



## HOLY MATRIMONY

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“What God had joined together let no man put asunder.”  
-Matt. 19:6

### Marriage in God’s Plan

There are many definitions of marriage floating around in the world today. This institution has been with mankind since time immemorial and has appeared under a variety of forms throughout history. It transcends cultures and religions. The Catholic Church recognizes a spiritual element in the matrimonial bond beyond the simple fact of biological union, and therefore recognizes it as a great work of God’s grace.

Canon Law gives the following definition of matrimony: “The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament” (CIC, 1055 § 1).

### At Creation

Scripture tells us that marriage was instituted at the very Creation of mankind by God. This truth excludes any naturalistic or anthropological speculations on the origin of marriage that would reduce it to a social convention created by man.<sup>1</sup> The Catechism says that marriage has been “established by the Creator and endowed by Him with its own proper laws” (CCC 1603). The fact that marriage has taken different forms throughout history should not cause us to lose sight of its common and permanent characteristics.

Marriage comes from the fact that God created man out of love and calls Him to love. Love is the innate vocation of every human being (CCC 1604), since man is made in the image of the God Who is love. The mutual love between man and woman is an image of the enduring love of God, and this love is blessed by the Creator to become fruitful. This is in the image of the Trinity: as in the Trinity, the Father loves the Son, the Son proceeds from the Father and the love between them is the Holy Spirit, so in matrimony the man loves his wife, who comes forth from his side (according to the creation story in Gen. 2:21-23), and the love between them is manifest as another being, a child.

Holy Scripture affirms that man and woman were created for each other, and that in the enduring bond of man and wife man finds his fulfillment on the natural level: “This at last is bone of my

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<sup>1</sup> The divine origin of marriage was denied by Martin Luther and the Reformers: “Marriage may therefore be a figure of Christ and the Church; it is, however, no Divinely instituted sacrament, but the invention of men in the Church, arising from ignorance of the subject.” In another work, he says, “No one indeed can deny that marriage is an external worldly thing, like clothes and food, house and home, subject to worldly authority...”

bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman because she was taken out of Man” (Gen. 2:23).

### **In the Old Testament**

Like everything else pertaining to man, the institution of marriage suffered when man fell from God’s grace after Creation. Without the grace of God, man’s understanding becomes clouded, his personality subject to the violent and instable control of the passions, and his will to do good is hampered and weakened by the ever present desire to live only for selfish reasons.

In this state, marriage takes on a remedial aspect. It “helps to overcome self-absorption, egoism, pursuit of one’s own pleasure, and to open oneself to the other, to mutual aid and to self-giving” (CCC 1609). Yet too often marriage itself became marred by the sin of man, and instead of the ideal established by God it became a struggle of power, domination, jealousy and lust. The bond became polluted and used for other ends besides the good of the spouses and the procreation of children (political, economic, social reasons). In many places, polygamy became the norm.

While never condoned in Scripture, polygamy is never explicitly condemned, either. Nevertheless, the wives of Jacob and Solomon prove to be snares to them, and the prophets saw in God’s exclusive and faithful love of Israel a powerful symbol of marriage, which deepened the Israelite’s understanding of the unity and indissolubility of marriage. Jesus says that polygamy, as well as divorce, were tolerated in the Old Testament because of “hardness of heart” on the part of the Israelites (Matt. 19:8).

### **Marriage in the Lord**

In the Old Testament, God had used the analogy of marriage to describe His relationship with His people. In uniting Himself with human flesh, God the Son in a sense “weds” Himself to humanity by becoming “one flesh” with it. The Church is called His Bride, and our heavenly reward with Him called “the wedding feast of the Lamb” (Rev. 19:7).

Christ’s first miracle was performed at a wedding, and the Church has always attached great importance to Jesus’ presence at the wedding of Cana. “She sees in it the confirmation of the goodness of marriage and the proclamation that thenceforth marriage will be an efficacious sign of Christ's presence” (CCC 1613).

