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# Cana Catechism

by Ed Harrington

from the Notes of  
**EDWARD DOWLING**  
S. J.



*A QUEEN'S WORK  
PAMPHLET*

**Deacidified**

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# *Cana Catechism*

BY ED HARRINGTON

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EDWARD DOWLING, S.J.

**Y**OU ARE sitting in church on Sunday and the priest's voice becomes a little sentimental, his eyes reach out to the heaven that is surely beyond the choir loft, and he quotes from a Persian poet:

“The lover knocks at the door of the Beloved, and a voice replies from within: Who is there? It is I, he said; and the voice replied: There is no room for thee and me in this house. And the door remained shut. Then the lover retired to the desert and fasted and prayed in solitude. After a year he came back, and knocked once more at the door. Once more the voice asked: Who is there? He replied: It is thyself. And the door opened to him.”

If you are a woman, you might shift a little in the pew and look out of the corner of your eye tracing resemblances in the man next to you to the beloved of fifteen years ago—and then you would remember that you hadn't bought the asparagus yesterday and that the stores are closed on Sunday.

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THE QUEEN'S WORK

If you are a man, you would probably squirm and wonder what all this had to do with the fact that you had fathered an inveterate tree-climber and that broken arms are a luxury on seventy-five a week.

If you have been to a Cana Conference, you know that the man's thoughts and the woman's thoughts and the priest's words are not so far apart, that there is a connection between asparagus on Sunday and tree-climbers and the spiritual poverty of a year in the desert. You know that Cana aims at a unique blend of metaphysics and married life, at the sanctification of dish-washing and dinner conversation.

### Why?

Why all the fuss?

Why start these conferences now?

Doesn't the pastor take care of these problems in premarriage talks?

Actually, the answers to these questions are more in the newspaper than in the Bible. If St. Augustine were the Bishop of Kansas City in Kansas rather than of Hippo in Africa, and read our tabloids, his *City of God* might have included advice on infant care. With the values of Christianity at stake in the home, a new tradition of spirituality is needed: a contemplative life in the midst of grocery lists and an economy-size Stan Musial practicing his swing in front of the living-room mirror.

But during the war when the government wanted to get the message of democracy across, they didn't do it with a liberal dose of Jeffersonian theory; they put a picture of a kid playing baseball on a page and called it America. When Cana wants to explain the full spiritual import of Christian marriage, the twentieth-century apostle borrows a leaf from the huckster's notebook and goes toward the soul through the fingertips. The "why" of Cana is the "what" of the modern age: parish priest, layman, they all fit into the plan, but the technique is new. Christ in Galilee walked and Christ in the twentieth century rides in a car, although the message is the same.

### **Where Did It Start?**

Hundreds of years ago, faced with a spiritual crisis, Europeans answered with the monastery. Cana is reverse lend-lease, an American adaptation of another European answer to crisis.

Before the war, Father John Delaney, S.J., observed the Family Retreat in Europe. In 1941 when he returned to this country, he sponsored "Family-Renewal Days" in New York City. By 1944 Father Delaney had brought the apostolate of the kitchen and the automobile to Chicago. That year, Father Edward Dowling, S.J., brought the New York-Chicago pattern to St. Louis, and his imaginative group of conferees remembered one of the most practically spiritual

miracles of the Christian tradition and called their meeting a "Cana Conference."

If this were still that Sunday sermon, you would probably look grim by now. Having been lured into attention by a promise of the practical, you listen to a policy recital and history. You want to know (with a minimum of frills): What does the conference contain?

There are two main lines of discussion in a Cana Conference. One stresses the couple's wants (how to get asparagus on Sunday), the other stresses their needs (the parable of the lover who went into the desert).

