

# The Role of Catholic Religious Education in Croatia in Strengthening of Marital Love and Prevention of Divorce

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## ABSTRACT

The authors aim at presenting the role of Catholic religious education in promoting the aspects of love that positively affect future healthy and stable marriages, hence preventing divorces. As the evaluation criteria for the effectiveness of love-focused education, authors have taken Sternberg's theory of love which includes three greatly significant components of marital life - passion, intimacy and decision/commitment. The authors have analysed the meaning of these components and their coverage across different classes of the elementary as well as high school in Croatia.

*Keywords:* religion, school, love, marriage, divorce

## 1. Introduction

The Catholic Religion Program for Elementary Schools (CRPES, 2003) in Croatia consists of the topics dealing with marriage, in the lessons designed for the second, sixth and eighth grade.<sup>1</sup> The High School Program also includes the topics dealing with marriage in the third grade (Plan and Program of Catholic Religion Education for the Four-year High Schools (from now on: PCEFHS), 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> The major part of children begins their schooling when they are six or seven years old, and the duration of elementary school is eight years.

Through an analysis of the above mentioned programs we try to reach objectives associated with the strengthening of several abilities or experiences in human life. The common goal of the topics is to familiarize students with the importance of Christian marriage. Since marriage presents the “condition” that precedes the divorce, the improvement of capacities for creating a healthy and stable marital relationship helps preventing divorce itself. For that reason, we will focus in this work on prevention of divorce. Since Catholic marriage, in order to be valid, has to be founded on love, we have used the triangular love theory by Robert J. Sternberg (1986)<sup>2</sup> as the criteria for judgment whether the Catholic educational program in Croatia promotes all of his components of love. We have decided to use Sternberg’s theory of love because the components he describes are very similar to the components of conjugal love we can find in apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*: “Conjugal love involves a totality, in which all the elements of the person enter - appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will” (FC, 1981, p.13). Sternberg uses different terms - passion, intimacy and decision, he analyses them from a psychological point of view, and does not talk about spirituality directly (1986).

In this paper, we will use a catechetical-psychological approach and analytical-descriptive method in order to answer our question: Does religious education in Croatian schools sensitize students for all three Sternberg’s components of love - components of love that are believed to be prerequisites for a long fulfilling marital relationship? Paper will be divided in three chapters. In the first chapter we will describe and analyse intimacy as a component of love and its presence in the above mentioned school programs. In the second chapter we will do the same for the passion component, and in the third chapter for the decision/commitment component.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Sternberg wrote many articles about the triangular theory of love, but we refer to the article published in 1986. We focus on the division of three components of love which correspond to early Sternberg’s works.

## 2. Intimacy in marriage in the religious education program

In this chapter we will briefly present contents that educate students about the importance of intimacy in marriage and explain how they can be realized.

In Sternberg's model of triangular love, intimacy refers to the "feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness in loving relationships. In thus includes within its purview those feelings that give rise, essentially, to the experience of warmth in a loving relationship" (1986, p. 119), in our case in marriage.

When we look at Croatian religious education program, we notice that the theme of family is elaborated only in the second grade. The content does not refer directly to marriage, but rather promotes a positive emotional atmosphere in the family. It presents the family as the "little community of those who love each other" (CRPES, 2003, p. 60). The accent is put on the emotional dimension of all kinds of family relations, which also include marital relations. "Although the intimacy component is not synonymous with an emotional component, it is largely composed of emotional elements..." (Sternberg, 1986, p.126). The word *love*, used in the Program many times, indicates *emotional love*, which counts for intimacy component, and will be treated as that.

In the sixth grade of elementary school, the Program deals with marriage more directly. It presents the act of getting married as an act of the "promise of love and fidelity" (CRPES, 2003, p.110). The issue of *promise*, promise to *love*, makes part of the intimacy component. Christian marriage is presented in the sixth grade as a relationship that should be characterized by "mutual fidelity and prolific love" (Razum, 2007, p.79). A request for fidelity and love, as presented here, consists of emotions and attitudes that Sternberg describes as the "desire to promote the welfare of the loved one (...), being able to count on the loved one (...), giving of emotional support to the loved one" (1986, 121). The deprivation of manifest love can mean that there is no intimacy at all, as happens in failed marriages, or that the manifest intimacy component has decreased in time, while the latent level of intimacy has increased (Sternberg, 1986, p.126, fig.2). In other words, it means that in a successful marriage it is possible and probable that there will be a strong presence of intimacy which may not be manifested, as

Sternberg suggests; it simply happens because the spouses do not feel the necessity to show intimacy all the time (1986, p.126).

