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The Cana and Pre-Cana Conferences

Rev. Jack Egan

"W e seek in the Cana and Pre-Cana Conferences to build up in the lives of those to be wed and those having been wed the great Christian ideal of the family. We seek to make every family a sanctuary in human society from which there would come those worthy to build and prepare to build a Christian world." So spoke His Eminence Samuel Stritch in 1947 about a comparatively new work in the United States to which he has given his full approval.

The appeals of the recent Popes for the reform of family life have received numerous responses from both the clergy and the laity under their direction. The rapidly growing Cana and Pre-Cana Conference work in the United States is part of the response. It is also proving to be an answer to the prayers of countless married men and women. The American Bishops have responded to the work by giving it their blessing and giving it a place in the work of the Family Life Bureau of the National Catholic Welfare Council.

The Cana Movement itself has been the result of the combined efforts and zeal of the laity and clergy alike. Those close to the work during its initial years have looked upon it primarily as a movement of married couples. The focus of their work and attention has been on the Cana Conference Day itself. This Cana Day has been defined as a day of inventory and inspiration, a day of recollection and renewal for married couples as married couples. The Pre-Cana Day is a similar effort with the material and approach adjusted with the view of preparing engaged couples for the vocation of marriage. The married people have felt the need of practical asceticism applied to their married lives. They realize that they have special needs different from those of a person living alone. They realize that most sermons, most writing on the spiritual life are geared for the individual rather than the couple. They realize that getting to heaven for them is not an individualistic work, but a cooperative
work. They also realize that it is something they must work out themselves. The Church does not give them salvation as a gratuitous gift, they must work for it, in cooperation with God, the Church and each other. The people in the Cana Conference Movement feel that too long they have waited for the Church to do everything for them, whereas they should be helping each other do things for themselves. They are beginning to realize their responsibility to themselves and other married couples.

Cana couples, becoming more and more aware of the sacramentality of their married life, want to understand it more thoroughly and apply it more fully to their lives. In passively waiting for priests to do the work of making their marriages better, many couples before Cana failed to realize the full sacramentality of their married lives. A priest in speaking to married couples may unconsciously apply to them the principles he has learned for the sanctification of his own life. They are looking for rules which involve the sanctification of living with mothers-in-law, sanctification of time-payments, sanctification of mixing baby's formula, and sanctification of romance and love-making. In their work in the Cana Conference Movement, the couples have taken the lead in helping priests who understand their language, who are patient with their problems, and who are sympathetic with their needs. They have helped educate the priests by discussions not in the quiet of the rectory parlor, but in the noise of the family parlor with the children dashing in and out.

Though the lay people in Cana know that the movement is primarily by and for the laity, they, with the proper perspective which they have learned from the conferences, insist just as strongly that the movement should be under the authority and direction of the bishops and the clergy. They rightly believe, that if the priests do all the work in the movement, the couples will lose the interest and benefit that comes from doing and working at their own marriages. They will begin to feel that Cana Conferences are similar to listening to sermons during which they can relax and apply the material to their neighbor rather than to themselves. They feel that too long have they expected marriage to do something for them, and now it is time that they do something about making their marriages holier and happier.
The purpose of the Cana Conference Movement is to bring about sanctification within the home. It endeavors to bring about natural and supernatural happiness by education in Christian attitudes of family life. It is intended to bring about a proper appreciation of husband, wife and children by each other. It is striving to teach the wife that besides cooking for her husband because he is the bread winner, she is serving him as a child of God, as a temple of the Holy Ghost. It is striving to teach the husband that he should be affectionate to his wife not only because she is beautiful, but because she too is a child of God and he is fulfilling the imagery of Christ's union with the Church. Cana is striving to get the couples not only to imitate the romance of the Canticle of Canticles in the Bible, but to realize the meaning of it in their own lives.

Cana is endeavoring to bring about in families a Christian attitude toward work, money, pleasure and education. The couples have observed in their own lives how religion seems to be relegated to a certain compartment. They want to take it out of its niche and let it permeate their whole lives. They want the Blessed Mother to be part of their life not only when they are kneeling before her statue but when they are baking as she did, when they are washing as she did, when they are singing to the baby as she did, when they are looking for a place to live as she did, when they are worried about a child as she was.

