

Sacrament of Marriage

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In God's Image

As it sets out to speak of the Sacrament of Matrimony, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes that Scripture begins with the creation of humankind in the image and likeness of God, and ends with the wedding-feast of the Lamb in Revelation (See CCC, 1602). This surely suggests that the best possible way to grasp something of the Catholic teaching and understanding of the Sacrament of Matrimony is to begin with our understanding of God. We are made in God's image and likeness, and through the Eucharist, our earthly anticipation of the wedding feast of the Lamb, we are drawn further into this image and likeness.

God is never an additional element of our world-view, but the very foundation of it. In God, we live and move and have our being. Thus, everything that we think and everything we do ought to reflect this view, including marriage. God is the key to unlock our understanding of this sacrament.

Who or What Is God?

If "God himself is the author of marriage" (CCC 1603), the central question is: *Who or what is God?* We have become accustomed to speaking of "images of God," and to recognizing that not all the images of God that we operate with are worthy of the reality of God. There are dysfunctional ways of imaging God. An image of God as a sort of cosmic policeman, watching and scrutinizing our every move, and ready to hand out a ticket for bad moves, is seriously inadequate.

We all probably have some degree of dysfunction in our thinking about God. We could come to a better understanding by considering the writings of the New Testament. Quite simply, God's best name is "Love." In the First Letter of St. John we read: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (1 John 4:16).

The *Catechism* also expresses this idea: "God who created man out of love also calls him to love—the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. For man is created in the image and likeness of God who is himself love" (CCC, 1604). While that conviction of the First Letter of John and the *Catechism* is beautiful, it is also abstract. The New Testament, in a number of places, provides us with a picture of what this Love—this God—is like.

Luke's Picture of God

Let's go to the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. Speaking of the image of the father, Saint John Paul II was fond of referring to this parable as the definitive picture of God in the New Testament.

The younger son asked his father for his inheritance, has obtained it, and squandered it in a distant country. Starving for food, and love, he comes crawling home in shame, full of self-accusation. But, before he could get these words out, the father was waiting and watching and preparing to welcome him. We are told: "While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20).

The father in the parable is Love—God as Love—waiting and watching to welcome his errant children home, into his company, into his arms. Christian marriage embodies this waiting and watching Love of God as each partner seeks to forgive the other, and to be reconciled to the other, as the need arises during the course of their marital relationship.

The snapshot of the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son shows us that, even when we go wrong, as the younger son did, God as Love waits to have us home, to have us back, to embrace us, and to do all of this without a word of accusation. It is the son who accuses himself; his father does not accuse him. The elderly father suggests a loving God whose very nature will not let us go.

This snapshot shows us that when at times spouses hurt or offend one another, there is an urgency to work towards forgiveness and reconciliation.

John's Picture of God

In the Gospel according to John we find a concrete and dramatic portrayal of what it means to say that God is Love. In the Gospel we recognize that Jesus is the Word of God: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us . . ." (John 1:1, 14).

A word, we might say, is our very self-expression. A carefully chosen word expresses exactly our understanding. The Word that is Jesus expresses exactly the understanding of God the Father. To hear and to see that Word when he became flesh and lived among us is to understand the meaning of Love—that is God—incarnate.

What does Love "become flesh," look like? Look at John 13:1, where we read: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." Pay attention to the last three words, to the end—in Greek, *eis telos*. We know what happened. Jesus loved in the Last Supper; he loved in the foot-washing. He said: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I

have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:12-13). He loved in the arrest in the garden, in the trials, in the suffering that led up to the cross, and finally, he loved on and from the cross.

His last words in this gospel were: "It is finished" (John 19:30), in Greek, *tetelestai*. This Greek verb has the same root as the word *telos*, "end," in John 13:1. In other words, having loved "to the end," he acknowledged his death as the end. He laid down his life, and there is no greater love than that. Christian marriage embodies this self-giving love to the end, as the spouses pattern their lives on God-in-Christ, on loving each other without calculation, without counting the cost.