*“In his preaching Jesus unequivocally taught the original meaning of the union of man and woman as the Creator willed it from the beginning: permission given by Moses to divorce one’s wife was a concession to the hardness of hearts. The matrimonial union of man and woman is indissoluble: God himself has determined it “what therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder” (CCC 1614).*

There is a deep spiritual connection between Christ’s sacrificial love for the Church and the love of a man for his wife. The grace of Christian marriage is the fruit of Christ’s cross, which is what St. Paul means when he says, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave

Himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25). It has been the perennial teaching of the Church that in His ministry, Christ reordered marriage to its original end and raised it to the dignity of a Sacrament of the New Law.

### **The Ends of Marriage**

According to the Church, marriage exists for two ends:

- 1) The procreation of children and the rearing of a family
- 2) The mutual good of the spouses

These two ends are often called “fecundity” and “fidelity,” or sometimes the “procreative” and the “unitive.” Conjugal love requires fidelity by its very nature, as a consequence of the total gift of self-made by the spouses. A deeper reason is to be found in the fidelity of God to His covenant in that of Christ to the Church. Through the sacrament, the spouses are able to represent this fidelity and witness to it, giving the marital indissolubility and new and deeper meaning. Fidelity is also demanded for the good of the children.

Marriage, specifically the conjugal act, is ordered towards procreation by its very nature: the conjugal act and the procreative act are one and the same. But fecundity does not end with the simple act of procreation, but extends to the fruits of the moral, spiritual and supernatural life that parents hand on to their children (CCC 1653).

Both the Council of Trent and St. Thomas Aquinas, among others, affirm that in the matrimonial covenant, the primary end is the procreation of children and the secondary end is the good of the spouses (*STh, Supplementum*, Q. 67, a. 1, ad 4th; *Catechism of Trent*, Part II, VII, §§ 13-14). This was reaffirmed by Pope Pius XI in his 1930 encyclical *Casti Connubii* on Christian marriage.

Pope Paul VI (*Humanae Vitae*, 1967) and Pope John Paul II have pointed out that the ends of marriage must be sought in unity. To seek one apart from the other is to do violence to the marriage bond and to sin against the natural law.

### **Virginity for the Sake of the Kingdom**

Though marriage is lofty, Church tradition affirms that there is a higher calling. The bond with Christ takes precedence over all other bonds. Many throughout Church history have renounced the marriage bond to follow the Lamb wherever He goes (Rev. 14:4). Christ Himself invited men and women to follow Him in this way:

*“For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it” (Matt. 19:12).*

Virginity for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven is a powerful unfolding of baptismal grace and a sign which recalls that marriage is a reality only of this present age which shall pass away and

shows forth, in the bodies of consecrated virgins, the mystical presences of that Kingdom to come where we “are neither married nor given in marriage, but are like the angels in heaven” (Mark 12:25). Consecrated virgins participate now in the life to come by their witness that the bond with Christ is supreme over any earthly bond.

Though both marriage and virginity comes from God, the Church, following St. Paul, has always affirmed that virginity is a superior calling to marriage, for the two-fold reason that marriage is earth-bound whereas virginity is not, and virginity more fully enables one to serve God without distraction:

*“But I would have you to be without solicitude. He that is without a wife is solicitous for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please God. But he that is with a wife, is solicitous for the things of the world, how he may please his wife: and he is divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin thinketh on the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit. But she that is married thinketh on the things of this world how she may please her husband. And this I speak for your profit, not to cast a snare upon you, but for that which is decent and which may give you power to attend upon the Lord without impediment”*

-1 Corinthians 7:7-8, 32-35

### **Celebration of the Sacrament**

“According to Latin tradition, the spouses as ministers of Christ's grace mutually confer upon each other the sacrament of Matrimony by expressing their consent before the Church” (CCC 1623). This is a unique aspect of Matrimony apart from the other sacraments: that the spouses themselves act as the ministers of the sacrament, which is witnessed and blessed (but not conferred) by the Church.