Cana Couples want to realize the sacramentality of their lives. Many of them were raised to look upon marriage as a refuge for sinners, or as a necessary evil in the life of a women, burdening her with a multitude of cares. By listening to jokes they were disgusted with the physical relations of marriage. At work the men were warned about the shackles of matrimony welded by domineering wives. Around them they had the example of infidelity in thought and word, if not in deed. The girls were taught that men were brutes, and the men were taught that women were shrews. How could man or maid, amid all the worldly preparation for marriage, advance to the altar with the thought of the sanctifying Sacrament which they would give each other? Having been educated mainly by movies and magazines, how can they view their love being like that of Christ
and His Church? In an economic age in which children are a 21-year liability and a constant threat of eviction, how can they look forward with joy to the fulfillment of the primary purpose of the mutually given Sacrament?

The Cana Conference Movement was born of the deeply felt need of bride and bridegroom to have Christ a permanent guest in their household. Here He would help them constantly change the water of daily, humdrum, wordly, life into the rich red wine of daily living in which they would be vividly conscious of His presence and His help.

Cana is distinguished from other family movements partly by its purpose and partly by its means. Admittedly both its purpose and its means have much in common with other movements in the Catholic Church, but by its choice and emphasis of parts of its purpose and its means, it has become quite distinctive.

The Cana Conference is the center of the Cana Movement. It is the means used to bring couples together to learn the Christian attitudes which should be the core of their lives. It de-educates them, sluffing off the attitudes, maxims and habits of the pagan world. It outlines the course of reasonable Christian action which they should follow not only in saying their prayers but in buying their furniture, entertaining their in-laws, spanking their babies, respecting their employees and employer. The Conference is really a series of talks with time for questions and discussion by the couples.

The ideal Cana Conference seems to be one which starts at nine o'clock Mass, with the couples made aware of their active participation in the Holy Sacrifice. It continues throughout the day, to end at Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament and the renewal of the marriage vows in the afternoon at five o'clock. The priest who conducts the conference usually gives three talks of forty-five to sixty minutes each. The last hour session before Benediction is devoted to answering questions and discussion among the couples. However, the number of talks, the length of the conference and the place for holding them varies in different parts of the country. In some parts of the country, the Cana Conference is given in an afternoon from one or two until
six, ending with Benediction and renewal of the marriage vows. Usually there are three talks and a question-discussion period.

For several reasons of similarity, the Cana Conferences have been called mistakenly “Retreats.” Father John Delaney, S.J. who observed the Family Retreat Movement in Europe gave “Family Renewal Days” in the United States. But the Cana Conference is distinguished from the Retreat by several points. Cana is couple-centered rather than individual-centered. Cana demands that husbands and wives partake together as two become one. The Retreat stresses spirituality, the building up of the spiritual life by spiritual exercises. Cana stresses spiritualizing daily family life, making God the God of “pots and pans and things.” The Retreat stresses the virtues of Faith, Hope, Charity, and Humility, whereas the Cana Conference stresses that it is a virtue to get up at night to get a cup of cold water for one of Christ’s little ones, stresses trust that God will take care of the little ones He sends to bless the family, stresses realization that these little ones as well as the partner possess immortal souls which partake of divine life by Sanctifying Grace.

The Retreat teaches the virtue, but the Cana Conference takes it into the home and puts it to work. The Retreat with its silence and contemplation is intended to make man aware of his own personal relation to Almighty God. Cana is intended to make man and woman together aware of their relation to each other and how God is the third party to that relationship. At the Cana Conference, silence is not insisted upon, for the couples feel that they have much to learn from other couples. They can learn that their little problems are not unique, that others have faced or are facing them, and are only too glad to discuss their solution. In retreats the priest usually does all the talking and answering of questions, but in Cana, though the priest gives the talks, the couples enter into the discussion periods and help answer their own questions. To say the Cana Conferences are just retreats for pairs would be as much of a misnomer as to say that a retreat is a mission because both treat of man’s eternal salvation.

Though talking and discussion are encouraged at a Cana Conference, still it is not a social meeting. The purpose is too
serious, too sublime. However, Cana Conferences do help people of the parish to get better acquainted, encourages them to become more parish minded, and gives them the spirit to be mutually helpful in the things that affect their parish and family life.

