

# 14. Christian Marriage

The Catholic Marriage Ceremony provides a scenario of married life:

- (1) A young couple, with the future unknown ahead of them, make an act of faith and trust in each other.
- (2) They make this act of faith and trust in each other in the presence of God on whom they will rely to live it.
- (3) They make it in the presence of the Church's minister and their relatives and friends whose support and prayers will still be necessary long after the ceremony has concluded

It is always difficult to venture into the unknown, no matter how well prepared. It is not sufficient merely to exchange vows and hope for the best. The mutual act of faith and trust will have to be renewed again and again. The assistance of God will have to be continually sought. The prayers and support of relatives and friends are a necessary factor in the enduring partnership of marriage.

But, presumably, a lot has happened before a couple make that momentous approach to the altar. They have met, courted, gained an understanding of each other's background, strengths, weaknesses, hopes and aspirations. They are now special to each other and begin to talk and think in terms of marriage. It is at this stage that a couple experience the most beautiful human gift --- love. They realize that they love each other. There can be no more exhilarating or profound experience than to be loved by a special person and to love that person in return.

Love, based on knowledge of each other, gives the impetus for the decision to marry.

The decision to marry, then, is not to be prompted by a desire to escape an unhappy home, nor by a fear of being "left on the shelf". Marriage is not a solution to a problem, nor is it a cure for some deficiency in character. A weakness that is present before marriage will still be present after marriage. This is why love based on knowledge of each other is the only sure foundation for marriage.

And, again, this is why sexual intercourse before marriage has never had the approval of the Church. It is not because sexual intercourse is wrong. On the contrary, sexual intercourse is good and the most beautiful expression of love between husband and wife. But sexual intercourse before marriage can hasten a commitment for which the couple is not yet ready; it can restrict the relationship simply to the physical so that they know little more about each other than the shape of their bodies. If this happens, the full realization of what they are like

comes only after marriage when often it is too late. Marriage is much more than a physical relationship. It is a partnership of minds, souls, hearts, as well as bodies.

Only when it is a full partnership does sexual intercourse become the true and supreme expression and promoter of love --- a love based on knowledge of each other.

Once the decision to marry has been made, the couple begin their more proximate preparation for marriage. Where to live, the organization of finances, the number and spacing of children, are all questions which need to be discussed thoroughly before marriage. To assist young couples in these and other aspects of necessary preparation, the Church conducts Marriage Preparation Courses which are strongly recommended and the details of which can be obtained from the priests at the local Church.

It can be seen, then, that when the day of the wedding arrives a lot has already happened. The act of faith and trust that is made during the ceremony is, indeed, a leap into the unknown future; it is a risk; but it is a calculated risk founded on knowledge and supported by love.

Only after a thorough preparation for marriage does the wedding ceremony itself take on a special significance. When two Catholics marry it is most appropriate that the marriage ceremony takes place within the Nuptial Mass. The Eucharist, which is the supreme expression of God's love for the human family, is the most fitting context for a man and woman to make their supreme expression of love for each other.

The wedding ceremony itself is introduced by the readings from Sacred Scripture. The couple listen to God's Word spoken to them on their special occasion. There are many readings from which to choose. They might listen, for instance, to the words of St. Paul about love which should have special significance for the couple at the altar:

**"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.**

**And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.**

**If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.**

**Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right.**

**Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things endures all things. Love never ends." (1 Cor. 13, 1 --- 8a).**

The priest explains the readings from Scripture more fully and then invites the couple to exchange the marriage vows in his presence and in the presence of the community attending.

The couple join hands and both say separately: I (name) take you (name) to be my wife/husband. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honour you all the days of my life."

The priest, then, invokes God's blessing on them: "May the Lord in his goodness strengthen your consent and fill you both with his blessings. What God has joined man must not divide."

So, the couple have made their act of faith and trust in each other. They have committed themselves to a life-long partnership. The vows have been exchanged. As a symbol of the exchange of vows the couple now exchange the wedding rings. The priest, firstly, blesses the rings (or one, if only the bride is to receive a ring):

"May the Lord bless these rings which you give to each other as the sign of your love and fidelity."

The bridegroom puts the ring on his bride's finger saying:

"(Name), take this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit".

The bride places the ring on her husband's finger saying the same words.

The community of family and friends present is now invited to pray for the intentions and welfare of the newly married couple. They pray that their love may be patient and gentle ---. That their love may endure forever ---. That they may know how to pray together in joy and in sorrow ---. That they may be blessed in their daily work ---. That peace may dwell in their home ---.