The Gospel records that after Jesus said *It is finished*, "he bowed his head and gave up his spirit" (John 19:30). *Gave up his spirit* is not here a synonym for *died*. It does not say, "He bowed his head and died." There's more to it than that. The verb to *give up* is in Greek *paredoken*, a word that means "to hand over." Thus, the sentence would read, more literally and indeed more theologically, *He bowed his head and handed over his spirit*.

To whom did the Lord Jesus hand over his spirit? We know from this Gospel that at the foot of the cross were "his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. . . and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her [Mary, his mother]" (John 19:25-26). In other words, the Church was there at the foot of the cross. Mary, mother of the Church is there as well as the beloved disciple. As Jesus *expired*, he *inspired* the Church, "he handed over his spirit" to the Church. In the Gospel according to John the Church was born from the cross.

This enables us to say that every aspect of being Church shares in some way in the cross of Christ. Every aspect of being Church, including the Sacrament of Matrimony, shares in the Paschal mystery, the event of Jesus' dying and rising.

This snapshot of Jesus' loving to the end, to death, shows us how wildly passionate this loving God is. He becomes human, like us, and through the entirety of his life, demonstrates this Love. This snapshot invites the Christian married couple to show forth God as self-giving love—without counting the cost—in the totality of their marriage. It invites each of them to be the face of the self-giving Jesus to the other.

In the first two sections of this magazine we examined two concepts of what it means to say that "God is Love." Each is a look into the heart of God as Love, and each offers us insight into the meaning of Christian marriage. Taken together, the two concepts tell us that God as Love is an unconditional gift. These concepts show us that the Sacrament of Matrimony should reveal to us an image of God who is unconditional love.

The Sacrament of Matrimony

As Catholics understand it, the primary sacrament of God- is the Church, and marriage is a sacrament of the Church. The word *sacrament* means “sign,” but in Catholic theology sacrament is not just a sign that points to something else. Rather, it is sign that both communicates and participates in the life and reality of God. The Church is the primary and central sign of God in the world.

One of the most common manifestations of the Church is a Christian married couple. Through them the Church can grow, they provide the Church with new members, one generation after another. In the Sacrament of Matrimony God embraces the couple so that they become together a communication of and a participation in God. God is Love, and the married couple becomes the effective sign of that Love in their marriage.

Some may think that the wedding celebration is what constitutes the sacrament, but it is just the public beginning of the sacrament. The married couple’s entire life is the sacrament. Just as the Rite of Baptism is only the beginning of the life of the baptized, so too it is with marriage. Baptism doesn’t end at the font, but begins there. Marriage doesn’t end in the sanctuary, but begins there.

The fabric of a couple’s married life involves many things for example, how they listen and speak to each other, how they handle disagreement, and how they respond to disappointment and failure. This is finely expressed in the *Catechism*: “Marriage helps to overcome self-absorption, egoism, pursuit of one’s own pleasure, and to open oneself to the other, to mutual aid and to self-giving” (CCC, 1609).

We might put it like this: the Sacrament of Matrimony is Church. Marriage does not simply point to Church, nor is it simply modeled on the love of Christ for the Church. It *is* Church, it *is* Body of Christ in this particular home, on this specific street. Sometimes marriage is described as the domestic Church, the Church of the *domus*, “the home and the family.”

This is the kind of theological thinking that lies behind the somewhat controversial but nonetheless magnificent passage in the Letter to the Ephesians:

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the Church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. (Ephesians 5: 21-25)

Clearly, the controversial words in this passage have to do with a wife being “subject to her husband” (vv. 22, 24). New Testament scholars tell us that these sentiments probably derive

from a household moral code adapted from popular Greco-Roman philosophy to assist in the moral instruction of Christians. In these Greco-Roman codes the household was understood as a patriarchal and hierarchical social unit, with the father of the house firmly in charge and in control.

Paul accepted this patriarchal and hierarchical account of marriage and family because he was a man of his times and of his culture. His times and his culture are not ours, nor is the patriarchal and hierarchical account of marriage.

