

SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE

(C 1601-1666, USC Ch. 21)

The *Catechism* (C 1603) states: “*The intimate community of life and love which constitutes the married state has been established by the Creator and endowed by him with its proper laws.... God himself is the author of marriage.*” The word “matrimony” comes from the Latin word *matrimonium*, which means “wedlock.”

In this article we will look at:

- Biblical Roots of the Sacrament
- Jesus’ Teaching on the Sacrament
- Twofold Purpose of Marriage
- Celebration of Marriage
- Matrimonial Graces
- Mixed and Interfaith Marriages
- Domestic Church
- Divorce and Pastoral Care
- Declaration of Nullity (Annulment)

Biblical Roots (C 1603-1605, USC p. 279)

In the *Book of Genesis*, we read how God saw “it was not good for the man to be alone,” so God created for him a woman who would be his special companion (Gen 2:18). The two would form a “love union” or partnership which would be expressed, celebrated and symbolized by their sexual union: “The two shall become one body” (Gen 1:24). In time, the “love union” or partnership between the man and the woman became known as marriage. The man and the woman received their new titles “husband” and “wife” to symbolize their new calling or vocation. The “love union” between a husband and wife is also sometimes called the *unitive* dimension of marriage.

We also read in the *Book of Genesis* how God intended the union between the man and the woman to be fruitful, to lead to the procreation of new life. “Be fruitful and multiply...” (Gen 2:8). This is often called the *procreative* dimension of marriage.

It took Israel centuries to grasp God’s plan for marriage. The patriarchs and kings of Israel practiced polygamy just like their neighbors. Moses permitted men to divorce their wives due to “the hardness of their hearts” (Mt 19:7-9).

The prophets of ancient Israel prepared the hearts of their people to receive Jesus’ teachings on marriage, which was a restoration of God’s plan for marriage. They described marriage as a visible sign of God’s invisible and faithful love for Israel. Just as God

faithfully loved Israel, so should husbands and wives faithfully love each other (Is 62:2-5).

In its treatment of marriage, the *Catechism* points us to the books of Ruth and Tobit because they describe the ideals of fidelity and tenderness that should exist between spouses. The Song of Solomon depicts a human love that mirrors God’s love, a love strong as death.

Jesus’ Teaching on Marriage (C 1612-1617, USC p. 280)

Jesus brought to full awareness God’s plan for marriage. In John’s gospel, Christ’s first miracle occurs at a wedding. The Church sees in Jesus’ presence a confirmation of the goodness of marriage.

In his teaching, Jesus was very clear about God’s plan for marriage. In Mt 19:3-6, we read: “*Some Pharisees approached him, and tested him, saying, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause whatever?’ He said in reply, ‘Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate.*”

St. Paul reiterates Christ’s teaching on marriage when he says: “*A wife should not separate from her husband and a husband should not divorce his wife*” (1 Cor 7:10-11). In his letter to the Ephesians, he states: “*For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and his church*” (Eph 5:31-32). Paul is saying that the union of a husband and wife is like the union of Christ with his Church, and Paul calls this reality a *mystery*, a word translated by St. Augustine as “sacrament.” Christian marriage is a visible sign of Christ’s love for his Church. In this sense, marriage is what the *Catechism* calls an *efficacious sign* or sacrament of Jesus’ presence. (For more on the term “efficacious sign”, see Art 12.)

Marriage as a covenant relationship. The sacrament of marriage is a covenantal relationship and not just a contractual one. What is the difference? In a contractual relationship, one person is free to break the bond if the other person breaks the commitment in some way. In a covenantal relationship, both spouses promise “to love each other in good times and in bad,

in sickness and in health, until death do us part.” A covenant relationship mirrors God’s love for us. He keeps loving us even when we stop loving him.

Pause: What spoke to you most in the section of the article that we have just read?

Marriage in the early centuries of Christianity. While from the early centuries of Christianity, marriage between two Christians was looked upon as a sacred union, it did not take place in church. Christians were married according to local civil custom. The consent of the man and the woman was all that was needed. By the end of the fourth century, the practice began in which a priest or bishop offered a blessing to the newly married couple and took an active role in the civil ceremony, though this was not required.

During the Middle Ages, Christian marriage was recognized as a sacrament. In 1208, Pope Innocent III called marriage a sacrament. In 1563, the Council of Trent reaffirmed that marriage was a sacrament and that a Catholic marriage had to take place in the presence of a priest. (The Protestant Reformers, while believing that marriage was sacred, rejected it as a sacrament.)

