



**The Catholic Women's League of Canada
Alberta Mackenzie Provincial Council**



**Christian Family Life Chair
Communiqué # 7
August 30th, 2021**

TO: Diocesan Christian Family Life Chairpersons, Diocesan Presidents
CC: Provincial Executive (for information)
CC: National Chairperson of Christian Family Life (for information)
FROM: Celine Berlinguette, Provincial Chairperson of Christian Family Life

My dear sisters in Christ,

A little girl's dream: 'long white dress, veil, and flowers', playing with her dolls, where Barbie and Ken get married! How many scenarios for a 'perfect wedding' have come to light from child's play?

“Marriage, as designed by God, is a faithful, exclusive, lifelong union of a man and a woman joined in an intimate community of life and love. They commit themselves completely to each other and to the wondrous responsibility of bringing children into the world and caring for them. Man and woman are equal; they are also different. It is this difference that points marvelously toward their complementarity. Man and woman, in their sexual difference, are made for each other. This complementarity draws them together in a mutually loving union that should always be open to the procreation of children.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church #1602-1605)

What is a certainty is that marriage is not a fairy tale and shouldn't be entered into lightly. When we think of marriage, we envision a young man and a young woman making a commitment to each other before God, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do they part...

The meaning of marriage does not seem to be the same for all people. In the last few years, we have heard a lot about “Child Marriages”. What are “Child Marriages”? Child marriages are defined as a marriage where at least one of the parties is under the age of eighteen.

In Canada, under the Constitution Act, marriage is a federal power (for example: changing the law to allow same-sex marriage). Up until 2015, Federal law did not stipulate the age when individuals could get married, however the federal Civil Marriage Act was amended to permit the marriage of youth sixteen years and older, with parental consent. Prior to the amendment of the Civil Marriage Act, the solemnization of marriage was under the jurisdiction of each province, therefore those laws could vary, however in most provinces a person had to be at least sixteen years old before they can get married and if under the age of eighteen would require the signature of both parents.

As a point of interest, according to the Code of Canon Law – (Can. 1083 §1) – the minimum age for valid marriage is fourteen years for a woman and sixteen years for a man.

Between the years 2000 and 2018, Canada issued 3,382 marriage certificates involving children under the age of eighteen, according to information from Vital Statistics. One would have to believe that the

marriage licenses would be for youth ages sixteen to eighteen as children younger than sixteen years of age cannot enter legal marriage.

While many still refer to an “unwed couple” that live together as “common law,” the term is no longer used in Alberta’s law system. As of 2003, the Adult Interdependent Partner Act now refers to the couple as Adult Interdependent Partners (AIP). A minor may enter a relationship so long as they are *at least* sixteen years old, and the guardians have given their written consent to the partnership. Common-law relationships registered through the Alberta legal system follow the same rulings as legal marriages.

Canada’s legal system also has laws regarding “Age of Consent to Sexual Activity”. The age of consent laws applies to all forms of sexual activity, ranging from kissing and fondling to sexual intercourse. The age of consent to sexual activity in our country is sixteen years. There are exceptions to the law, for example where there is a relationship of trust, authority, or dependency. All sexual activities without consent are criminal offences, regardless of age.

In Canada, underage marriages are illegal. According to research by McGill University since 2016, twenty-three hundred children between the age of 15 and 17 were in a marriage union with 98 percent of them being informal, common-law unions. These were mostly pre-arranged, with the young girls marrying much older men. These types of unions are in violation of the women’s human rights, preventing them from living their lives free from all forms of violence (physical, mental, and sexual), preventing them from obtaining an education, thus having a greater chance of living in poverty.

A report put out by Child USA (The National Think Tank for Child Protection) – “2020 Report on Child Marriage in the United States” indicated that between 2000 and 2010, there were 248,000 child marriage licenses issued in the USA for children, some as young as twelve and thirteen years old.

Worldwide, more than 650 million women alive today were married as children. Every year, at least 12 million girls are married before they reach the age of 18. In the least developed countries, that number doubles: 40 per cent of girls are married before age 18 and 12 per cent of girls are married before age 15. The practice is particularly widespread in conflict-affected countries and humanitarian settings (source: [UNICEF](#)).

Canada actively supports efforts to reduce the incidence of child marriages in the world by raising awareness, investing in projects that prevent it and is also a key funder of the United Nations efforts to end child marriages.

Before, we as Canadians can heal the ailments of other nations we have to deal with our own issues. What should Canada do about child marriages in this country? We have laws in place and yet Child marriages and pre-arranged marriages are still an issue. But are all the under-age marriages in Canada pre-arranged? The statistics do not give a breakdown. I know that some of the under- age marriages were/are consensual – as my marriage was one of them, and through the mercy of God, my husband and I celebrated fifty-two years of marriage this year.

Interesting Canadian facts:

- The age of majority is eighteen or nineteen years depending on the province
- The age of majority regarding Federal laws is 18 years
- Provinces restrict minors from smoking up to age eighteen or nineteen depending on province,

- Legal drinking age is eighteen or nineteen depending on the province
- Voting age is eighteen

However, youth can legally be married at the age of sixteen. Why such disparity in what is considered legal age?

We cannot forget the millions of women and young girls that are victims of this modern-day slavery, often abused by their spouse and made to prostitute themselves for their husband's financial gains.

Addressing child marriage requires recognition of the factors that enable it, such as:

- Culture
- Poverty
- Lack of educational opportunities
- Limited access to health care
- Some marry off their daughters to reduce their burdens
- Belief that it will secure their daughters future or to protect them
- Risk of pregnancy outside of marriage

As noted above, this is not only an issue in third world countries, but also happening in our own back yards.

My dear sisters in Christ, we must be aware of the issues that our sisters across the continents are faced with. There are many organizations working to end child marriages; UNICEF, World Vision, Chalice, Plan International, International Women's Health Coalition to name just a few. In their work to delay and prevent child marriages the following evidence-based strategies are used:

1. Educating girls. Education plays a critical role in keeping girls safe from child marriage. ...
2. Empowering girls with information, skills, and support networks....
3. Rallying the wider community to stand up for girls' rights. ...
4. Providing girls and their families with income opportunities. ...
5. Petitioning government and encouraging supportive laws.

The work must continue to stop child marriages in our world's poor countries, where there are no laws governing marriages, where women are enslaved by poverty, and lack of education. We must be grateful for and support the organizations that work with the young women and communities to break the cycle and eliminate child marriages.

What can be done in our own country where laws do exist? Is it that the laws are not being enforced? Has marriage become so lax, that it has become easy to get into and easy (or not) to get out of? Ultimately, parents are responsible for their children until they reach the age of majority, a responsibility that should not be taken lightly!

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” Jeremiah 29:11

Yours in Christ,
Celine