The Catholic understanding of marriage is described by Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* in these contrasting terms: "The unity of marriage will radiate from the equal personal dignity of wife and husband, a dignity acknowledged by mutual and total love" (Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 49). Marriage is based on the equal personal dignity of both spouses.

It would be a tragedy if acknowledging Paul's time-conditioned perspective prevented us from seeing and owning the sentiments: "Husbands and wives, love each other just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for it. The view of marriage here is of mutual self-giving, based on Jesus' example of self-giving unto death, and of forgiveness and reconciliation when those are needed.

The Rite of Marriage

Falling in love is easy; staying in love requires work. Christian married couples must remain in love, and must be love in action. That is costly indeed. Married love is the vocation to give oneself to and for the other until death. We must give until, as with the Lord Jesus, there is nothing left to give. In the Rite of Marriage, couples promise to take each other, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death parts them.

The essence of these vows is simply not understood if thought of as just staying with this person until death comes around. No! It means being prepared to lay down one's life for this person. There is nothing more one can do for another than to lay down one's life. That is the pledge of Christian marriage.

Married love is the commitment to be there for the other without an exit clause, or an "out" to abandon the enterprise as soon as the other's otherness gives us difficulty. Therein lies the Paschal mystery dimension of Christian marriage. It demands a giving of oneself to the other as God gives himself to us, without qualification, without condition, even to the point of laying down one's life, modeled by the Lord Jesus.

Vatican II puts it like this, “Authentic married love is caught up into divine love” (Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* 48). Essential to this being caught up into divine love is the constant and regular giving of the spouses, one to the other.

Promises All Around

At a wedding, we all know that the spouses make a solemn vow to each using their own words, or those prescribed by the Church. The keys to proper and valid marriage vows are statements that reflect the following:

- Marriage is a lifelong commitment.
- Marriage is more than a contract. It’s a covenant.
- The love of spouses ideally reflects God’s unconditional love for all creation, and Christ’s love for the Church.

One thing that we may not know is that marriage is more than a private agreement between two persons. In addition to the promise made between spouses, there are two other promises made at every wedding: 1) the couple promises to the community to be a living witness and model of covenant love, and 2) the community promises to support and hold accountable the couple in their journey of life and love.

Without these promises between the couple and the community, few, if any, couples would be able to keep their vows to each other. Plus, without the communal promises there is little reason for a public wedding.

The Eucharist

Catholic marriages are often celebrated within the context of the Eucharist, though for pastoral reasons this is not always the case. The reason for placing the Sacrament of Matrimony within the celebration of the Eucharist is to recognize the participation of marriage in the Paschal mystery—the dying and rising with Christ. Paul tells us in the First Letter to the Corinthians that the Eucharist “proclaims the Lord’s death until he comes” (11:26). Nowhere are we drawn closer to the death of the Lord than in the Eucharist.

Celebrating a marriage in the context of the Eucharist proclaims that the self-giving of the spouses is to be like the self-giving of the Lord, complete unto death. In marriage each spouse dies to self-centeredness and rises in service and giving of self to the other.

Another way of looking at this is to recall that many Catholic churches are built in the shape of the cross—the nave or main part of the church being the vertical beam of the cross, and the sanctuary the horizontal beam. The Rite of Marriage takes place just inside the sanctuary, at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal beams of the cross. The spouses make their pledge to

one another on the cross, as it were, because this is a costly pledge, demanding death to self-preoccupation and rising to the new life of self-giving to the other.

Whether the Rite of Marriage is celebrated within the Eucharist or not, every Christian marriage is implicitly eucharistic. The Eucharist is the memorial of Calvary, the proclamation of the Lord Jesus' self-giving unto death. Since every Christian marriage explicitly intends this spousal self-giving unto death, every Christian marriage is implicitly eucharistic.

When we take the Eucharist as a memorial to Jesus, we are remembering this costly-crucial love. We receive him into ourselves, and his paschal presence energizes us. It enables us to continue to struggle to let this reality permeate every aspect of our married lives. Marriage is profoundly eucharistic.

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