After each prayerful petition all who are present say, "Lord, hear our prayer."

And, finally, the priest invokes the blessing of God on this new husband and wife. The Nuptial Blessing can take a number of forms. This one example:

**“Holy Father, creator of the universe,  
maker of man and woman in your own likeness,  
source of blessing for married life,  
we humbly pray to you for this woman  
who today is united with her husband in this  
sacrament of marriage.  
May your fullest blessing come upon her and her  
husband so that they may together rejoice in  
your gift of married love and enrich your Church  
with their children.  
Lord, may they both praise you when they are  
happy, and turn to you in their sorrows.  
May they be glad that you help them in their  
work and know that you are with them in their  
need.  
May they pray to you in the community of the  
Church, and be your witnesses in the world.  
May they reach old age in the company of their  
friends, and come at last to the kingdom of  
heaven.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.”**

### ***The Meaning of Marriage***

It was stated earlier that the Marriage Ceremony provided a scenario of married life. It speaks of love, permanent commitment, fidelity, openness to children and perseverance in good times and bad.

It is these qualities which make marriage a unique and supreme human relationship. There is no other relationship, which requires so total a commitment of one person to another. In fact, marriage is more than a relationship, it is a union, a communion, between a husband and wife. Their life together is now different from their lives separately. Once married, everything they do is done with the other in mind. They do not lose their individual identity, but that identity is enriched by sharing and caring for the partner. Their union should be so complete that everything they do, big or small, is geared towards strengthening and deepening their union, their communion. There is no development unless both develop, no happiness unless both are happy, no real love unless it is mutual.

And so their communion grows through their years together. The marriage union can never remain static. It must either grow stronger and deeper day by

day, or deteriorate. Once deterioration has set in it is very difficult to arrest. The wedding day, then, happily introduces a couple into the life-long pleasure of increasing their love for each other.

### ***The Sacredness of Marriage***

If this is the ideal to be sought in marriage, it can be seen that marriage is different from other human relationships. There is something sacred about it. That it is possible for a couple to love each other in this way is a gift from God. In their unselfish acceptance of this gift a couple not only experience a communion with each other which they thought was beyond them, but they experience a communion with God who assists and blesses them in their efforts to strengthen and deepen their married life.

For the baptized there is an even more profound dimension to this sacredness. For the baptized, marriage is a sacrament. A sacrament is a sign. This loving communion that exists between a husband and wife is the clearest sign and indication available of the extent to which God loves the human family. As married love is a commitment to fidelity, to loyalty in good times and in bad and to permanence, so God's love for the human family is all these things. But a sacrament is more than a sign. It is a pledge of special assistance from Christ. When a couple receive the sacrament of marriage their communion of life together receives a special consecration. Everything they do --- their work, their sacrifices, their good times and bad --- strengthens not only their own union but also their union with God. Married life becomes their way to holiness.

### ***Family Planning***

With the assistance of God, the communion between husband and wife as outlined above is possible. Not only is it possible, but it is true to say that anything less makes marriage a very difficult relationship to live.

If then the ideal is possible and a couple are trying to live it another element arises for consideration. Married Christians in response to God's call (cf. Genesis 1, 28: "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it") should seek to make their love fruitful. A child is the expression and the result of the communion between a husband and wife. A child shares their love and steers it to an even more profound level. A child is living proof of the couple's participation in God's creative work.

To completely nullify the possibility of children by contraceptive means is to destroy the ideal. It is to prevent love from achieving what, of its nature, it seeks to do, that is, to create, to be shared. The use of contraceptives to render procreation impossible is sinful even though recourse to contraceptives be had

only on occasions, be it only once. Every marriage act must, of itself, remain open to the transmission of life.

It would be wrong to overlook the difficulties that abound in raising children. Financial difficulties and personal problems must all be considered when a couple are deciding about children. When they are to have children, and the number they are to have, are questions which must be resolved by the couple themselves. The Church does not claim the right to **impose** on the couple's responsibility to their family. The Church, however, is concerned that damage can be done to a couple's communion of married life by contraceptive prevention of children.

It is important to state again what was said in the introduction. Marriage is not to be entered into lightly. It requires serious preparation. An integral part of that preparation must surely be an agreement by the couple on the size and spacing of their family. The marriage preparation courses are designed to assist couples in the area of family planning and in the spacing of children.