We can also find the emotional components of love in goals set for the students of the eighth grade (in the third topic of the third part). Here we can read that the objective is to “build a readiness to accept love as norm of human sexuality and relations between two genders” (CRPES, 2003, p. 134). We can presume that love is also seen in its emotional component here, since it is terminologically separated from sexuality - because it is set as a norm of it. But we should not exclude the decisional component here, because of the content that is suggested by the program. *Methodological instructions* advise an analysis and interpretation of the Hymn of Love in the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor 13, 1-13), where we can find a type of love that is not purely emotional (CRPES, 2003, p. 134).

We can say that the intimacy component of love is not specifically mentioned in Program’s topics, but it is set as a norm (or as a part of the norm) for the passion component (CRPES, 2003, 134), and implicitly as a prerequisite for a decision to get married (CRPES, 2003, p. 93, p.110). The sacrament of matrimony that is described in the program has to be founded on conjugal love that also “involves (...) power of feeling and affectivity” (FC 13). One cannot promise love if one does not feel it in a way already, because that kind of decision would be empty, as well as sexuality without emotions would be negative from a catholic point of view.

### **3. Religious education program on passion in marriage**

When it comes to passion in Sternberg’s love theory, it refers to “drives that lead to romance, physical attraction, sexual consummation, and related phenomena in loving relationships. The passion component thus includes within its purview those sources of motivational and other forms of arousal that lead to the experience of passion in a loving relationship” (1986, p. 119), in our case in marriage. This component is important when we talk about marriage because it is the component that is specifically related to romantic relationships (Sternberg, 1986, p. 120), which marriage tends to be, at least in the beginning.

In the Catholic Religious Education Program for the eighth grade, we can find that the concept of *love* is set as a norm of human sexuality (2003, p. 134), although it is not specified whether *love* is seen exclusively as an emotional or as a decisional component. From the analyses of the textbook (Periš, Vučica, and Vuletic, 2009), we have concluded that *love* is seen both as an emotion and a decision. We can read in the textbook that sexuality can be considered mature when associated with lasting and unselfish love (Periš et al, 2009, p. 15). The textbook also says that sexuality has several levels: “physical, sensitive, spiritual and moral” (Periš et al, 2009, p. 17). In the *methodical instructions* of the program we can see that the question of the passion component of love is always advised to be elaborated in the light of God’s plan, that is in the light of Christian theology (PCEFHS, 2009, 4), which does not observe sexuality individually, but as a part of a greater God’s plan - that is to be focused on the realization of responsible love with a person of opposite sex” (Periš et al, 2009, p. 17).

The content which refers directly to the passion dimension of marital love reappears in the Program for the third grade of *The Plan and the Program of Catholic Religion Education for the Four-Year High Schools* (2009). There is a whole topic entitled *Human being - woman and man*, which presents human beings in their sexual dimensions, as well as different ways of the understanding of sexuality during history. We can also find a Christian view on treating different genders, and the promotion of equal dignity of man and woman (PCEFHS, 2009, p. 91). A discourse about the equal dignity of both sexes and their differences is very important. In this context of passion as a component of love, we can indicate to their complementarity. Why is it important to discuss complementarity with high school students? It is important that a man and a woman succeed in acknowledging and integrating the “masculine” (for men the dominant part, for women recessive) and the “feminine” (for women the dominant part, and for men recessive) part of their personality, and that they recognize the importance of their conjugal relationship as “place” where they can find out what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman. In order to find out what it means to be a man/woman, one must be in a relation with the opposite gender. This happens, for most of

people, already in a family, but specifically, it happens in strong intersexual relations like marriage (Gambini, 2007, p. 47-49).

