

Introduction

It is a time of tremendous joy and expectation when a man and woman decide to commit to each other in marriage. There is understandable excitement surrounding the wedding day. Attention generally turns well in advance to arrangements regarding clothes, the reception and entertainment. Certainly all of these aspects are important for a communal celebration. However, our Catholic faith reminds us that the wedding day merely marks the beginning of a permanent journey of love in union with Christ. Marriage is of much greater significance than a mere contract. In fact it is a way of life and a form of vocation for those who are called to it. Moreover, marriage is a sacrament that confers grace on the man and woman who are joined together in Holy Matrimony. The fruits of this grace will strengthen them in experiencing married love in the manner its creator, God the Father, intended it to be lived. When the guests are assembled in Church on your wedding day remember that the most important person present with you is Our Lord Jesus Christ.

"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."
[Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1601]

God created man out of love and in turn calls him to love. Man is created in the image and likeness of God who is himself love. Since God created man and woman, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man. Man and woman were indeed created for each other, for God said, "It is not good that man should be alone" (Genesis 2:18). In blessing them God said "Be fruitful and multiply," (Genesis 1:28). In marriage calls a man and a woman to an intimate communion of life and love between them. Jesus recalled the Creator's plan for an unbreakable union between them by describing the state of spouses joined in marriage: "So they are no longer two, but one flesh" (Matthew 19:6).

Thus we can see that marriage is not a purely human institution. It is God who is the author of marriage. Therefore, even if in civil law attempts are increasingly made to redefine and under-privilege marriage, Christians are always obliged to understand it in the way God intended it and to honour it accordingly. Catholics are called to live out marriage in fidelity to the goods and requirements of marital love as designed by God.

In his earthly ministry Jesus restored the initial order of marriage as willed by his Father. For example, Our Lord abrogated the permission given by Moses to divorce one's wife. Instead, Jesus reaffirmed the original indissolubility of the union between a man and a woman. He determined that "what therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder" (Matthew 19:6). The initial quotation from Scripture recalls the wedding feast at Cana. This is the occasion on which Jesus performed his first sign. The Church sees this as confirmation of the goodness of marriage and the proclamation that henceforth marriage will be an effective sign of Christ's presence.

Christ raised marriage to the dignity of a sacrament. It is through the sacrament that the spouses obtain the strength to live out their vocation together and remain true to the requirements of marriage. Their love for each other mirrors that which Christ, the Bridegroom, feels for his spouse, the Church. Our Lord gave himself totally and selflessly for his people on the cross and the Apostle Paul emphasizes this analogy when speaking of marital love:

"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her" (Ephesians 5:25-26).

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.

[Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1661]

The Marriage Ceremony

The celebration of marriage between two Catholic faithful normally takes place during Holy Mass because of the connection of all the sacraments with the Paschal mystery of Christ. It is important to remember that in this sacrament it is the spouses who act as the ministers of Christ's grace. They confer the sacrament of Matrimony upon each other by expressing their consent before the Church. It is the consent "freely and consciously given" that makes the marriage. It is the expressed wish of a man and a woman to give themselves definitively to each other with the goal of living a union of faithful and fruitful love. The priest (or deacon) receives this consent in the name of the Church and gives the blessing of the Church. Together with the witnesses the couple visibly expresses the fact that marriage is an ecclesial reality. Marriage is celebrated publicly because it is a liturgical act and a state of life in the Church.

The effects of the sacrament are two-fold:

1) It creates a bond

This bond between the spouses is perpetual and exclusive. Sealed by God himself a marriage concluded and consummated between baptized persons can never be dissolved.

2) It confers the necessary grace

This is designed to perfect the couple's love and to strengthen their indissoluble unity. Through this grace Christ dwells within the couple and helps them to rise after they fall; forgive one another; bear one another's burdens; attain holiness in married life; and welcome and educate children.

The Good and Requirements of Marital Love

A married couple is joined together in a deep personal unity. Beyond coming together in one flesh it leads to the forming of one heart and soul. This is a totality marked by the act of mutual self-giving, just as Christ offered himself entirely to his Church. Thus, Christian marriage entails the following necessary characteristics:

i) Unity and indissolubility

Love between Catholic spouses is undivided and exclusive. A husband and wife should accord each other equal personal dignity in mutual and unreserved affection. Spouses grow together in communion and this is completed by communion in Jesus Christ through the sacrament. A couple's common faith and reception of the Eucharist deepens their bond still further.

ii) Fidelity

God's love for us is definitive and irrevocable. Married couples share in this love and it sustains them in turn. By their own faithfulness a husband and wife serve as witnesses to God's faithful love. God did not give his Son to us in part, nor did he promise to love us conditionally. So spouses, who strive to imitate God's love between them, must follow this example for their good and the benefit of their children.

iii) Openness to fertility

From the beginning God wished to associate men and women in a special way with his own creative work. Hence, married love directs spouses to co-operate valiantly with the love of the Creator and Saviour, who through them will enrich family life. The education of children in the faith by parents reveals just how marriage and family constitute a vocation truly at the service of life.

The Christian home is the place where children receive the first proclamation of the faith. For this reason the family home is rightly called "the domestic church," a community of grace and prayer, a school of human virtues and of Christian charity.

[Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1666]

These are the virtues integral to Christian marriage. Yet because the sin of our first parents ruptured the communion between man and woman, the marital union is very often threatened by discord and infidelity. Among grave sins contrary to the sacrament of marriage are: adultery; polygamy; divorce and the refusal of fertility which deprives married life of the gift of children. However, through the grace conferred in the sacrament of marriage God has offered us the help, in his infinite mercy, to achieve marital union in accordance with his original divine intention.

Virginity for the sake of the kingdom

Not all persons are called to the vocation of marriage. Christ has invited many men and women to renounce the great good of marriage and to follow him in a way that manifests most clearly the absolute primacy of love of him and the expectation of his return. It is virginity for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven and like Marriage it is sustained by grace which comes from the Lord himself.