Like all other sacraments, marriage consists of form and matter, joined with intention and proper minister. There has been much debate throughout the centuries as to in what exactly the form and matter of marriage consists in. Some said the form was the consent, others claimed that this was the matter. What we can say for certain is that two things are necessary for a marriage to occur: one man and one woman (matter), coupled with a free and public consent (form).

The Church defines “free consent” as:

- not being under constraint (like a “shotgun wedding”)
- not being impeded by natural or ecclesiastical law
- given by each of the parties, not one only

This consent is vital to the marriage. If it is not given, *there is no marriage*. The priest or deacon presiding over the marriage ceremony receives the consent of the spouses in the name of the Church and gives the blessing of the Church. The presence of the Church’s minister, and of the witnesses, visibly expresses the fact that marriage is an ecclesial reality.

The fact that marriage is a sacrament and an ecclesial reality is why the Church requires that the faithful contract marriage under a certain form. Several reasons converge to explain this requirement:

- Sacramental marriage is a *liturgical* act. Therefore, it ought to be celebrated in the public liturgy of the Church, subject to the Church's liturgical norms.
- Marriage introduces one into an ecclesial order, and creates rights and duties in the Church between spouses and their children.
- Since marriage is a state of life in the Church, certainty about it is necessary (hence the obligation to have witnesses).
- The public character of the consent protects the "I do" once given and helps the spouses remain faithful to it.

### **Effects of the Sacrament**

Two new realities arise as a result of this sacrament: the *marriage bond* and the *grace of the sacrament*. The bond that arises through the consent of the spouses is sealed by God Himself. The marriage bond has been established by God in such a way that a marriage concluded and consummated between baptized persons can never be dissolved and remains until the death of one of the spouses. Neither the Church nor civil government has the power to contravene this reality.

Like all sacraments, marriage has its own special grace proper to it. The grace of matrimony is intended to perfect the couple's love and strengthen their indissoluble unity. By this grace they help each other on the path to holiness in their married life and in the education of children.

### **Separation**

“Yet there are some situations in which living together becomes practically impossible for a variety of reasons. In such cases the Church permits the physical *separation* of the couple and their living apart. However, the spouses do not cease to be husband and wife before God and so are not free to contract a new union. In this difficult situation, the best solution would be, if possible, reconciliation. The Christian community is called to help these persons live out their situation in a Christian manner and in fidelity to their marriage bond which remains indissoluble” (CCC 1649). Tradition calls this “separation from bed and board.”

The Church has always recognized what it calls the “Pauline Privilege” (found in 1 Cor. 7:10-15): the allowance for the dissolution of a marriage contracted between non-believers in the case that one (but not both) of the partners converts to Christianity and the other partner leaves the marriage. The Church also allows a Petrine Privilege, a situation which allows for the dissolution of a marriage between a baptized and an unbaptized, freeing the baptized to marry a Catholic. Circumstances allowing use of the Petrine Privilege are rare and its use is reserved to the Pope alone (hence, the name).

Furthermore, a marriage which has been ratified but not consummated (*ratum et non consummatum*) can be dissolved by (a) a dispensation from the Pope for a grave reason, or (b) the taking of religious vows by either of the two parties.

## **Divorce**

Divorce refers to the dissolution of the marriage bond, and taken as such, it is impossible. A valid, sacramental and consummated marriage can never be dissolved except by death. The Church follows the teaching of Jesus, Who said, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commit adultery" (Mark 10:11-12):

*Today there are numerous Catholics in many countries who have recourse to civil divorce and contract new civil unions. In fidelity to the words of Jesus Christ - "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery" the Church maintains that a new union cannot be recognized as valid, if the first marriage was. If the divorced are remarried civilly, they find themselves in a situation that objectively contravenes God's law. Consequently, they cannot receive Eucharistic communion as long as this situation persists. For the same reason, they cannot exercise certain ecclesial responsibilities. Reconciliation through the sacrament of Penance can be granted only to those who have repented for having violated the sign of the covenant and of fidelity to Christ, and who are committed to living in complete continence.*