The passion component of love is mentioned one more time in *The Plan and Program for the Third Grade of Four-Year High Schools* (PCEFHS, 2009, p. 94). The fourth topic in the third grade is entitled "Parents and family - responsible parenthood". One of the chapters refers to the question of giving birth to children. It suggests that giving birth represents a "vocation and wellbeing for conjugal partners" (PCEFHS, 2009, p. 94). As well as the passion dimension is a prerequisite for having children in a physical way, partners must also include other components of love in this project of giving life, that is if they want to experience *giving birth* as a truly fulfilling experience in their marital life. First of all, there is the intimacy component which should not be excluded from this process, and of course the decisional one, which will be presented in the next chapter.

#### **4. Religious education program *on decision in marriage***

The decisional component in Sternberg's theory refers to, "in the short term, the decision that one loves someone else, and in the long term, the commitment to maintain that love. The decision/commitment component thus includes within its purview the cognitive elements that are involved in decision making about the existence of and potential long-term commitment to a loving relationship" (Sternberg, 1986, p. 119).

When we go back to the question of *giving birth* presented in the previous chapter, we can see that the decision to give birth should be founded on a decision to love that child or/and partner, if we consider procreation as wellbeing of the marital couple. The only way the child will be a source of wellbeing for the couple is if they do not see it as a burden. They will not see it as a burden only if the emotional and the decisional components, in their positive way, are included in the process of having a child. In this context, it does not matter that much whether the child has been planned in advance or not; it is important that the couple is open for a new life that will somehow change their relationship.

Persons that have not experienced much love in their life become more dependent on love, and persons that are

dependent on love are not ready to make proactive decisions. It is because such person alone is not free, he/she depends on the other person that presents his/her source of love, who is their marital partner in many cases. In this case, a child can be seen as an intruder, because it stands in a way of his/her relationship with a partner, and will not contribute to a wellbeing of that person at this point (Kerr and Bowen, 1988). Murray Bowen deals with persons who have not grown up emotionally, and still want to be children and have parents which would take care of them. Even if they get married, they will not be prepared to accept *giving birth* as a vocation, at least not as a serious vocation in which they have to be the grown-ups (Bowen, 1978). For this reason it is important for a person to be mature and to be able to live all the components of love positively before they can experience giving birth as a vocation or experience of wellbeing. And what is most important in this case, it is necessary that the child receives proper physical and emotional care, not feeling neglected or overwhelmed by his/her parents.

In this context of giving birth to a child we can also refer to the dynamics described by Godbout and Caillé as the *give-receive-reciprocate cycle* that should be respected by human beings. In this context, as we receive the gift of life from our parents, we ought to reciprocate it. But the reciprocation act does not have to be directed towards parents, it can be directed towards others. In this case it can be open to giving birth to a child. In this way the gift of life goes on. In order to do so, persons have to be able to experience the gift of life themselves (Godbout and Caillé, 1998). If they do not experience it, they will not be able to give life to others. Or it will be only the mechanic way of delivering a life, which will not be a personal willing act, and in that case it will certainly not be experienced as a vocation or wellbeing for the marital partners.

When we analyse the presence of the decision component in the two programs, we can see that there is also a great content dedicated to a marriage as a sacrament (CRPES, 2003, p. 110). In the third grade of the High School Program, we can read about marriage as a sacrament of conjugal love and community (PCEFHS, 2009, p. 6), while in the program for the sixth grade of the elementary school we can see marriage as part of a unit that presents all the sacraments, and here we can see marriage as a “promise of love and fidelity” (CRPES, 2003, p. 110). Conjugal



partners are promising to love each other and to be faithful to each other. In this context we can see that all components of love are covered, but special emphasis is put on the decisional part. Conjugal partners promise love to each other. If they promise love, it means that they have made a decision. What does this decision mean to them? It means that they are promising to live all three components of love in their partnership; that they will exchange passion and love and make decisions for the benefit of both of them. For Hannah Arendt, a political philosopher, the question of promise has a great significance. She thinks of it in the context of freedom that has been given to the humankind. The freedom of acting brings consequences. The consequence is that we cannot predict future nor we can change past. But Arendt claims that there are two forces which can partially influence this condition. Those are the ability to forgive, which changes the past, and the decision to make promises, which can reduce the unpredictability of the future (Arendt, 1998, p. 236-247). The decision of partners to make such a promise of love makes the unknown future less scary and opens a possibility for the other partner to respond in the same way. Also here we notice the *give-receive-reciprocate cycle* (Godbout and Caillé, 1998), only this time it refers to partners themselves. A partner who receives the gift of promised love is more grateful and more willing to respond the same way, in words as well as in deeds.