The Cana Movement though directed to the reform and Christianization of the Family, does not intend, nor could it attempt to handle all the means of bringing this about. Everyone who has given any thought to living better family lives realizes that such things as just wages, proper housing, playground facilities, decent reading and movies, elevating radio programs, sound education, honest government, and many other environmental influences are vital to the restoration of the family. However, the Cana Conference Movement does not directly concern itself with these things. It is not intended to be an organization for bettering the conditions which surround the family, nor is it a Christian family action group destined to do the work of Catholic Action in transforming family life throughout the world.

The Cana Conference Movement is advisedly limited in its scope of activity to the Cana Conference, whether on a full day, a half day, or on a series of days. Its purpose in these conferences is to aid the couples in renewing the inner life of the family, building up the proper relationship between husband and wife, parents and children, the family and God, the family and money, the family and those in and around it. It is striving primarily to change, not the environment, but the people to meet the environment. Of course, it provides reasons for and motivation and incentive for the couples to go beyond the Cana Movement into the broader field of action of making the world a better place for families to live. But beyond pointing out the need for such further activity, and sometimes outlining a possible course of action, as well as giving strong motivation for it, the Cana Movement does not go. It would be a mistake to look upon the Cana Movement as a movement bent on embracing every type of activity for bettering the world. There would then be nothing distinctive about it, and the actual work that Cana is designed to do by means of the Cana Conference, would be neglected. Because many people who are active in Catholic Action saw the
need for the Cana Conference and in many cases started the Conferences in their locality, this may sometimes lead them to confuse the wider movement with the more restricted Cana Conference Movement. On the other hand, many couples after making Cana Conferences come to the realization that in order to make their lives as thoroughly Christian as possible, that in order to raise their children as Children of God, they must do something about reforming their environment. They gain their realization and zeal from the Cana Conference and feel that all their further work is part of the Cana Movement. It is not.

The Cana Conference Movement is a movement to promote the sanctification of the home by means of the Conferences. In order to spread the Conferences from parish to parish, from city to city, and to see that the Conferences are given regularly in the various localities, some sort of an organizing group is necessary. This group is usually formed of zealous couples who feel the need for making the ideals of Christ and His Blessed Mother more alive in their lives. They find the spirit and the instructions in the Cana Conferences, and following Christ's instructions, they shout it from the house tops for everyone to hear. These couples, organized under the direction of a priest, take upon themselves the apostolic work of getting priests to give the conferences and help him understand the needs of the people. They get couples to attend the conference. They secure a suitable place to meet for the conference in a parish hall or academy or convent hall under suitable conditions for enjoying the talks and discussions while gaining the most from them.

These organized groups, whether on a city wide basis as a steering committee, or on a parish basis as a parish committee, have as their sole purpose and reason for their existence, the organizing of Cana Conferences and the spread of the movement.

The Cana Conference is intended to teach not spirituality as such, but to inculcate the spiritualizing of all the family relationships. Therefore, the conferences are not limited to the expounding of theology, but embrace the wider field of theology in application to the spiritual life, which is asceticism. Proper application of the beautiful sacramental truths of matrimony require the explanation of and appreciation of man's whole person-
ality, body and soul, and those things in his environment which affect him. For this reason the psychology of man and woman, the psychology of children has played a big part in the conferences, together with the theological doctrine. Discussion of fear, fatigue, nervousness, sickness and other things which serve to influence the action of the members of the family have a distinct place in Cana Conferences.

Since love-making and the right to love-making are part of the Sacrament of Marriage, love-making is discussed from the ascetical viewpoint. It is also discussed from the theological and psychological aspect. To Americans raised in a Puritanical tradition, influenced by Jansenism, to Americans trying to fight the pagan sexuality of America, there seems something incongruous and unbecoming for priests to discuss the essence of the Sacrament of Matrimony. Some good people are taught by their parents that is the weakness of fallen man to perform the actions by which God's work of procreation is carried on. The morality of love-making, what constitutes a deviation from Christian morals, should be thoroughly understood by every married person, but in many cases the people do not have this accurate knowledge. They do not realize their ignorance and hence do not ask for instructions in the confessional. They are astonished when they learn the true doctrine, and ask: "Why didn't someone tell us these things?" Many people are desperately in need of instruction about the nobility, beauty and holiness of married love-making.