### ***Family Training***

As the wedding day is only the beginning of married life, so the birth of a child is only the beginning of parenthood. When the child is brought to the Church for baptism the priest will remind the parents of their responsibility. He says: You have asked to have your child baptized. In doing so you are accepting the responsibility of training him (her) in the practice of the faith. It will be your duty to bring him (her) up to keep God's commandments as Christ taught us, by loving God and our neighbour. Do you clearly understand what you are undertaking?"

What the parents are undertaking, of course, is not an easy task. It is a task that involves many sacrifices by the parents. Their life style may well change because of the new family member. They will have less time to themselves, less money and less freedom to do as they choose. But while some things are sacrificed much more is gained as they explore new regions of this family communion.

A child learns so much from his parents, not just in terms of knowledge, but he learns how to relate, how to love, he learns his faith.

Because of this responsibility of the parents, the blessings they receive when their child is baptized takes on real significance.

The blessing for the mother: "God the Father, through His Son, the Virgin Mary's child, has brought joy to all Christian mothers, as they see the hope of eternal life shine on their children. May he bless the mother of this child. She now

thanks God for the gift of her child. May she be one with him (her) in thanking him forever in heaven, in Christ Jesus, Our Lord”.

The blessing for the father: “God is the giver of all life, human and divine. May he bless the father of this child. He and his wife will be first teachers of their child in the ways of faith. May they be also the best of teachers, bearing witness to the faith by what they say and do, in Christ Jesus Our Lord.”

### ***Mixed Marriages***

A couple brings to marriage two very different and unique personal histories. Each of them brings to marriage what he or she has inherited from family, and gained from educational background, social environment, and personal expectations and ambitions. There must necessarily be differences, sometimes radical differences, between a man and a woman who wish to marry. It is good that there are differences: without them life together would be dull. But they must be able to cope with each other’s differences. If they cannot cope, the differences will erode, not consolidate, their life together. The differences must be known and realistically faced.

One such difference is, often enough, religion. The parties to the marriage are quite frequently from different religious traditions, or one party is a believing Christian and the other of no specific religious tradition or inclination. It is not sufficient to pass over this difference as insignificant. It must be considered and resolved prior to entering marriage. The Church offers a service to a man or woman who is not a Catholic who intends to marry a Catholic. The service is a series of instructions from a priest on various aspects of the Catholic faith which might cause misunderstanding between the couple if left unexplained. The priest will mention the usual religious practices of Catholics which will become apparent during their life together.

It will also be explained that there is an obligation arising from the faith of a Catholic to do all in his or her power to have the children of the marriage baptized and brought up in the religion of the Catholic.

A difference in religion is a serious difference between a couple intending to marry. It is important that each of the partners come to terms with the difference and can live happily with it before marriage is embarked upon.

Religious differences, of course, are not insurmountable problems. Sometimes the non-Catholic party feels that it is appropriate and opportune to embrace the faith of the Catholic party and become a Catholic. But this does not always happen, nor should there be strong pressure from members of the family for it to

happen. The Church, which clearly believes in religious freedom, believes in it for all.

In special circumstances, the Bishop may give permission to a couple to be married in a place other than a Catholic Church. When the marriage takes place in a Catholic Church, the minister of the non-Catholic party may be present to participate in the ceremony. Should the couple desire it, and provided the non-Catholic is a baptized Christian, the couple may be married during a Nuptial Mass, if permission is granted by the Bishop.

The Church is sensitive to the beliefs and feelings of the person who is not a Catholic who wishes to marry a Catholic. But different religious traditions present real differences and the sensitivity must be two-way if problems are to be avoided during marriage.

### ***Marriage Breakdown***

Having considered the ideals of Christian marriage it seems inappropriate to mention marriage breakdown. However, the fact that marriages do break down cannot be ignored. When this happens it means that for some reason or other a couple have let their relationship slip and fail to the point where a divorce is sought.

According to the provisions of civil law, a divorce may be obtained, and the civil obligations and rights arising from the marriage are no longer existing. The civil law goes so far as to acknowledge that the parties are free to enter another marriage with all the civil rights and obligations which are consequent to a true and valid marriage.

The Catholic Church does not acknowledge another marriage after divorce, during the lifetime of the former spouse.

