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Understanding Christian Marriage

Most Catholics will be called to serve God and his Church through the vocation of married life. Marriage is a lifelong covenant, modeled on that between Christ and the Church. In marriage a baptized man and a baptized woman make an exclusive and permanent commitment to faithfully love each other and to cooperate in the procreation and education of children.

Marriage can be understood on a number of different levels. Every culture in history has acknowledged the importance of marriage in one way or another, making marriage a universal part of the human experience. Marriage also benefits civil society in a number of important ways.

On a deeper, more significant level, we can appreciate marriage as a part of God's plan for creation. Marriage is an institution created by God for the good of the human race.

Finally, because Christ gave human marriage the dignity of being a Sacrament, the vocation of married life has become a special source of grace for spouses and a privileged way for men and women to encounter God's love. The Sacrament of Matrimony also serves to remind the whole Church of God's love for his people.

The articles in this part address the following topics:

- Article 11: God, the Author of Marriage (page 53)
- Article 12: Marriage in the Old Testament (page 56)
- Article 13: Marriage in the New Testament (page 61)

Article

11 God, the Author of Marriage

Think of some of the institutions or organizations that human beings create, such as schools, clubs, teams, professional associations, and governments. One thing all of these institutions or organizations have in common is that it is up to humans themselves to define what they are and how they are structured.

If you were to set up your own club, you would be free to determine your club's nature and purpose. You could decide for yourself what your club would be about, what kind of activities you would undertake, who could join your club, and how someone might become a member. Governments too are free to name their own foundational principles, to choose their own means for appointing authority, and to write their own laws. In the case of purely human institutions, those establishing the institutions can legitimately create systems according to whatever they believe works best.

In the case of marriage, however, this principle cannot apply, because although marriage is a reality of human life and an institution into which humans enter, marriage is not a purely human institution. Rather, God himself is the author of marriage.

The exchange of rings is a sign of a couple's love of and fidelity to each other.

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What Is Marriage?

Marriage, or Matrimony, is a Sacrament at the Service of Communion. This means that it is a Sacrament that promotes the salvation of others and serves to build up the Church. (Holy Orders is the other Sacrament at the Service of Communion and is the subject of section 3 of this book.) Marriage is the faithful, lifelong union of a baptized man and a baptized woman committed to loving each other forever and being open to the gift of children. In marriage the husband and wife make a free and total commitment of their entire lives to each other. They



pledge their hearts, minds, bodies, and resources to each other in an exclusive and lasting way, welcoming and educating whatever children God gives to them.

The Church's Teaching on Homosexuality

Marriage is always between one man and one woman. This is a truth that is informed by **natural law**. Marriage requires the genuine emotional and sexual complementarity found only between a man and a woman, because only the sexual act between a man and a woman can result in new life—one of the purposes of marriage. Thus, it is not possible to redefine marriage to include homosexual unions.

Those with a homosexual orientation deserve love and respect as human beings created in the image and likeness of God. Because men and women who experience same-sex attraction are endowed with the same fundamental dignity as all human beings, the Church vehemently opposes any violence, hatred, or discrimination toward those who identify themselves as gay or lesbian. Furthermore, a homosexual orientation is not considered a sin. Homosexual acts, however, are sinful because they are not open to the possibility of life and are therefore contrary to natural law and to what is written into the body itself.

Like all Christians, men and women who experience same-sex attraction are called to a life of chastity. Sexuality is more than just physical expression of sexual attraction—it concerns one's inmost being. Thus, chastity means physically and spiritually integrating one's sexuality within oneself (see *Catechism*, 2337). By living a life of chastity and virtue, those with a homosexual orientation can attain perfection in charity and live the fullness of the Christian life.

For those who realize they are sexually attracted to people of the same sex, this inclination and the call to chastity can be a cross to bear, requiring great effort at mastering will over emotions. An active prayer life, regular participation in the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Penance and Reconciliation, and support from the faith community can help men and women with homosexual inclinations to live faithful Christian lives filled with loving relationships among family and friends.



Marriage Points toward God

Throughout history every society has, in at least some sense, recognized the value of marriage. In fact, the very well-being of societies and their individual members is closely related to the health of marriage and family life. Societies may not always celebrate marriage in the same way or see it as meaning exactly the same thing, but the greatness of the union of man and woman is indeed recognized throughout the world. This is due to the fact that the vocation of marriage is part of the very nature of created man and woman.