Cana Conferences are not designed as a medium for increasing the birth rate by diatribes on birth control. Rather they stress the positive side of married life, the joy of children, the glory of populating heaven, the peace of trust in God's providence to care for children. However, the Catholic stand on contraception is clearly stated and proved, lest people think that if such things are not mentioned in Conferences on married life, they are not wrong. Letting the couples express their opinion in the discussion period, usually brings out strong words against contraception and the lack of trust in God.

There is a tendency on the part of some who do not know Cana to think that Cana Conferences are only for bankrupt
marriages or marriages which are having severe difficulties. Outsiders sometimes have the idea that Cana is a sort of marriage clinic or an Alcoholics Anonymous for marriage. While it is true that Cana Conferences have helped some couples on the verge of separation, have brought happiness to families which were torn by discord, still Cana is meant for and finds its greatest value with the ordinary couple who are not unhappy but who are looking for a greater measure of married happiness.

Pre-Cana Conferences are the Conferences given to engaged couples to prepare them for marriage. It is a very important part of the Cana program. It is carrying out the law of the Church and the pronouncements of the Popes about adequately preparing the young people for marriage. As Pope Pius XI pointed out in his encyclical on marriage, there is a remote and proximate preparation necessary for marriage. The remote preparation goes on in the home from the time the child begins to observe family life around him. He is conditioned for married life by all that he sees and hears, all the habits he acquires, by the virtues and vices, by the principles he learns. Cana Conferences are concerned with this preparation for marriage in as much as they help the parents train their children for marriage. The proximate preparation of which the Pope speaks is greatly aided by the Pre-Cana Conferences. These do not supplant the private instructions to be given by the parish priest, nor do they supplant the advice which the couple should seek from their spiritual director or confessor. The Pre-Cana Conferences are an adjunct to these, covering a much wider field, and taking much more time than could be allotted to individual couples.

The large crowd of couples who attend these conferences diligently wherever they are held, shows that the young couples strongly feel the need for these. They pass the word along to their friends and the ensuing conferences are even larger. After they are married they write to Cana Directors and speak of their increasing realization of the value of the conferences.

The Pre-Cana Conferences usually take the form of lectures and instructions extended over a period of several weeks. There are seven to fifteen lectures, varying from city to city. The
lectures are given by priests, married couples, and doctors. A unified course is necessary to insure the young couples getting all the material they need. Pre-Cana is spread over a longer period of time than the Cana Conferences because there is more to be covered and it is necessary to give them a longer time to absorb it. Since it is necessary to break down prejudices and harmful emotions in the couples, the longer course is more beneficial but more difficult to conduct.

The material is much the same as the material covered in the Cana Conferences, but applied to their life as they will meet it in the future. There is added material about Canon Law, courtship, the wedding ceremony, honeymoon, and a more lengthy exposition of God's glorious plan for procreation and the morality of married love-making. Special attention must be given to the breaking down of the wrong attitudes toward sex and the instilling of the idea of the beauty and holiness of married love. Love-making must be put in its proper Christian perspective in order to take away their worries and scruples as well as to avoid sins and unhappiness in their married life. It must be explained to them that they may be much disappointed with the joy of married life if they are looking for pleasure rather than charitable love.

Understanding husband and wife, the psychology of man and woman, their different outlook on things, their different reactions to their environment, their religious life together, these play a big, if not the biggest part in the talks on their future life together. The necessity of thinking about their new life, working at it, making sacrifices generously, subduing their selfishness, expanding their thoughtfulness, praying for and with each other, all these form part of the Pre-Cana Conferences. The couples receive an explanation of the Canon Law on marriage, the liturgy of the wedding, and practical hints about how to carry out the wedding.

If the Pre-Cana Conferences are successful, the couples will enter their marriages more thoughtfully and work at them more intelligently. Some of the things stressed in the Cana Conferences today can be relegated to the background as the couples
come from marriages well prepared for by the Pre-Cana Conferences.

The Cana Conference Movement can well take as its guiding and inspiring words the dictum of Pope Pius XI in his encyclical letter to the world, "Casti Conubii": "In order to bring about the universal and permanent restoration of marriage, it is indeed of the utmost importance that the faithful be well instructed concerning matrimony; and that both by spoken and by written word, not only once and inadequately, but often and fully, by means of plain and weighty arguments, so that these truths will strike the intellect and be deeply engraved on their hearts." All the forces of evil are striving to break down marriage and the Christian family. Cana must help all others working in family life to build it up.