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# 21 THE SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE

MARRIAGE IS A SACRAMENT AT THE  
SERVICE OF COMMUNION

—CCC, NOS. 1601-1666

## A MARRIED MAN: GOD'S SERVANT ABOVE ALL



St. Thomas More was born in London on February 7, 1478, to a middle-class family. His father, John More, was a knight and local judge. As a young boy, Thomas was placed in the service of the Archbishop of Canterbury John Morton—who was also Chancellor of England. More went on to study at Oxford University and then to study law in London. He mastered Greek and enjoyed the company of important figures of the Renaissance culture such as Desiderius Erasmus.

His attraction to a deeper spirituality led him to a close relationship with the Franciscans at Greenwich and with the London Carthusians, another religious community with whom he lived for a time. Called to marriage, More wed Jane Colt in 1505. They had four children before Jane died in 1511. After her death, Thomas married Alice Middleton, a widow. Their home was open to their entire family, friends, and many acquaintances. More continued his quest for virtue and union with Christ while fostering the faith of his family.

He was elected to Parliament in 1504. This began a political career that saw him knighted in 1521, elected Speaker of the House of Commons in 1523, and finally made Lord Chancellor of England on October 25, 1529, the first layman to hold the position. King Henry VIII, reigning at that time, was desperate to bear a male heir to the throne. Blaming his wife, Queen Catherine of Aragon, for their lack of a son, Henry VIII sought an annulment so that he might marry Anne Boleyn instead, whom he had fancied

for quite some time. Unable to receive the declaration from Pope Clement VII, the king formally broke from the Catholic Church and declared himself the Supreme Head of the Church of England. If Rome would not grant him an annulment, his own church would. On May 15, 1532, all the English bishops (save St. John Fisher) submitted to the king as their new head. The following day, St. Thomas More resigned as Chancellor.

In 1534, the English Parliament passed the Act of Succession, which acknowledged the offspring of King Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, rather than the daughter born to Queen Catherine, as the true heir to the English throne. The nobility and clergy were called to ascribe to an oath upholding the act, and as one of the most respected laymen in the country, so was More. However, More chose to uphold the indissolubility of marriage and refused to take the oath. Even faced with death, St. Thomas More would not act against his conscience. As a result, on July 1, 1535, St. Thomas More was tried in Westminster Hall and convicted of high treason. On July 6, he was led to execution outside the Tower of London. In his final words before being beheaded, he referred to himself as "the king's good servant, and God's first." As a martyr who died for his faith, St. Thomas More was beatified by Pope Leo XIII in 1886. He was later canonized by Pope Pius XI in 1935.

In this text we cite the stories of other married people—such as Elizabeth Seton, Pierre Toussaint, Rose Hawthorne Lathrop, Orestes Brownson, Cesar Chavez, John Boyle O'Reilly, and Luigi and Maria Quattrocchi—from the viewpoint of various teachings witnessed in their lives. God's grace blessed them with the faith and virtues that flourished in the marital state. In turn, married people have enriched the life of the Church by their faith and love and by the children whom they have raised and formed in the Christian tradition. Marriage is a Sacrament at the Service of Communion.



## GOD IS THE AUTHOR OF MARRIAGE

*The vocation to marriage is written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator. Marriage is not a purely human institution despite the many variations it may have undergone through the centuries in different cultures, social structures and spiritual attitudes.*

—CCC, no. 1603

Sacred Scripture begins with the creation and union of man and woman and ends with “the wedding feast of the Lamb” (Rev 19:7, 9). Scripture often refers to marriage, its origin and purpose, the meaning God gave to it, and its renewal in the covenant made by Jesus with his Church.

God created man and woman out of love and commanded them to imitate his love in their relations with each other. Man and woman were created for each other. “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him. . . . The two of them become one body” (Gn 2:18; 24). Woman and man are equal in human dignity, and in marriage both are united in an unbreakable bond.

But fidelity to God’s plan for the unity and indissolubility of marriage developed gradually among the people of ancient Israel under God’s providential guidance. The patriarchs and kings practiced polygamy, and Moses permitted divorce. Jesus later cited this case as a toleration of human hardness of heart and taught God’s plan for marriage from the beginning (cf. Mt 19:8). It was the prophets of ancient Israel who prepared for Jesus’ renewal of God’s plan for marriage in their insistence that the permanent and exclusive fidelity of marriage illustrates the unending fidelity of God to his covenant with Israel and his will that Israel be faithful to him alone (cf., e.g., Hos 3 and Ez 16:59-63).