If either is left out, the conference might degenerate into a cookbook or a theological meander. Practically, Cana realizes that most of the people present have probably done more thinking on meat prices than on spiritual poverty: the progression is from steak to metaphysics—but it must be a progression or the conference has failed. A discussion of playgrounds for children is only a few "whys" away from the profound ideas of motherhood and fatherhood. Cana seeks to focus those "whys" in the light of Christian doctrine, but its success is not doctrinal and will not be published in a book. Cana's success is in the living room of a home where a finer understanding of marriage makes a better family life.

An enormous task?

Yes.

But how is it done?

You, priest and parishioner, supply the answer.

### The Priest

“No worries, three squares a day, a place to put your head at night—what does a priest know about marriage?”

When it is a non-Catholic speaking, you despair of explaining that a priest ministers to the soul and that his experience is God’s grace whispered in the dark of the confessional. When it is a Catholic speaking (if he’s single), you tell him to go and take up the easy life.

But now that Cana tries to reach the soul with hands more often consecrated to dishwashing than to the sacrifice of the Mass, the question becomes important: What *does* the priest know about the practical aspects of marriage?

If the Cana priest knows little, he has to learn. He does not play the brooding savant who shuffles nervously in front of the group dispensing awe in eruptions of Thomistic Latin. Cana is mutual. The priest must study the couples’ words as much as (or perhaps more than) the couples study his. It has been a long time since doctors have treated sick people or teachers have taught students: the one treats the disease, the other his subject.

Someday Cana’s arteries might harden. Someday the conference might become as formal as a marriage contract. But right

now a bit of youthful enthusiasm and gangling naivete is excusable and desired—and the priest to get is the one who can talk *to* and *within couples* rather than the one who can talk *on a problem*. A problem has never come to a Cana Conference; people do.

If the priest can aim at stimulation rather than suffocation, if his work has only begun when the couples leave and does not end until the reactions he has started produce ideas which are part of his listeners' lives, he has succeeded. "Go and listen to the McKenzies" was Father Overman's advice in the August 1946 issue of *The Priest*. To him a stiff course in theology or hours in the confessional are not enough. The Irish monk bent on preserving the heritage of Western culture probably found that clear, beautiful handwriting was more important than understanding the manuscript which he copied. And the Cana priest is richer in his work for having listened to the couples than for having a subtle grasp of the theory behind Canon Law impediments.

In a way, the Cana priest should wear a frock coat and a Prince Albert beard. He is as old fashioned as the family doctor or the one-room-school teacher — or as old fashioned as the world seems to consider the ideal of marriage which he fights for. His is a difficult task: he must go back to the desert of our opening sermon—and not return until he is one with the married couples whom he teaches.



## How?

Like the Irish monk who tried a dozen flourishes on scrap parchment before he found the best way to write, Cana is in the process of constant experiment. In Chicago, Pre-Cana Conferences for the engaged couples had husband-wife panels giving the talks. In St. Louis, Station WEW broadcasts a Sunday roundtable of married couples in a miniature Cana Conference.

In some cases the trend has gone even farther. I have watched two evening conferences where all the talks were given by the couples. Perhaps this is a good direction to take, perhaps not. That's not the point. Many Cana ideas at this stage are headed for the wastebasket along with the rest of the scrap paper that goes into producing a finished manuscript. The danger is that new directions will not be taken, that early Cana patterns will become formalized.

Much is in transition. As long as Cana experiments are directed toward the broad ends of the program, that transition means life. If this pamphlet (in its practical suggestions) becomes a rarity to be chained to a lectern in the Cana Conference hall of fifty years from now, so obsolete as to be laughable, much the better if our new techniques are accomplishing the purpose.

## Where Do We Start?

However, experience has given some tools already. These are the model-T ideas of a new program, recommended to you because

the dust-grimed, cranky horseless carriage of the nineteen-aughts was a tremendous improvement over the one-horse shay.

Whenever a research group does a study of advertising readership in magazines, they invariably discover that one motif leads pin-ups and futuramic automobiles: the picture of a child.

Cana is no exception.

