

Matrimony

Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled.
~ Hebrews 13:4

THE FIRST BOOK OF THE BIBLE tells us that God created humankind “in the image of God...; male and female” (Gn 1:27) and then established the institution of marriage when he blessed

them and commanded them to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gn 1:28). Scripture is filled with images of marriage and family that help tell the story of salvation (see Ru 4:11-15; Song 2:8-13; Song 4:9-16, 5:1; Is 62:3-5; Hos 2:16-20; Tb 8:4-8). Jesus’ first miracle was at a wedding (see Jn 2:1-11), and he himself is the Bridegroom (see Mk 2:19-20). St. Paul explicitly links marriage to the mystery of Jesus’ bond with his Church (see Eph 5:31-32). United as one family in Heaven, we are invited to the marriage of the Lamb to his Bride, the Church (see Rv 19:6-9; Rv 21:2, 9).

The desire that a man and woman have to love one another is “in the image and likeness of God.” When love is expressed between a man and woman in marriage, their love images and is in the “likeness” of God’s love for each individual. Thus, marriage, like God’s love, must unite them completely and forever to such an extent that the man and woman become “one flesh” (Gn 2:24). Marriage, like God’s love which gives life and care to all things, must also give life and be caring through the procreation and education of children (see Gn 1:28).

The institution of marriage is the “natural union” between man and woman, that is, the way God created men and women to come together in love. Jesus elevated this natural institution to a sacrament at the wedding feast of Cana, where he performed his

first public miracle at his Mother’s request (see Jn 2:1-11). Because of this elevation to a sacrament, marriage is now not only an “image and likeness” of God’s love for his people, but also an image of Jesus’ spousal relationship to his Bride, the Church (see Eph 5:32). The proper name for this sacrament is Matrimony (see also hand-out on What is a Sacramental Marriage?).

Thus, since marriage images both God’s love and Jesus’ love and has been elevated to the sacrament called Matrimony, any sins against marriage are particularly serious. One effect of sins against this sacrament is that they lie to the world about divine love. For example, divorce seems to say, “God’s commitment, care, and love are only passing.” Other sins against Matrimony are adultery, prostitution, polygamy, birth control, artificial insemination, sterilization, premarital sexual relations, free union, trial marriage, pornography,

masturbation, homosexual practices, incest, rape, and abortion.

What is the Purpose of Matrimony?

The twofold purpose or end of marriage is the good of the spouses (unitive love) and the transmission of life (procreation). For Matrimony to be lived out as God intended, this twofold purpose must never be separated. The “good of the spouses” refers to the mutual sanctification and fulfillment a husband and wife are to give to each other in marriage. They are to help each other live and grow in holiness to become saints. Marriage also fulfills each spouse’s de-



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sire to love someone and be loved by someone. In particular, this purpose is done by demonstrating to each other an unconditional, permanent, and total love that images the love that God has for each of us.

Furthermore, just as God's love gave life to humanity in creation and salvation, so marriage is also for the "transmission of life," particularly by the procreation and education of children. Married couples must be open to receiving children from God, and with this supreme gift of children, it is their responsibility to care for and educate them, both physically and spiritually. The family is the first place that children hear about Jesus. For this reason, the family is called the "domestic church." It is the special duty and privilege of parents to help their children embark on a life of holiness.

This twofold purpose of unitive love and procreation is manifested most clearly in the conjugal act. Every time, in this act, the spouses give themselves completely to each other, including their fertility, they become "one flesh." Thus, their marriage is necessarily forever (indissoluble, unbreakable bond), exclusive (fidelity), and open to life (procreative), similar to God's love (see Gn 2:24; Mt 19:6; Mk 10:2-13; 1 Cor 7:10-11). A husband and wife who truly live out their vocation to love each other give to each other and their family a foretaste of life in Heaven.