The books of Ruth and Tobit witness the ideals of marriage. They describe the fidelity and tenderness that should exist between the spouses. The Song of Solomon pictures a human love that mirrors God’s love, which “many waters cannot quench” (cf. Sg 8:6-7).

## THE UNDERSTANDING OF MARRIAGE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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.

## CHRIST'S TEACHING ON MARRIAGE

Jesus brought to full awareness the divine plan for marriage. In John's Gospel, Christ's first miracle occurs at the wedding in Cana. "The Church attaches great importance to Jesus' presence at the wedding at Cana. She sees in it the confirmation of the goodness of marriage and the proclamation that thenceforth marriage will be an efficacious sign of Christ's presence" (CCC, no. 1613).

Jesus unequivocally taught the indissolubility of marriage:

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. (Mt 19:3-6)

St. Paul reinforces Christ's teaching on marriage. "A wife should not separate from her husband and a husband should not divorce his



wife" (1 Cor 7:10-11). In the Letter to the Ephesians, we read, "For this reason a man shall leave [his] father and [his] 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 the church" (Eph 5:31-32). Thus the love of husband and wife reflects the love between Christ and the Church. By Christ's will, Marriage is one of the Seven Sacraments.

## COVENANT AND LITURGICAL ACT

By their marriage, the couple witnesses Christ's spousal love for the Church. One of the Nuptial Blessings in the liturgical celebration of marriage refers to this in saying, "Father, you have made the union of man and wife so holy a mystery that it symbolizes the marriage of Christ and his Church." Through the liturgical celebration of marriage, husband and wife enter into a covenant which is also a Sacrament:

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. (CCC, no. 1601, citing CIC, can. 1055, and *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* [CCEO], can. 776)

The Sacrament of Marriage is a covenant, which is more than a contract. Covenant always expresses a relationship between persons. The marriage covenant refers to the relationship between the husband and wife, a permanent union of persons capable of knowing and loving each other and God. The celebration of marriage is also a liturgical act, appropriately held in a public liturgy at church. Catholics are urged to celebrate their marriage within the Eucharistic Liturgy.



## THE CELEBRATION OF MARRIAGE

*According to the Latin tradition, the spouses as ministers of Christ's grace mutually confer upon each other the sacrament of Matrimony by expressing their consent before the Church. In the traditions of the Eastern Churches, the priest (bishops or presbyters) are witnesses to the mutual consent given by the spouses, but for the validity of the sacrament their blessing is also necessary.*

—CCC, no. 1623

In the Latin Church, the free consent of the couple is at the heart of the marriage celebration. By Church law, when two Catholics marry they must exchange this consent in the presence of the Church's minister, two witnesses, and the congregation. The priest or deacon calls forth this consent, but the marriage itself takes place through the public consent of the couple. The priest invites the couple to do so in these words: "Since it is your intention to enter into marriage, join your right hands and declare your consent before God and his Church." There are various formulas for this consent. One that may be used is as follows: "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 honor you all the days of my life." In the Eastern Churches, the Sacrament is conferred by the blessing of the priest after receiving the couple's consent.

The consent is further symbolized in the Latin Church by the blessing and exchange of rings with the words: "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."

*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. (Mt 19:3-6)*

St. Paul reinforces Christ's teaching on marriage: "A wife should not separate from her husband and a husband should not divorce his

## THE PURPOSES OF MARRIAGE

*The marriage covenant, by which a man and woman form with each other an intimate communion of life and love, has been founded and endowed with its own special laws by the Creator. By its very nature it is ordered to the good of the couple, as well as to the generation and education of children. Christ the Lord raised marriage between the baptized to the dignity of a sacrament.*

—CCC, no. 1660

The *Catechism* teaches that Christ's grace in the Sacrament of Marriage protects the essential purposes of marriage: the good of the couple and the generation and education of children. These purposes are protected and fostered by the permanence of the marriage bond and the mutual fidelity of the spouses.

"What God has joined together, no human being must separate" (Mk 10:9). We have already noted that God's plan for marriage involves a permanent covenant embraced by the couple. The Church declares every valid sacramental consummated marriage to be indissoluble, that is, no one can dissolve the marriage bond.