Though marriage should be valued and cherished for its contribution to society, we know that marriage has an even deeper significance. It is beyond a purely human institution. Marriage points us toward God and is rooted in him. Because we were created by God out of love, we were also created *for* love. This, in fact, can be seen as a core understanding of what it means to be a human person. The love that a man and woman share, which is celebrated in the Sacrament of Matrimony, provides us with an image of the very love that God unfailingly has for human beings.

Because marriage was created by God, following his plan for marriage will bring us closer to him. The love between a husband and wife serves to remind the whole Church of the love God has for his people. The intimate communion of life and love that characterizes Christian marriage is a sign and symbol of God's covenant with his people, a covenant of love and grace in Jesus Christ. It also models to others the love and mutual self-giving that is the mark of Christian activity in society and in the Church. 🙏



natural law

The moral law that can be understood through our intellect and the use of reason. It is our God-given instinct to be in right relationship with God, other people, the world, and ourselves. The basis for natural law is our participation in God's wisdom and goodness because we are created in the divine likeness.

Catholic Wisdom

Marriage and the Good of Society

In the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, the bishops of Vatican II write about the nature of marriage:

For God himself is the author of marriage and has endowed it with various values and purposes: all of these have a very important bearing on the continuation of the human race, on the personal development and eternal destiny of every member of the family, on the dignity, stability, peace, and prosperity of the family and of the whole human race. (48)

Article

12 Marriage in the Old Testament

Although the institution of marriage can be understood and appreciated by even the most secular of societies, this does not change the fact that marriage was specifically planned and designed by God. The Old Testament is one place where we can clearly learn about God's plan for marriage. Here we read about God's creation of human beings and marriage, how the marriage covenant helps to protect us from the effects of Original Sin, the fact that marriage is the source of many blessings, and the ways in which marriage can serve as a means for coming to understand God more fully.

The Creation of Humans

God established the institution of marriage from almost the very beginning of creation. In the Creation account in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, we read the following:

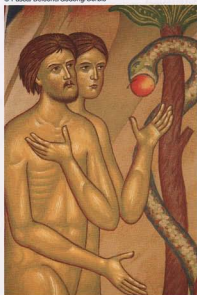
God created mankind in his image;
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them and God said to them: Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it.

(Genesis 1:27–28)

This image of Adam and Eve is taken from a fresco at the Monastery of Saint-Antoine-le-Grand in France.

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This passage helps us to understand that marriage was a part of God's plan from the very beginning. Men and women were to join together to be cocreators with God, filling the earth with their descendants, made in the image and likeness of God just as the first man and woman themselves were.

In the second Creation account in Genesis, we are given a much more detailed account of the first instance of the human vocation to marriage:

It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suited to him. So the LORD God formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds of the air . . . but none proved to be a helper suited to the man.

So the LORD God cast a deep sleep on the man, and while he was asleep, he took out one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. The LORD God then built the rib that he had taken from the man into a woman. When he brought her to the man, the man said:

"This one, at last, is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh. . . ."

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body.

(Genesis 2:18–24)



wisdom literature

The Old Testament Books of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Sirach, and the Wisdom of Solomon.

Sin, Justice, and the Law

The Paradise that Adam and Eve once enjoyed became off-limits to them after the Fall when they first disobeyed God. With the consequences of Original Sin upon them, marriage—initially a relationship of perfect harmony and love—became subject to various forms of corruption and weakness. Some consequences of Original Sin named in the book of Genesis are pain in childbirth and hard toil in work.

When God gave Moses the Law as described in the Book of Exodus (see 20:11–17), the many legal restrictions centered around marriage were meant as a way to protect against the effects of Original Sin. Husbands were required by the Law to treat their wives fairly, and adultery was forbidden. Because the Law held marriage to be a covenant and a sacred institution, men and women were required to strive to overcome their sinful tendencies for the good of each other as well as for the good of the community.

Source of Abundant Blessings

We can learn more about the marriage covenant in the Old Testament from the **wisdom literature**. The view of marriage and family life found in wisdom literature is wonderfully positive in its emphasis on the essential goodness of marriage and childrearing. Marriage and children are portrayed first and foremost as precious gifts from God and as the source of great joy.

For example, in the Book of Proverbs, we find this description of the value of a good wife:

Who can find a woman of worth?
Far beyond jewels is her value.

Her husband trusts her judgment;
he does not lack income.
She brings him profit, not loss,
all the days of her life.