Preparation for the Sacrament of Matrimony

Preparation for marriage is first done by parents when they provide a daily example of God's plan for marriage and family for their children. Those who come from broken and dysfunctional families are at a

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great disadvantage when they contract their own marriages, because they have not had the privilege of seeing a good and holy marriage. Tragically, these situations are increasingly common. For this and other reasons, many dioceses and parishes require those preparing for marriage to do additional preparation such as taking marriage preparation classes, meeting with married couples, and making a retreat together.

The goal of these preparations is to ensure that those seeking Matrimony understand what married life is all about in the eyes of God and are capable of living out God's plan for marriage. Without exception, they must recognize the purposes of marriage, and that these purposes can only be lived out by following Christ. Couples who do not understand these essential aspects of marriage are not able to freely give their matrimonial consent.

The Rite of Matrimony

Any baptized man and woman able to give their consent freely to one another may receive Matrimony. Mixed marriages and marriages between a Catholic and someone unbaptized may also be contracted if the couple receives permission to do so from the proper authority, usually the bishop. In these latter cases, the Catholic promises to practice his Catholic faith and to baptize and raise the children as Catholics.

Unlike the other sacraments, which are usually conferred by a bishop or a priest, Matrimony is conferred by the spouses on one another in their consent to the sacrament. The role of the priest or deacon at the celebration of the sacrament is to receive their matrimonial consent in the name of the Church and

to give a blessing, which seals their marriage with the Holy Spirit in order to assist them in living out their commitment.

Those who are to be married should have no grievous sin on their conscience at the time of reception of the sacrament. In order to be spiritually ready, the couple may choose to receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before the celebration of Matrimony.

When both parties are Catholic, Matrimony should be celebrated within the context of Mass, which is when Christ gives himself to his Bride, the Church.

The Rite of Matrimony normally consists of the following elements: 1) introduction and questions, 2) matrimonial consent, 3) blessing and exchange of the rings, 4) the nuptial blessing, and 5) the solemn blessing. Of these, the nuptial blessing provides great insight into the mind of the Church. By this the marriage is sealed with the Holy Spirit. There are five different texts that can be used for this blessing. The blessing begins by recalling God's plan for marriage and what marriage signifies, and then seeks the Lord's blessing

on the couple to help them live out the sacrament. Following is the text of one nuptial blessing:

"Holy Father, you created mankind in your own image and made man and woman to be joined as husband and wife in union of body and heart and so fulfill their mission in this world. Father, to reveal the plan of your love, you made the union of husband and wife an image of the covenant between you and your people. In the fulfillment of this sacrament, the marriage of Christian man and woman is a sign of the marriage between Christ and the Church. Father, stretch out your hand, and bless N. and N. Lord, grant that as they begin to live this sacrament they

may share with each other the gifts of your love and become one in heart and mind as witnesses to your presence in their marriage. Help them to create a home together (and give them children to be formed by the Gospel and to have a place in your family). Give your blessings to N., your daughter, so that she may be a good wife (and mother), caring for the home, faithful in love for her husband, generous and

kind. Give your blessings to N., your son, so that he may be a faithful husband (and a good father). Father, grant that as they come together to your table on earth, so they may one day have the joy of sharing your feast in Heaven. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen" (*Rite of Marriage* 121).

What are the Effects of Matrimony?

When a baptized couple gets married, they establish an unbreakable bond between each other, which God himself seals with the Holy Spirit, marking them and their marriage as his own. In other words, the husband and wife are joined together not only by their own commitment but also by God. For this reason, no one, not even the spouses themselves, is

able to divide the marriage bond. It is indissoluble.

When the marriage is blessed by the Church in Matrimony, the spouses are given unlimited grace to love each other as Christ loved the Church. In this way, they are enabled to help each other to become holy and to create in their home a "domestic church," a school of prayer and holiness for their children. The grace of Matrimony also strengthens their indissoluble unity. Knowing that the marriage vows are at times difficult to live, husbands and wives should never forget that God has provided them with every means to live out their married life.

(CCC 1534-1535, 1601-1658, 2685)

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