The God-centering of the mediæval world is as much a memory today as the smoke of the first combustion engine. Even the couple's interest in each other seems to go the way of the spirit in the machine age. But more of this later.

Long before the modern Cana was thought of, long after the original Cana had taken place, Protestant and secular groups realized the appeal of the child and had achieved tangible results in the Parent-Teacher Association. Although these groups could not even consider many vital problems (with religion waiting in the rain until the heterogeneous group broke up) they found vigorous discussion in centering on the child. Because of this, one of the best topics at the beginning of a Cana Conference is the parent-child relationship.

But here the practical sneaks in and raises some tough problems. Few seminary courses qualify their graduates to moderate a discussion which runs all the way from diapers to daughters-in-law. And few parents whose children are scattered through

the teens are too anxious to spend time discussing infant care with newlyweds. (Here again, the priest who goes into the desert to identify himself with the couples he teaches must learn that all is not contemplation; hard listening may produce helpful hints on diapers.)

As a result of the accidental difficulties surrounding the "Parent-Child Relationship" topic for a first conference, I have found that it still pays to don the frock coat—to start with the relationship of husband and wife, however old that may be in a cynical and almost polygamous world. Honeymooners and grandparents have the experience of love in common.

### Order

So far, in talking about the mutual character of a Cana group and the need for abandoning pat formulae, I might have given the wrong impression. A Cana Conference is not a Donnybrook Fair with topics for tumblers and the priest hawking theology like a baseball program. Experience has taught that there is an orderly, systematic approach which still leaves room for free discussion.

Most of the wants of couples can be classified under four major relationships. The family has two internal relationships: husband-wife and parent-child; and two external: family-Creator and family-crea-

ture. These categories provide channels for discussion—not strait jackets.

Which does not mean that the conferees sit cross-legged and meditate on the mystical import of “husband-wife.” Nor does it mean that mysticism is for monasteries alone. It does mean that you start at the oblique angle, at the concrete instance. “Playgrounds” or the “Medicine Cabinet in the Bathroom” has much to do with the profound in married life.

Santa Claus is more of a reality to a child than the Holy Ghost. First things in importance are often the last in interest. Persuasion to practical Christianity can begin at the remotely spiritual; it succeeds when the Holy Ghost becomes as much a part of integrated family life as a “family-hold-back signal” on the roast beef at a dinner party.

### Shirt Sleeves

At this point, our analogy of a practical sermon in church breaks down. Cana policy assumes the atmosphere of a CYO picnic committee, shirt sleeves and all. The organizer in the group (jut-jawed, slightly bass voice, with or without Roman collar, always with an orderly fanaticism in the eyes) draws out a list. What do we need?

We need some people, two couples at least. We need a priest, or priests, or even any other qualified person (emphasis on the adjective) to lead the discussion. A place

to meet. Provisions for the children (optional). And finally, we need a program to give definite lines to the discussion.

The problem of people is usually the easiest with an organization picnic. It is with Cana. Cana welcomes married or engaged couples of any religion.

The program for engaged couples has just begun to come into the limelight. Canon Law has always directed that those about to be married apply to their pastor for instructions, and Cana gives more emphasis than one single talk because Cana feels the need for marriage instructions has gone beyond that envisioned when the earlier requirement was framed. Usually they are given in a series and have been most successfully held in Brooklyn, Chicago, and St. Louis on a city-wide basis.

When we begin to talk about the priest we run into as much trouble as the good Padre boning up on the everyday logistics of the pantry. The picnic committee might invite Father So-and-so because they hear his Mass on Sunday. Cana invites the priest because he is essential. With all the emphasis on the practical, marriage is a sacrament and as such peculiarly in the domain of the trained theologian.

On the practical level, it seems best to have the parish priest give his time to Cana in other parishes. His best talks (and his best jokes) are well known in his own parish. And in discussing difficulties, there

is always the danger that his people will take his examples personally and feel that he is violating the confidence which he receives every day.