(31:10–12)

This description is echoed in the Book of Sirach:

Happy the husband of a good wife;
the number of his days will be doubled.
A loyal wife brings joy to her husband,
and he will finish his years in peace.
A good wife is a generous gift
bestowed upon him who fears the Lord.
Whether rich or poor, his heart is content,
a smile ever on his face.

(26:1–4)

Many of the Psalms proclaim the joys of bearing children.
Psalm 127 states the following:

Certainly sons are a gift from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb, a reward.
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the sons born in one's youth.
Blessed is the man who has filled his quiver with them.
He will never be shamed
for he will destroy his foes at the gate.

(Verses 3–5)

Live It!

The Song of Songs

One of the most complex books of the Old Testament, the Song of Songs, can be interpreted from many perspectives—allegorical, cultic, dramatic, and literal. Traditionally, the lover and the beloved in this book are interpreted as standing for Israel and God, or for Jesus and the Church.

The Church looks at the unique expression of human love in these poems as a reflection of divine love. The passion and beauty expressed are a reflection of the passion and beauty of God's love for us. So too the mutual love shared in marriage is an image of the love that God has for all of his people.

To adequately express our love in any relationship, we need to have dialogue. Open and honest communication provides the basis for maintaining and deepening the bonds of respect, friendship, and love. What steps can you take to have open and honest communication in the relationships in your life?

The Prophets: God's Fidelity to Israel

The prophets of the Old Testament were given a special vocation by God to speak to the people of Israel on his behalf. They often called the Israelites to a spirit of repentance, preaching God's displeasure with his people's social injustices as well as their frequent lapses into **idolatry**.

One theme that runs throughout the prophets' writings is the image of God's being married to his people. The idolatry of the Israelites is compared to the sin of adultery. However, God is the ever-faithful husband who is always anxious to forgive his bride and to take her back to himself.

Here is an example from the Book of Isaiah:

For your husband is your Maker;
the LORD of hosts is his name,
Your redeemer, the Holy One of Israel,
called God of all the earth.

The LORD calls you back,
like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,
A wife married in youth and then cast off,
says your God.
For a brief moment I abandoned you,
but with great tenderness I will take you back.
(54:5-7)

Similarly, the entire book of Hosea deals with the themes of repentance and renewed fidelity. Hosea's unconditional love of his wife—even in the face of her infidelity—reflects God's love and continued longing for Israel, despite the nation's transgressions.

In the second chapter of Hosea, we read God's message to Israel as conveyed to the prophet. Here, God expresses his desire to reunite with Israel in a renewed bond of marital faithfulness:

Therefore, I will allure her now;
I will lead her into the wilderness
and speak persuasively to her. . . .

I will betroth you to me forever:
I will betroth you to me with justice and with judgment,
with loyalty and with compassion;
I will betroth you to me with fidelity,



idolatry

The worship of false gods in violation of the First Commandment.



covenant

A personal, solemn promise of faithful love that involves mutual commitments and creates a sacred relationship.

and you shall know the LORD.

(Verses 16,21–22)

The image of God's being married to his people in the prophets' writings is a recurring theme and one that shows us God's great love for us. Through these writings we see that God is ever faithful and always ready to forgive us. We also come to understand that marriage itself is a beautiful image for the unending love that God has for us. 🙏

Covenant versus Contract

The Old Testament portrays marriage—as well as God's relationship to Israel—as a **covenant** rather than as simply a legal contract. But you may be wondering, what is the difference between the two terms?

Usually a contract is an agreement that involves an exchange of goods or services. For example, contracts are written today for people buying or selling a major item, such as a house or car. Other contracts may involve a certain kind of work one party will provide for another, such as the construction work for a new building, which is performed for an agreed-upon price.

A covenant is an agreement that goes much deeper than an exchange of goods. A covenant can be considered an exchange of *persons*. Those who enter into a covenant promise their very selves to each other. Marriage can be seen as a covenant because in it a man and a woman promise to remain faithful to each other until death. God's "marriage" to Israel is a covenant, because God promises his special loving concern for the nation of Israel in exchange for Israel's wholehearted fidelity to the one true God.



Article

13 Marriage in the New Testament

One of the keys for understanding Scripture is to see the many ways in which the New Testament is a fulfillment of all the promises made by God in the Old Testament. God's laws in the Old Testament are not canceled in the New Testament but are given an even deeper significance.

This is also true in the case of marriage. In the Old Testament, marriage was a sacred covenant created and blessed by God. In the New Testament, marriage is given the additional dignity of numbering among the Seven Sacraments.