The Sacrament obliges marital fidelity between the spouses. Love has a definitive quality about it. It is more than a practical arrangement or a temporary contract. Marital intimacy and the good of the children require total fidelity to conjugal love. This flows from Christ's own fidelity to the Church, which he loved so much that he died for her. By their mutual fidelity, the spouses continue to make present to each other the love of Christ and lead each other to greater holiness through the grace they receive from the Sacrament.

Married love is ordered to the good of the spouses and to the procreation and education of children. These are the unitive and procreative purposes of marriage. "By its very nature the institution of marriage and married love is ordered to the procreation and education of the offspring and it is in them that it finds its crowning glory" (CCC, no. 1652; GS, no. 48). The fruitfulness of married love includes the moral, spiritual,

## FROM THE CATECHISM

### **1. Why is the family called "the domestic Church"?**

The Christian home is the place where the children receive the first proclamation of the faith. For this reason the family is rightly called "the domestic church," a community of grace and prayer, a school of human virtues and of Christian charity. (CCC, no. 1666)

### **2. What is essential in the consent of those to be married?**

The parties to a marriage covenant are a baptized man and woman, free to contract marriage, who freely express their consent; "to be free" means:  
—not being under constraint;  
—not impeded by any natural or ecclesiastical law. (CCC, no. 1625)

### **3. Why should the couples be prepared for marriage?**

So that the "I do" of the spouses may be a free and responsible act, and so that the marriage covenant may have solid and lasting human and Christian foundations, preparation is of prime importance. . . . It is imperative to give suitable and timely instruction to young people, above all in the heart of their own families, about the dignity of married love, its role and exercise, so that, having learned the value of chastity, they will be able at a suitable age to engage in honorable courtship and enter upon a marriage of their own. (CCC, no. 1632)

and faith life the parents hand on to their children. Parents, as principal educators of their children, are at the service of life.

Together with their children, parents form what the Second Vatican Council called the domestic church. The Church lives in the daily life of families, in their faith and love, in their prayers and mutual care. The

*Catechism* notes that “All the members of the family exercise the priesthood of the baptized in a privileged way” (CCC, no. 1657).

Not all married couples are able to have children. “Spouses to whom God has not granted children can nevertheless have a conjugal life full of meaning. . . . [and] can radiate a fruitfulness of charity, of hospitality and of sacrifice” (CCC, no. 1654).

## EFFECTS OF THE SACRAMENT

The first effect of the Sacrament of Matrimony is the gift of the bond between the spouses. “The consent by which the spouses mutually give and receive one another is sealed by God himself” (CCC, no. 1639). “The marriage bond has been established by God himself in such a way that a marriage concluded and consummated between baptized persons can never be dissolved” (CCC, no. 1640).

The grace of this Sacrament perfects the love of husband and wife, binds them together in fidelity, and helps them welcome and care for children. Christ is the source of this grace and he dwells with the spouses to strengthen their covenant promises, to bear each other’s burdens with forgiveness and kindness, and to experience ahead of time the “wedding feast of the Lamb” (Rev 19:9).

## DO ALL YOU CAN TO STRENGTHEN MARRIAGE

The pastoral care of the Church for the support of marriage is shown by a variety of programs to help men and women to know God’s plan for marriage and the Church’s teaching. Remote preparation, which can begin in the family, takes on a more organized character in the form of courses in high school and college years. As engaged couples draw closer to the celebration of marriage, there are more intense programs of preparation (frequently called “pre-Cana programs”).

These programs are all the more necessary because 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 with-

out 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 a 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.

In her teaching, the Church gives us a picture of family life that begins with the total gift of love between the spouses evidenced in their resolve to remain exclusively faithful until death. This promise, made before God in the midst of family and friends before an authorized priest or deacon, is supported by the continuing presence of Christ in the life of the spouses as he pours into their hearts the gift of love through the Holy Spirit. The couple does not walk alone and possesses the graced freedom to respond to all natural and supernatural help.

The couple's joyful acceptance of children includes the responsibility to serve as models of Christian commitment for their children and helps them grow in wisdom and grace. In this way, their family becomes a "domestic church." The family honors the home as a place of prayer that conveys a sense of the sacred where so much of Christian life occurs.

The couple needs to remember they have entered a relationship between persons. They come to one another with two loves, the one commanded by Jesus and the one caused by their attraction to each other. They are challenged to unite their personal love with Christ's love. Their human love will survive more effectively the cultural challenges they face, as well as the psychological and economic ones, when it is merged with the powerful love of Christ, who wants them to succeed and whose divine grace is ever at their service.