For, as was stated above, the Church considers marriage to be forever, unable to be dissolved by human authority: "What God has joined, men must not divide". So there is a problem for anyone (not just a Catholic) who has been previously married and wishes to remarry in the Catholic Church.

The first marriage remains valid in the eyes of the Church unless it can be shown that it was never, in fact, a marriage. In other words, the first marriage must be declared null and void. The Church maintains Tribunals to examine the circumstances of a previous marriage, and to make a judgment on their validity or invalidity. If a previous marriage is found to have been invalid, the person is free to marry in the Church.

Marriage is no fairy tale existence. The couple are real people who have their moods, their differences of opinion. They go through various stages in their life when things are seen and appreciated in different ways. They have happy times and sad times, easy times and hard. But at all times they are seeking to grow together in their communion of married life. This at times is difficult. They need to trust each other, to be faithful to each other, to forgive each other and to pray together. St. Paul sums this up beautifully in a passage from his Letter to the Colossians:

**“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.**

**Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”** (1 Colossians 3, 12-17).

It may seem that the ideal of Christian marriage as set down in the preceding pages is beyond the grasp of most. With the help of God, it is not beyond the grasp of a couple sincerely and generously taking on marriage. It is a high ideal, but to start with anything less than the ideal is to be cheated of what is possible. Whatever requires effort is not thereby rendered impossible. On the contrary, the effort mutually expended in building a life-long communion of married life and love is rewarded with a happiness that can be had from no other source. St. John put it this way:

**“Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God.**

**He who does not love does not know God; for God is love.**

**In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.**

**In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins.**

**Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.**

**No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and love is perfected in us." (1 John, 4, 7-12).**

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## **REFLECTION**

### **WHY MARRY?**

Because I have found the person I sincerely love and cherish, the "someone special", my "other half", with whom I feel completely relaxed and happy, without whom I feel incomplete.

Because love is a lasting thing, and united we are stronger than when alone, we wish to be united forever in a permanent union in which we can share everything ---- joys, sorrows, problems, hopes, responsibilities.

Because I want to give him all I can ---- my whole being ---- and to receive from him all he has to give.

We hope to fulfil each other's needs for love, support, companionship,  
to express our physical oneness by sexual intercourse,  
to share the joy of giving new life,  
to have a family and build a home together.

With each other to trust,  
to confide in,  
to fight with,  
we hope to grow in union with one another and with God, towards a communion of our two lives.

This will enable me to grow in independence as a person, away from my parents.

It will give meaning and purposes to life.

We've got something to live for  
Someone to die for.

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained."  
With God's help, we accept the challenge,  
with love,  
faith,  
hope,  
in each other  
and in Him.

## **MARRIAGE IS A BIG DEAL**

Would you become a teacher without serious thought?

Would you travel abroad without finding out about the availability of accommodation, work and entry visas?

Would you buy a car without comparing all the models and prices?

Would you marry, without the sort of preparation that really matters?

### **CHECK OUT THESE QUESTIONS:**

**How can two people know they love each other?**

**What is Marriage?**

**What's so special about Christian Marriage?**

**How different are men and women in Marriage?**

**How easy is it to express love?**

**How can two people keep on loving?**

**Can I handle sex in Marriage?**

**What will my partner expect of me?**

**Children! How, When?**

**Money! How can two people make ends meet?**

Courses, which raise these questions, are presented by local committees in cities and towns around Australia.

These local committees arrange for doctors, marriage counselors, clergy, financiers, solicitors and married couples, who want to share their knowledge and experience with you, to be at the conferences. You also can share **your** ideals, **your** experiences, **your** talents with them and the other engaged couples who attend.

Courses consist of in-put of ideas by the experts, films, group discussions and question time.

Courses vary in length of time and in-put, but cover basically the same matter - -- see the check-out questions above.

Reliable and recent literature is available for couples to continue their one-to-one communication. Experts are available for private consultations.

Marriage builds up the Australian Community and the Christian Community because it starts off the family unit --- the husband and wife.

Why not let the Australian and Catholic Community help you start your marriage.

### **POINTS FOR DISCUSSION**

- 1. What things would you consider important in preparation for marriage?**
- 2. All marriages are sacred.  
Does a Christian marriage have a more sacred dimension? Why?**
- 3. Family planning is the responsibility of parents. What should guide the Christian in this regard?**
- 4. What steps can be taken to avoid the breakdown of marriage due to religious differences.**
- 5. What helps do married people have to reach the ideals of a Christian marriage?**