### Atomic Theory

At this point, it seems necessary to really dust off the frock coat. We have to deny atomic theory because it doesn't work in a Cana Conference.

The priest is essential. But if he is conceived of as a *part* of the molecule, an atom, who happens to be in the same orbit as the laypeople at the conference but is distinct from them, the whole idea collapses. As a priest, he is necessary for the interpretation of the sacrament.

And yet marriage is the only sacrament in which the participants are the ministers. Any married person is something of an expert on marriage, both sacramentally and practically. When the Cana Conference becomes a single, an-atomic unit of experience, it succeeds. When the knowledge of all the laypeople present and the knowledge of the priest concentrate together on the single fact of married life and interpret it, practical, workable conclusions are inevitable.

The Queen's Work has an incomplete, though extensive, list of priests who have given Cana Conferences from time to time. As for the people, they are your fellow parishioners.

## **The Place**

Cana Conferences have been held in homes and hotels, summer camps and summer houses, convents and schools, parish halls and trailers. The place really doesn't make any difference, but there are some considerations which should come into your plans (if the organizer hasn't already thought of them).

The place should have some facilities for children so that they can be taken care of while their parents attend the conference. And money matters (which have ended many an idealistic program before it began) should be carefully watched. The expenses of the conference should be borne by all who attend, and not by the person or place which acts as host to the group.

## **The Sitter**

Symbolic of Cana's attempt to rephrase Catholic theology in the eight-cylinder jargon of the modern world is that one of its greatest concerns has not been the quiddity but the sitter. In St. Louis, where scores of these conferences have been held, the children are often cared for by a group of young women headed by a mature, competent widow. Experts from the pioneer metropolis attempt to maintain an index based on one sitter to four children. They also advise that children under two be cared for in some other way unless special facilities, such as cribs, are handy.

Evening conferences, of course, are not as involved with the sitter problem as those held in daytime. However, it's best to keep the starting hour of these conferences later than eight o'clock so that the participants can face the problems of eating, instructing the sitter, etc., before they come to discuss them. When sitters are available, entertainment for the children has ranged from a few picture books to a movie at some large conferences.

### **Program and Time**

Important as the Cana theory on reaching the abstract through the fingertips, are the small details of scheduling and time. Amazingly minute items loom large in experience. Veterans in the movement would no more think of holding a conference without comfortable chairs than would they invite a prominent divorce lawyer to lecture on the stability of family life.

As far as time goes, the meetings can last anywhere from three hours to a three-day confab once held at a summer camp. Bishop O'Hara of Kansas City is behind the idea for week-end conferences at his retreat house, Gethsemane. And another idea which achieves a brilliant union of the practical with the practical is to hold the conference at a summer resort where clear heads for discussion are insured by cool water for swimming. In St. Louis, inventive mid-westerners came up with the reverse of the long meeting and held short evening con-



ferences on specialized topics which lasted about two-and-a-half hours and were conducted by laypeople.

### **Cokes and Cards**

It is hardly worthwhile to point out that refreshments are in the spirit of Cana. As a matter of fact some unreconstructed reader might already be planning to "save the best wine until the last." Experience shows that Cokes and coffee are the most practical thing to serve, and should appear at long conferences between meetings and after the gabfest at short conferences.

Name cards help to make the groups jell. Shrewd publicity workers will also find that a mimeographed roster listing the couples' names, addresses, telephone numbers, and parishes, can insure a greater turnout if it is well circulated before the meeting. Frequently two or three couples will apply together for reservations, and publicists with connections at the city desk can get an announcement of names and addresses in the local newspaper.

The responsibility for all these details has to be put somewhere—and definitely. A good way to do it (if you don't get outraged screams from the "elected") is to appoint a sponsoring couple who take care of publicity, refreshments, mimeographed roster, name cards, and the like.

Cost should be held low in order to make Cana a popular uprising and not a small

private party. The more the better. The money angle can be handled by soliciting free-will offerings, or the cost can be divided up and an assessment made against the participants.