-CCC 1650

## **Civil Marriages**

A civil marriage is a situation arising when the state declares a man and woman husband and wife, claiming thereby to make them such. The state has no power to do this with regards to baptized persons; its only job is to register such marriages once they have taken place. Catholics are bound to have their marriages civilly registered after the fact, but recognizing that the state of marriage does not arise from the civil law. A civil marriage is invalid if one or both of the parties are Catholics. Baptized non-Catholics can validly marry under civil law, not because the civil government has any power to marry, but because non-Catholics are exempt from having to use the Church's form.

## **Annulments**

An annulment is a declaration of nullity, which is a canonical declaration that a union that was reputed to be a marriage has proved not to be so under closer examination. It is a declaration that a union was "null"; i.e., that no marriage ever existed.

Whether a marriage is declared null or not has to do solely with circumstances leading up to and at the time of the marriage. Nothing that happens afterwards affects the nullity of a marriage. Thus, it frequently happens that unions of 20 years with many children are found to be null. This

happens because whether or not a marriage is null has to do only with what occurred at the time of the exchange of vows.

Nullity is declared when it can be demonstrated that the marriage could not be contracted because of an *impediment* (Lat. *impedimentum*, baggage, burden). Impediments are of two kinds: *diriment impediments* and *impeding impediments*.

Diriment Impediments: obstacles arising either from natural law or ecclesiastical law which prohibit marriage between the persons affected and make null any attempted marriage between them. Some diriment impediments are:

- Insufficient age
- Existing prior marriage
- Consanguinity (blood relation within prohibited degree)
- Affinity (marriage to the relatives of one you have had sexual intercourse with. Thus, a man cannot marry his wife's sister after the wife dies.)
- Spiritual Relationship (godparent, sponsor, etc.)
- Adoption
- Public Honesty (cannot marry the relative of one you have been engaged to without a dispensation)
- Solemn Vows
- Holy Orders
- Disparity of Cult (Catholic and a non-baptized person)
- Crime (killed one spouse to marry another)
- Impotence
- Error (married one twin instead of the other)
- Imbecility
- Violence & Fear
- Abduction
- Clandestinity (no witnesses)
- Lack of Consent
- Defect of Form

Ecclesiastical diriment impediments can only be dispensed by the Pope. Diriment impediments of the natural law can never be dispensed.

Impeding Impediments: obstacles that make a marriage unlawful but not invalid. Once impeding impediments are removed, marriage can be contracted.

- Previous engagement subsisting
- Forbidden times (marrying during Lent)
- Simple vows
- Mixed Religion (marriage of a Catholic to a baptized non-Catholic)

Impeding impediments can be dispensed with for good reason.

When an annulment is declared, it must be understood that (a) it is a legal term which says something about the state of the marriage contracted and does not say anything about the relationship existing between the two parties or whether or not they love each other then or now (b) it does not make any statement on the legal status of the children arising from such a union (they do not automatically become “bastards”) (c) an annulment is a declaration that no marriage ever took place: it is not the same as a divorce, which claims to dissolve an existing marriage.

### **Conclusion**

The sacrament of Matrimony signifies the union of Christ and the Church. It gives spouses the grace to love each other with the love with which Christ has loved his Church; the grace of the sacrament thus perfects the human love of the spouses, strengthens their indissoluble unity, and sanctifies them on the way to eternal life (CCC 1661).

For Further Reading: Gen. 1:18-25; Matt. 19:3-12; Mark 10:11-12; 1 Cor. 7:7-8, 32-35; Eph. 5:25-32; Dr. Donald Ascii, *The Conjugal Act as Personal Act*; Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*; Pope Pius XI, *Casti Connubii* (1930); *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 1601-1666