Twofold Purpose of Marriage (C 1643-1651, USC p. 283)

The *Catechism* (1660) states: “*The marriage covenant, by which a man and a woman form with each other an intimate communion of life and love...is by its very nature ordered to the good of the couple, as well as to the generation and education of children.*” So the two purposes of marriage are the welfare of the couple through their love for each other and the procreation and education of children. These two purposes of marriage are protected and fostered when the couple clearly commits to a permanent relationship. These two ends of marriage are often called the *unitive* and *procreative* dimensions of marriage.

The Church, of course, knows that not all couples can have children. Such marriages can be fruitful in other ways: in charity, hospitality and sacrifice (C 1654).

Challenges to the Church’s understanding of marriage. Speaking on this issue, the *United States Catholic Catechism* (p.280) states: “*There are attempts by some in contemporary society to change the definition or understanding of what exactly constitutes marriage. Efforts to gain approval for and acceptance of same-sex unions as marriages are examples. While the Church clearly teaches that*

discrimination against any group of people is wrong, efforts to make cohabitation, domestic partnerships, same-sex unions, and polygamous unions equal to marriage are misguided and also wrong. The Church and her members need to continue to be a strong and clear voice in protecting an understanding of marriage, which is rooted in natural law and revealed in God’s law.”

Pause: What are some anti-marriage forces at work in our society today?

Celebration of Marriage (C 1621-1632, USC p. 282)

The marriage of two Catholics takes place in a Catholic Church. Celebrating marriage in a church helps to underline its sacred and religious dimension. It also helps to emphasize that marriage is a public state of life.

Marriage between a Catholic and a baptized Christian from another religious tradition also normally takes place in a Catholic church. Permission may be requested to have the marriage take place in a non-Catholic church. When a Catholic marries a person from a non-Christian faith tradition, permission can be requested to have the ceremony take place outside a church.

Marriage between two Catholics or between a Catholic and a baptized Christian of another faith tradition takes place in a Church in the presence of a priest or deacon, two witnesses, and ideally, in the presence of family and friends and other members of the Christian community. The wedding ceremony can take place within or outside the context of the Eucharist. It is especially desirable that two active Catholics celebrate their marriage within the context of the Eucharist. Either way, there is a Liturgy of the Word prior to the exchange of vows and rings.

Essential rite. The essential or central ritual in the marriage ceremony is the exchange of marriage vows, the promise “to love each other in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, til death do us part.” In the Latin tradition, the spouses are the ministers of the sacrament. They actually confer the sacrament on each other (C 1623). Just as the priest is God’s instrument in bringing about the Eucharist or ministering God’s mercy in the sacrament of Reconciliation, so the husband, in the celebration of marriage, ministers the sacrament to his wife and she to him. They actually confer the sacrament upon each other (C 1623).

After the exchange of vows, there is usually a blessing and exchange of rings which helps to symbolize and underline the commitment which the couple has just made. In the exchange of rings, the bride and bridegroom say: "Take this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." The Irish have a wedding ring called the *claddagh* (the name of a small town in Ireland). It shows the hands folded in prayer around a heart of love beneath a crown of fidelity. The ring of fidelity, the heart of love, and the hands folded in prayer are the three dispositions needed to sustain a marriage.

If the marriage ceremony takes place outside the Eucharist, the presider concludes the ceremony with the nuptial blessing.

Matrimonial Graces (C 1641-1642, USC p. 285)

Each sacrament confers graces upon the recipients to help them live the Christian life. Concerning the graces bestowed upon couples when they receive the sacrament of Matrimony, the *Catechism* (1661) states: "*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.*"

The graces received in the sacrament of Matrimony are intended to offer divine assistance to couples as they seek to grow in their love for each other in good times and in bad. Matrimonial graces should help couples to be more trusting and forgiving, and help them to carry the crosses connected to marriage and family life. Matrimonial graces are given to couples to help them love and care for their children and to raise them to be faithful followers of Christ and his Church. Growing in love for each other and for their children is the primary way that couples grow in holiness.

It is important that married couples remember that they do not walk alone in their marriage journey and that they frequently pray for the graces of the sacrament to be operative in their relationship, especially during difficult times. At the beginning of the day, a spouse may pray: "Lord, help me this day to be a loving wife/husband and parent. Grace me with the strength to live the sacrament of Matrimony in a way that will give you glory."

Pause: In your opinion, what are three keys to a healthy marriage?

Mixed and Interfaith Marriages (C 1633-1637, USC p. 289)

The term *mixed marriage* refers to a union between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic. The differences in religious traditions can enrich or hurt the marriage and children depending on how the couple handles the issue. Couples can learn from each other's respective tradition how to be more faithful to Christ. The mixed religions situation will hurt the marriage and confuse the children if the couple is in conflict concerning the faith formation of the children.