In the second topic for the third grade of the Four-year High School Program we can see one more example of the decision component in practice. In the second topic, entitled *Family in God's plan*, we can see that there is a content about family members' duties and rights (PCEFHS, 2009, p. 92). The decisional component plays a significant role in the discourse about duties and rights. It is especially important for duties, because it is easy to accept one's rights. The acceptance of duties, on the other hand, is difficult. It demands a great effort of will. When Sternberg talks about the decision component, he talks about the two aspects we have already mentioned, the decision and the commitment (1986, p. 122).

The decision to love does not necessarily imply a commitment to love. Oddly enough, commitment does not necessarily imply decision. Many people are committed to the love of another without necessarily even admitting that they love or are in love



with the other. Most often, however, decision will precede commitment both temporarily and logically. Indeed, the institution of marriage represents a legalization of the commitment to a decision to love another throughout one's life (Sternberg, 1986, p.123).

That means that the acceptance of duties on an everyday basis and in a long term represents an act of will associated with this commitment. It is here that we can see the strength of marital love. Here we can see the importance of the decisional component. But it is here that we can also see the interrelatedness of all three components, since they cannot be analysed separately, as suggested by Sternberg (1986, p. 120). It can be clearly seen on the example of the decision. The decision has its value even where passion and love do not play any role, but when they are present the decision becomes stronger and obtains a different quality and easiness, and is sometimes the only thing that prevents marriages from falling apart.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to evaluate which of Sternberg's components of love are promoted in Croatian religious educational system and to what extent. This paper is not about divorce directly, it is more about the way to prevent divorce and its negative consequences through religious education. We know that educating students about passion, intimacy and decision cannot make the students ready to be mature when it comes to these dimensions. But what it can do is to transmit, in addition to information, the right attitudes towards cultivating these love and marital components in their own lives.

We can say that religious education in Croatian schools sensitizes students for all three Sternberg's components of love, which are believed to be prerequisites for a long, fulfilling marital relationship. Of course, there is always room for improvements, but the religious education system reflects indeed the catholic way of seeing the marriage, and in it there is a place for each of the above mentioned components. Also, the three components are presented as important parts of marriage, none of them is specified as less relevant, and we can say that the Sternberg's triangle is balanced in this case.

Further research should include the issue of divorce and its coverage in the two programs. We should certainly take in consideration that the Catholic Church does not accept divorce as it is seen in the secular society. The Church points to *dissolution of the bond* or *separation with the bond remaining* (Code of Canon Law, 1983, p. 834-848). In either case, we think that there should be a major part of the content dedicated to the topic of conjugal separation because today it presents an inevitable experience for a large number of children of separated parents. Religious education should talk more about this in order to provide useful and accurate information and to prevent the stigmatization of children whose parents are separated.

There is another component of love that is mentioned in *Familiaris consortio* and is important within the ecclesiastic environment, and is not directly mentioned by Sternberg. This is a *spiritual* component. This component could also be the object of future researches. Although Sternberg does not mention it explicitly in his article, we can find this component included in the decisional component, because we generally make cognitive decisions to love something or somebody only if it represents some kind of value for us. And when we talk about the concept of value, we talk about a significance, a sense which are spiritual qualities.

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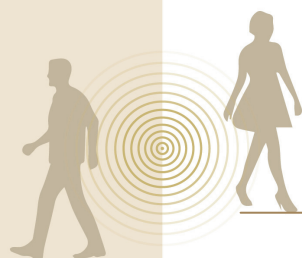
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