So far in our conscientious attention to the minute and important, we have made an omission of serious proportions. Story has it that a rather jolly Trappist who wanted to tell a joke while Gethsemane was enroute to Idaho asked the rector, "May I say something practical?" "Certainly," replied the superior, "go in the corner and say a Hail Mary." Cana stands with the rector. We have found that ending the day with a renewal of marriage vows makes the most fitting climax possible. When all-day conferences are held in parishes, a dialogue Mass is a brilliant keynote address.

We have also had some experience in scheduling Cana Conferences, and we thought that the inclusion of "model schedules" (to be disregarded at will and studied for their worth and foundation of experience) would be a great aid to those on the verge of their first Cana get-together.

#### A Possible All-Day Conference

8:30 Talk on the Mass

9:00 Mass

9:30 Breakfast—reading at breakfast

10:00 Talk

11:00 Talk

12:00 Dinner

1:00 Roundtable on ideal Catholic home, touching prayer, recreation, budgets, etc.

2:30 Rosary by husbands and wives

3:00 Talk

3:45 Refreshments

4:00 Discussion by couples on resolutions to be drawn from the day

Afternoon conferences present their own particular problems—how much ground to cover in a shorter time, etc.—but a projected schedule could be as follows:

1:00 Conference on unity of souls

2:00 Conference on money as a source of disunion

3:00 Conferences on children and unity

4:00 Discussion

5:00 Benediction

An evening conference could be run on this model.

5:30 Talk

6:15 Soul Compatibilities

6:45 Supper and discussion

7:30 Talk

8:15 Discussion

8:45 Discussion

9:00 Benediction

9:15 Refreshments

### Home and Radio

Cana is by no means a subversive movement (unless it is considered un-something-or-other to dedicate yourself to subverting de-Christianized marriage) but it can learn from the Russians. We have found that a Cana "cell" in the home, a small meeting of friends informally gathered together, can produce concrete results.

Usually there are from four to eight couples at these meetings (they have to be held down to living-room size) and although some direction is attempted in laying down topics, informal give-and-take is the real order of the meeting. These conferences have had outstanding success in warm weather when air-conditioned halls are at a premium and a few fans can insure calm, cool discussion. The round-robin idea works well here too, with each participating couple playing host to the group in succeeding weeks.

In radio work, the Saint Louisans have again taken the lead. Station WEW has had *Cana Conversations* on Sunday morning for more than a year. The roundtable pattern is used in the radio meeting, with a priest and two couples discussing some special topic of everyday married life. These panels have a flexibility which is denied the regular conference. The discussion reaches

right into the home without the intrusion of Coca-Cola, sitters, and hard chairs.

Sample topics from the St. Louis experiment are: "Family Vacations," "Can You Afford a Car?" "The Post-Marital Problem" (one of the best letter-getters of the whole series), "Homework," "Budgets," "Mealtime in the Home," "Extravagance," "Adopting Baby," "Cana and the Parish," "What Movies for Our Children?"

### **Cana and the Parish**

What God has joined together a good many Catholic activities tend to put asunder. Sunday Mass usually means that dad goes to one Mass while mother watches the children; then mother goes to another Mass while dad watches the children.

As soon as grade school is ended, we separate boys and girls. Our men's societies are for men only; the women's societies are definitely just for women. Most husbands are separated from their wives all day by business. When they do get a chance to get together, they are chaperoned by children and radio—and with television all hope fades into a little screen.

There is probably no well-established parish in the United States today that *needs* either a Cana Conference or Cana Society. If they don't have them, the Sunday Masses will continue to be crowded and the mortgage will continue to be amortized. But there are a great many couples and

families in those parishes that would find them helpful and valuable if the experience of several thousand couples in various parts of the United States is any criterion.

The question is not: How many cornerstones will be laid? The question is: How long can the family stand with one foot inside the vestibule door and one foot on the banana-peel world of divorce and movies and Margaret Sanger-ites? And what positive good can be done when the family slips and falls?