The Wedding at Cana

Marriage is one of the Seven Sacraments, all of which were instituted by Christ. Although marriage existed before the coming of Jesus Christ in the Incarnation, Jesus affirmed the goodness of marriage and raised it to the dignity of a Sacrament at the time of his first miracle during the changing of water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana (see John 2:1–10).

Though the bride and groom at the wedding at Cana were undoubtedly grateful that Jesus stepped in to save them from social embarrassment at their wedding reception, the significance of Jesus' action here goes much deeper than simply keeping a party afloat. This was Jesus' first public sign or miracle—that is, the first place where he openly manifested his identity as the Incarnate Son of God.

By choosing to reveal himself as God at a wedding, Jesus was also showing us the value of marriage. And just as water—something good in its own right—was changed into the more remarkable substance of wine, so also would the vocation of marriage be raised and transformed into a sign of Christ's presence and a privileged means of encountering God.



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An early nineteenth-century painting titled "The Marriage at Cana."



Pharisees

A Jewish sect at the time of Jesus known for its strict adherence to the Law.

The Unity of Marriage

Christ established the Sacrament of Matrimony as a union that is absolutely and unquestionably permanent. According to the laws of the Old Testament, a Jewish man could divorce his wife under some conditions; however, Jesus set a higher standard for his followers. Christians were to accept marriage as it was intended by God as a bond that could be broken by only the death of one of the spouses.

We can see this teaching in a conversation Jesus had with the **Pharisees** in the Gospel of Matthew:

[Jesus] 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'? . . . Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate. . . . Because of the hardness of your hearts Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) and marries another commits adultery." (19:4-9)

Christ presents this vision of marriage as the norm according to God's plan. Because Jesus came to free us from Original Sin, we would receive the grace necessary to live

Pray It!

Anniversary Prayer

Just like weddings, anniversaries are times to pray and rejoice. Here is a prayer you can pray for your parents or other couples you know who are celebrating an anniversary:

Dear God,

Bless _____ and _____ on their anniversary.

In their love for each other, they reveal your love to the world.

Give them the grace to live out their marriage covenant, provide them with strength when times are hard, and shower them with joy in the company of family and friends. Open their eyes to the gifts you have given them in order to serve you by serving others.

May they enjoy many more years together, growing closer to each other and to you.

May they love and honor each other all the days of their lives.

Amen.

married lives that are closer to God's plan for marriage before the Fall.

The Wedding of the Lamb

Another unique aspect of the New Testament's vision of marriage is the way marriage reflects the relationship of Christ to the Church. Many New Testament passages describe the **nuptial** relationship between Christ and his Church.

In his Letter to the Ephesians, Saint Paul sets out a theology of the vocation of married life based on the Church's identity as the Bride of Christ (see Ephesians, chapter 5). In the Book of Revelation, traditionally attributed to Saint John the Apostle, the Church is frequently described as the



nuptial

Something related to marriage or a marriage ceremony.

The Letter to the Ephesians

The same power that unites Christ and the Church also unites a wife and husband. This is what Saint Paul meant in his Letter to the Ephesians:

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her: . . . So husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. . . . For no one hates his own flesh but rather nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. . . . This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church. (5:25–32)

Thus the Bible teaches us that the Sacrament of Matrimony signifies the union of Christ and the Church. The permanent nature of the marriage union symbolizes God's unending love for all humanity. The Sacrament gives a husband and wife the grace to love each other as Christ loves the Church. It promotes their dignity, strengthens their unity, makes them a sign of God's love in the world, and helps the couple to perfect their holiness on their journey to eternal life.



spotless Bride of Christ, the Lamb of God. In Revelation 19:7, John has a vision of the heavenly host joyfully singing of the Church: "For the wedding day of the Lamb has come, / his bride has made herself ready." Toward the conclusion of that same vision, John sees the Church, "a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (21:2).

In the New Testament, marriage is not only a covenant and a Sacrament, but also a key analogy for understanding God's love for us. Although the relationship between Christ and the Church is ultimately too profound for us to fully comprehend, we can grasp its nature in a real sense by considering the vocation of married life. When a husband and wife love each other in a total, faithful, fruitful, self-sacrificial, and unconditional way, they are a living reflection of the great love Christ has for his Church. ✞

Part Review

1. What is Christian marriage?
2. Why is it impossible to reinterpret or redefine marriage?
3. What are some of the things we can learn about marriage from reading the Old Testament?
4. Why is marriage a covenant rather than a contract?
5. In what sense is Christian marriage unique?
6. Explain how marriage reflects Christ's love for his Church.