marriage friendly policies
 - ❑ UN should encourage families around the world to have more children in order to strengthen society, in contrast to a consumerist world views which views children as a burden on families.
 - ❑ Two interviewees would like the UN to request that its members accept non-traditional marriages.

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Issue: What can the European Union bodies do to enhance healthy marriages?

- ❑ Many interviewees are of the opinion that the EU should 'leave us alone'.
 - ❑ EU can do little in a pluralistic society
 - ❑ Should respect the laws of each member State as regards marriage, divorce and abortion.
 - ❑ A minority proposed that the EU should promote tolerance to alternative marriage structures and that it should force member states to introduce legal separation of marriages.
 - ❑ EU should take a more active by supporting the Judeo-Christian values of Europe.
 - ❑ Provide funds for the study of marriage and family
 - ❑ Provide aid to civil society groups that have the objective of aiding a healthy marriage.
 - ❑ Promote educational programmes on a healthy marriage and adopt marriage-friendly policies in employment and social fields.

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Issue: What can the Non-Government Organizations do to enhance healthy marriages?

- ❑ The majority did not have an opinion on this issue.
 - ❑ NGOs could help in the education of and support to children, engaged and married couples.
 - ❑ NGOs can provide secular pre-marriage talks and counselling to reach segments of society not reached by the Church.
 - ❑ NGOs can help indirectly by their work in various areas
 - ❑ caring for the environment, caring for the elderly, promoting healthy lifestyles.
 - ❑ NGOs can lobby the Government and civil society towards the acceptance of non traditional marriages.

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Issue: What can the Educational Institutions do to enhance healthy marriages?

- ❑ Many respondents were affirmative in how educational institutions can aid a healthy marriage in Malta.
 - ❑ Talks on marriage issues in secondary schools
 - ❑ together with psychology lessons and training in interpersonal skills
 - ❑ Teaching of proper values in order to grow and enjoy healthy married life.
 - ❑ One interviewee noted that, "Education is not transmission of knowledge but the formation and building a good character by dispositions (virtues). The problems of the family are weak characters."
 - ❑ School curricula promote "value free" concepts which do not help to strengthen marriage.
 - ❑ "What these lessons are truly free from are Christian values."
 - ❑ Promote tolerance towards different forms of marriage

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Issue: What can the Pressure Groups do to enhance healthy marriages?

❑ Many interviewees suggested that they do not see a big role for pressure groups.

❑ Can put pressure on Parliament and Government to see to it that laws are marriage and family friendly.

❑ Extant Pressure Groups are actually opposed to the traditional marriage structure.

❑ Work to put forward concept that marriage is not something to be afraid of doing, but that it is life-giving, joyful and beautiful.

❑ Others desire pressure groups to work for the acceptance of non traditional forms of marriage in Malta.

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■ Conclusions

- The study has demonstrated that it is difficult to arrive at a consensus as to what constitutes a “healthy marriage”.
 - Although the vast majority of the opinion leaders interviewed approve of the Judeo-Christian concept of marriage.
- It is clear that since the Second World War, concepts of marriage structures in Malta have undergone a shift at an increasing rate.
 - Process assisted by the presence of an ambivalent ethical behaviour in Maltese culture.

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■ Conclusions

- The proposals for new marriage models tend to be ambivalently “accepted”.
 - There is a widespread impression that what Malta needs to do is to give its citizens better training in social skills;
 - That the State should remain the main “provider” in any sphere of life;
 - That the church should give better formation those members of hers who are preparing for marriage and support them after marriage.
 - Although these suggestions are valid, they do not go to the root of the problem.

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■ Conclusions

- Marriage needs a referential world-view which in Malta was traditionally provided by Christian faith.
 - Marriage commitment and fidelity are the result of something other than a skill.
 - The Church cannot rely on any props provided by legislation.
 - The Church should promote marriage as the model of love.
 - A loving Christian Marriage practiced by its “true” members, is the only way that she has to transmit this model to those who do not accept her teaching.

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Thank you

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