The supernatural is based on the natural. Conceive Cana as the modern Christian psychiatrist trying to help solve the neuroses of the natural. The patient is the family and has gone schizophrenic: one face turned to the city of man, one face turned to the City of God. The answer is the answer of modern psychology. Give the patient a couch (or a conference hall). Stay in the background yourself. Let the patient talk out his problem. The doctor is there to suggest (when the patient wants suggestion); the patient is there to talk and to cure himself. As a carriage-trade psychiatrist ministering to those who are lucky enough to know about the conferences, Cana can accomplish little. As a horse-and-buggy doctor, an integral part of parish life, Cana can accomplish much.

### **Ways and Means**

Sunday Mass is no clinic. It is a supernatural event which the Catholic attends under pain of mortal sin. Some parishes

take care of children during Mass; some even have a Communion breakfast. Why not make the Communion breakfast an affair for the whole family and, by Cana talks and roundtables, a cure for the whole man?

Sometimes those couples who know the real value of Cana suggest the idea of a parish group devoted to this one purpose. But the practical person, present always, comes up with the discouraging fact that the parish is organized from head to toe and has enough affiliations to take care of itself.

Father J. Roger Lyons, S.J., who did much writing on marriage during the last quarter of a century and who was one of the outstanding authorities on the Sodality, came up with an answer. He told the diocesan directors of Sodalities at their 1948 meeting that Cana and the Sodality could join together.

Father Lyons had two suggestions for working out his idea. One proposed the organization of a distinct Cana Sodality for husbands and wives together. The other called for a committee on Cana working in an already existing Sodality.

### **Where Does Cana Begin?**

This discussion began with a sermon in church. Cana doesn't.

If there is going to be any success to the movement, Cana must begin in the

home. There is no metaphor as stark as the restatement of the single fact: Cana must begin with the family and must be composed of the family. The priest has had experience as an organizer and as an administrator. Cana can draw on him for his know-how in this field and in the field of theology. But once the group is organized (and it can't be organized without cooperation from the family) Cana draws on the experience and know-how of the people present. Cana draws on the family.

We have tried to mark out the theory. We have even discussed overhead. We have tried to diagnose the disease. But the Church, the priest, the psychiatrist can do little more than this. The success of Cana depends on the patient. If he can sit down and talk out his problem—and cure it—nothing can stop a development of a finer married life.

But if Cana goes the way of many organizations, with a tight little circle controlling the organization *and the talking*, the inevitable will happen: the patient will go away more neurotic than when he came.

### **Where Does Cana End?**

A lot of meetings end with a jam in the parking lot and frayed nerves. Most of them don't even go that far. They end with a scraping of chairs as the crowd makes for the exit.



Not so with Cana—if Cana succeeds.

If a husband helps his wife with the dishes and their conversation runs in an amorous vein, they hold an informal Cana Conference. When they talk about the neighbors, or their in-laws, in a way that tends to divide them, that is not a Cana Conference. But if they talk of these everyday subjects in a way that tends to unite them and enriches their living together, we have an informal Cana Conference.

Cana Conferences in halls and on radio stations only began because Cana Conferences in the kitchen were not being held.

Without practice, marital conversation usually runs to brica-a-brac and ends there. But with the practice of the Cana Conference, these tête-à-têtes can turn into something that lives up to the Christian ideal of marriage. It may even be necessary to go back at intervals (ask any veteran retreatant about the value of renewing a spiritual experience) to renew the realization of what marriage is.

Weddings usually have many tears and many presents. The presents wear out. The tears can be wiped away.

But what about the vows?

Cana Conferences always include a repetition of the vows. And if the conference

ends in the home with a day-by-day, minute-by-minute renewal of the vows, Cana will have achieved a triumph in practical Christianity, having saved the best wine, not for the wedding day, but for the years that follow.

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