The New Testament shows that Christ's command to love is the door to the whole supernatural order. At the same time, it encourages the couple to know that Jesus affirms the human good of each person. Together the couple must seek the same goals of mutual love united to Christ's love, the raising of a family and the continued growth of their own relationship.

It can seem difficult, or even impossible, to bind oneself for life to another human being. This makes it all the more important to proclaim the Good News that God loves us with a definitive and irrevocable love, that married couple share in this love, that it supports and sustains them, and that by their own faithfulness they can be witnesses to God's faithful love. Spouses who with God's grace give this witness, often in very difficult conditions, deserve the gratitude and support of the ecclesial community. (CCC, no. 1648)

## DIVORCE AND PASTORAL CARE

Married couples have always experienced problems that threaten their union: jealousy, infidelity, conflicts, and quarrels. Lust and arbitrary domination can ruin a marriage. These issues arise from the impact of sin, both Original and actual. The first sin disrupted the original communion of man and woman. Despite this, God's plan for marriage persisted. He never failed to provide mercy and healing grace to help couples sustain their marriages. Sadly, some spouses fail to benefit from the Lord's help and from the many professional resources and support offered to them.

The Church's fidelity to Christ's teaching on marriage and against divorce does not imply insensitivity to the pain of the persons facing these unhappy situations. When divorce is the only possible recourse, the Church offers her support to those involved and encourages them to remain close to the Lord through frequent reception of the Sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist. In the case of those who have divorced civilly and remarried, even though the Church considers the second marriage invalid, she does not want these Catholics to be alienated from her.

Toward Christians who live in this situation, and who often keep the faith and desire to bring up their children in a Christian manner, priests and the whole community must manifest an attentive solicitude, so that they do not consider themselves separated from the Church, in whose life they can and must participate as baptized persons. (CCC, no. 1651)

### DECLARATION OF NULLITY OF A MARRIAGE

The consent of the spouses must be an act of the will, free of coercion or external threats. If this freedom is absent, the marriage is invalid. For this reason (or other reasons that render the marriage null and void), the Church, after an examination of the situation by a competent Church court, can declare the nullity of a marriage, that is, that the sacramental marriage never existed. In this case, the contracting parties are free to marry, provided the natural obligations of the previous union are discharged (cf. CCC, nos. 1628-1629; CIC, can. 1095-1107).

Thus they are encouraged to participate in the life of their parish communities and to attend the Sunday Eucharist, even though they cannot receive Holy Communion.

### A DECLARATION OF NULLITY (ANNULMENT)

The marriage of two baptized persons celebrated according to the norms of Church law is always presumed to be valid. When a marriage has broken down, this presumption remains in effect until the contrary is proven. The examination of the validity of a marriage is undertaken by a Church tribunal or court. 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. Grounds for a declaration of nullity (annulment) include flaws in the rite itself, in the legal capacity of the parties to marry (i.e., an "impediment"), or in the consent they gave—whether they were lacking in discretion or maturity of judgment or were marrying due to force or fear or with an intent to exclude fidelity or the commitment to a life-



long union or were placing unacceptable conditions on the marriage (cf. CCC, nos. 1628-1629). Once a declaration of nullity has been granted, if there are no other restrictions, one or both of the parties are free to enter a sacramental marriage in the Catholic Church.

## MIXED AND INTERFAITH MARRIAGES

The term *mixed marriage* refers to a union between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic. With appropriate permission, a Catholic can marry a baptized non-Catholic either in the Catholic Church or a non-Catholic church. In the first case, a non-Catholic minister can be present for the ceremony just as the Catholic priest can be present in the non-Catholic church with the permission of the bishop.

It is clear that there are differences because of diverse religious traditions, but these differences can be lessened when the spouses share what they have received from their respective traditions and learn from each other how they fulfill their fidelity to Christ. "But the difficulties of mixed marriages must not be underestimated. They arise from the fact that the separation of Christians has not yet been overcome. The spouses risk experiencing the tragedy of Christian disunity even in the heart of their own home" (CCC, no. 1634).

A marriage between a Catholic and a non-baptized person, which is an *interfaith* marriage and is not a sacramental marriage, can present even greater problems for a marriage. Nevertheless, the very differences regarding faith can be enriching for both spouses and, through God's grace, can lead them closer to him.