An *interfaith* marriage is a marriage between a Catholic and a non-baptized person. When one of the parties is unbaptized, it should be noted that while the marriage is valid and is blessed by the Church, it is not a sacrament. Baptism is our entrance into the Christian community and is required for one who wishes to receive the other sacraments. If the unbaptized party is baptized later during the marriage, the marriage becomes a sacrament.

The Domestic Church (C 1655-1658)

The Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* (11) states: "*In what might be regarded as the domestic church, the parents, by word and example, are the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children. They must foster the vocation which is proper to each child with special care.*" The home is the first school of Christian life and human enrichment. In a Christian household of faith, parents and children learn together to grow in the ways of Jesus. In a society which often fails to support Christian family values, the challenge for parents and children is very demanding. Couples have to be very aware of the forces in society that weakens marriage and family life. Addressing this issue, the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (p.286) states:

"Cultural changes in recent times have undermined God's will for marriage. The so-called sexual revolution, aided by artificial contraception, has made it more culturally acceptable for men and women to have sexual relations without having to marry each other. The legalization of abortion has reduced the pressure on men and women to worry about the consequences of unwanted pregnancies. The casual acceptance of unmarried cohabitation—

and of couples entering marriage without permanent commitment—contradicts the very nature of marriage. The political pressure for the legalization of same-sex unions is yet another step in the erosion of God’s plan for marriage and the understanding of marriage in the natural moral order of creation.”

Divorce and Pastoral Care (C 1649-1651, USC p. 287)

Even though the Gospel ideal is that married couples remain married until one of them dies, the reality is that many couples end up separated or civilly divorced. Though the civil authority may dissolve the legal aspects of a valid marriage (called in civil law a divorce), the state has no authority to dissolve a true Catholic sacramental marriage. A legally separated Catholic (divorced under civil law) may not remarry while his/her spouse is alive. *“What God has joined together, no human being must separate”* (Mk 10:9).

When it comes to the issue of marriage and divorce, the Church is in the challenging position of upholding Christ’s teaching on the indissolubility or permanency of marriage and, at the same time, showing the mercy and compassion of Christ towards her members whose marriages have failed and broken up.

The Church today shows her concern for people whose marriages have failed by inviting them to some form of a divorce recovery program which can help tremendously to heal the wounds of the breakup of a marriage. The Church also reassures separated/divorced Catholics that they can be full members of the Church and participate fully in the sacramental life of the Church.

What of Catholics who have remarried outside the Church? They are encouraged to participate in the life of the parish and to attend Sunday Eucharist even though they cannot receive Holy Communion. The *Catechism* (1651) states: *“They should be encouraged to listen to the Word of God, to attend the Sacrifice of the Mass, to persevere in prayer, to contribute to works of charity and to community efforts for justice, to bring up their children in the Christian faith, to cultivate the spirit and practice of penance and thus implore, day by day, God’s grace.”*

Declaration of Nullity—Annulment (USC p. 288)

In explaining what an annulment is and is not, the *United States Catechism* (p.288) states: *“When a church court issues a declaration of nullity, it does not mean there was no civil, sexual, or emotional marital relationship, nor does it mean that the*

children of the union are illegitimate. The declaration means that no sacramental bond—or, in the case of one party’s being unbaptized, no natural bond—took place because at the time of the wedding, the standards for a valid marriage were not met.”

Pause: *Current church law states that Catholics married outside the church should not present themselves for Holy Communion. What are your thoughts on this issue?*

Suggested Actions

If married, name one attitude or behavior that would enhance your marital relationship and begin to practice it. If divorced and unclear of your status in the Church, go speak to a priest. If single, know that you are a valuable part of the Church’s family, and support in whatever way you can, married couples whom you are friendly with.

Meditation

Most Christians live out their baptismal commitment within the context of Christian marriage and family life. In Christian marriage, couples commit themselves to a life of equal and intimate partnership in abiding love, and form a kind of domestic church where faith is nurtured and where they continue to grow in discipleship, fidelity and love of neighbor. Marriage is a community of life and love which promotes the mutual love of husband and wife and is open to the possibility of children. As a sacrament, marriage provides the family with the means to grow in holiness, and provides the Church with a living witness to the presence of Christ through the ministry of married couples to the Church and the world. The sacramental celebration of marriage is the beginning of a lifelong journey. All of the Church’s efforts to promote, encourage and support Christians in their vocation of marriage contribute to a healthy state of conjugal and family life for the Church and the world.

(Pastoral Foundations of the Sacraments, p. 143)

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