

# Why Every Sane Society Encourages Marriage, Not Divorce

G. K. Chesterton's defense of the family might have included a defense of divorce. Except that it didn't. He might have made the case that marriage is such an important institution for society that government should make it somewhat easier for victims of such marital troubles as violence or abandonment or adultery or childlessness to leave damaged, or even less than ideal, marriages. Except that he didn't.

Instead, Chesterton's defense of marriage was accompanied by an attack on divorce, or what he termed the "superstition of divorce." The phrase is a somewhat strange one, but the idea behind it is not. To Chesterton, those who sought to liberalize divorce laws had managed to persuade themselves that a marriage could be disposed of, even swept away, by the "stroke of a pen."

Marriage, for Chesterton (whose own marriage was childless), was grounded not just in a promise, but in a vow. And a vow, to Chesterton, was not something that ought to be eliminated with a stroke of a pen. He even seems to suggest that it *couldn't* be done away with in such a cavalier manner.

Critics of the matrimonial vow dismissed it as a rash act. Chesterton agreed—with the rashness of the act, that is, but not with its dismissal: The marriage vow was a vow of "substance," and all vows of substance were, by definition, rash. The same could be said of vows of chivalry, or vows of celibacy, or vows of poverty.

Chesterton's next step was to ask himself—and his readers—a philosophical question: Did being free include the freedom to bind oneself? His affirmative answer should not be surprising.

After all, a vow was not just a promise to another, but a "tryst with oneself." And marriage? Marriage was an "affair of honor."

Chesterton then turned to the general subject of loyalty. "Most sane men," he began, would concede the importance of loyalty to one's country. But was loyalty to one's country the highest form of loyalty? Not to G. K. Chesterton: A sane society should reserve its "greatest sense of loyalty to the family." After all, here the original vow was a voluntary vow. Chesterton moved to clinch his argument by asking yet another question: Shouldn't the vow made most freely also be the vow kept most firmly?

A sane society would therefore take steps to shore up the family. Not so in Chesterton's England—and elsewhere, then and now. Reformers, then and now, have instead been intent on making it easier for people to obtain a divorce. In England their focus was on the alleged plight of the poor as their access to divorce was somehow more limited.

Chesterton was generally sympathetic to the plight of the poor, but not in this case. Had he learned that a poor man was about to jump off the "cliffs of divorce," he would try to pull him back by his "coattails," even if the ground below was "strewn with the remains of dukes and bankers who had taken the plunge before him."

But reformers were determined to set the poor man free. Chesterton disagreed: Why make it easier for a poor man to obtain a divorce when that same poor man is not really free to do much of anything else? In Chesterton's summation, why must the poor man be free to "love as he pleases," when he is not truly free to "live as he pleases"? For that matter, he continued, why were the same reformers who were so pleased when a poor man obtained a divorce so horrified when that same poor man took a drink or smoked a cigarette?

In detailing his objections to the mistaken presumption of the “superstition of divorce” Chesterton seemed to be centering on the reformers’ mistaken emphasis on the plight of the poor. But his argument was really much larger than that. From his vantage point, both modern progressives and large-scale capitalists were at war with the family. Why? Because both understood that this “most ancient of households” was the main obstacle to their “inhuman progress.” Both understood that, without the family, the average man or woman—or child—was helpless in the face of the power that both wielded.

When G. K. Chesterton came to America for the second time he was surprised to learn that some states had moved to liberalize their divorce laws. The year was 1930; the depression was well underway; the poor were multiplying; and now it was possible, in some states, to obtain a divorce for something called “incompatibility of temperament.”

Chesterton was mystified and stunned. He couldn’t know whether such a reform was more in the interest of big business or big government. He only knew that succumbing to the superstition of divorce was certain to damage the family.

Actually, he knew a few more things as well. He knew how important rash vows were—especially when it came to marriage and its various incompatibilities. That would include an incompatibility of temperament, which to G. K. Chesterton was the basis for a marriage, and not a divorce!

—