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does the modern, secular view of marriage and the family affect your own family relationships? How do you resist forces that can weaken marriage?
2. What support for your family are you receiving from relatives, friends and your local parish? In what ways is your family a "domestic church"? How and when do you pray with your spouse? How

and when do you pray as a family? What is your practice concerning participation in Sunday Mass?

3. What help can you or your parish provide for other couples, especially those with troubled marriages in your neighborhood and parish? What do you think will turn the tide back to a society that does everything it can to sustain the ideal of a monogamous, permanent marriage?

## DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS

- God is the author of marriage.
- “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” (CCC, no. 1601; see CIC, can. 1055; CCEO, can. 776).
- Marriage is a liturgical act, appropriately held in a public liturgy at church. By their marriage, the couple witnesses Christ’s spousal love for the Church.
- In the Latin Church, the spouses, as ministers of Christ’s grace, mutually confer upon each other the Sacrament of Matrimony by expressing their consent before the Church. The free consent of the couple is at the heart of the marriage celebration.
- Unity, permanent lifelong commitment, and openness to having and caring for children are essential to marriage.
- The remarriage of persons divorced from a living, lawful spouse is not permitted by God’s law as taught by Christ. They remain members of the Church but cannot receive Holy Communion. They are called and encouraged to lead Christian lives by attending Sunday Mass and participating as far as possible in the life of the parish and to bring up their children in the faith.
- “The Christian home is the place where the children receive the first proclamation of the faith. For this reason the family is rightly called ‘the domestic church,’ a community of grace and prayer, a school of human virtues and of Christian charity” (CCC, no. 1666).

## MEDITATION

### Exhortation Before the Sacrament of Marriage

Dear Friends in Christ,

As you know, you are about to enter into a union which is most sacred and most serious, a union which was established by God himself. In this way he sanctified human love and enabled man and woman to help each other live as children of God, by sharing a common life under his fatherly care.

Because God himself is thus its author, marriage is of its very nature a holy institution, requiring of those who enter into it a complete and unreserved giving of self. This union then is most serious, because it will bind you together for life in a relationship so close and so intimate that it will profoundly influence your whole future. That future—with its hopes and disappointments, its successes and its failures, its pleasures and its pains, its joys and its sorrows—is hidden from your eyes. You know well that these elements are mingled in every life and are to be expected in your own. And so, not knowing what is before you, you take each other for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, until death.

These words, then, are most serious. It is a beautiful tribute to your undoubted faith in each other, that recognizing their full import, you are nevertheless so willing and so ready to pronounce them. And because these words involve such solemn obligations, it is most fitting that you rest the security of your wedded life on the great principle of self sacrifice. And so today you begin your married life by the voluntary and complete surrender of your individual lives in the interest of that deeper and wider life which you two are to have in common.

Henceforth you belong entirely to each other; you will be one in mind, one in heart, one in affections. And whatever sacrifices you may hereafter be required to make to preserve this common life, always make them generously. There will be problems which might be difficult, but genuine love can make them easy, and perfect love can make them a joy. We are willing to give in proportion as we love. And when love is perfect, the sac-

rifice is complete. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, and the Son so loved us that he gave himself for our salvation. "Greater love than this no one has, that one lay down his life for his friends."

No greater blessing can come to your married life than pure conjugal love, loyal and true to the end. May this love, then, with which you join your hands and hearts today, never fail, but grow deeper and stronger as the years go on. And if true love and the unselfish spirit of perfect sacrifice guide all your actions, you two can expect the greatest measure of earthly happiness that may be allotted on this earth. The rest is in the hands of God. Nor will God be wanting to your needs; he will pledge you the lifelong support of his graces in the holy sacrament which you are now going to receive.

—Msg. Charles Ramm,  
"Exhortation Before the Sacrament of Marriage," in  
*Liturgikon* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1977)

## PRAYER

Almighty and eternal God,  
your fatherly tenderness never ceases to provide for our needs.  
We ask you to bestow on this family and this home  
the riches of your blessing.  
With the gift of grace, sanctify those who live here,  
so that, faithful to your commandments,  
they will care for each other, ennoble this world by their lives,  
and reach the home you have prepared for them in heaven.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

—Blessing of Families, *Book of Blessings*



I will espouse you to me forever.

—Hos 2:21