

The Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults

The Sacrament of Marriage – Sign of Faithful Love

by Fr. Antony

Marriage was instituted by God at the Garden of Eden. After the creation of man God said “It is not good for man to be alone.” God established marriage at the very beginning of creation, “God created man in His image, in the divine image He created him; as male and female He created them. God blessed them saying: Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it...” (**Genesis 1:26-28**). Among the Jews marriage was considered as the blessing of God. The Scripture says, “Home and possessions are an inheritance from parents, but a prudent wife is a gift from the Lord” (**Proverbs 19:14**).

Jesus reaffirms that marriage was instituted by God when he said, “Thus they (man and woman) are no longer two, but one flesh. And thus whom God has joined together, let no man separate.” And through this Jesus is showing the true significance of marriage.

By His presence at the marriage at Cana in Galilee the Lord blessed and sanctified the marriage and performed his first miracle there. The breaking of marital fidelity is disobeying God’s will and, therefore, a grievous sin.

Besides the human, social and legal dimensions of marriage there is also a sacramental and religious dimension of marriage. As marriage is a public sign that one gives oneself totally to the other person, sacramental marriage is also a public statement about God. In the Scriptures, the relationship between God and God’s people is often described in terms of a marriage. Seeing God’s covenant with Israel in the image of exclusive and faithful married love, the prophets prepared the Chosen People’s conscience for a deepened understanding of the unity and indissolubility of marriage (**CCC 1611**). The early Christians, reflecting on Christ’s love for us, also used this image. Christ and the Church embrace in mutual love and self-giving, even as do husband and wife (**Ephesians 5:21-33**). “‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church” (**Ephesians 5:31-32**).

In order for a Christian marriage to take place the man and woman must be capable of entering into such a sacrament. This sacramental sign, which the husband and wife give to each other, they also give to the entire community of witnesses.

Marriage is not a legal contract. Marriage is not, as the German theologian Father Bernard Haring reminds us, a business contract for the purpose of getting a job done. Marriage differs from a legal contract. A legal contract attempts to spell out all possible conditions which might arise in the given situation. The contract is usually over when the specified time is complete.

Marriage is a covenant “by which a man and woman establish between themselves a partnership for the whole of life” (**CCC 1601**). In marriage you make an unconditional promise, not knowing where the promise will

lead, what the promise will entail. The unconditional promise is the essence of Christian marriage, and it is based on love. This is well expressed in the vows they make during the marriage.

Usually we think of this covenant in a rather personal and individual context, but it has an ecclesiastical dimension. That is why usually we have the wedding ceremony during the Eucharistic celebration. The Second Vatican Council reminds us that the marriage covenant exists not only for the good of the partners and their children, but also for the good of the Church and the good of society at large (**Vat. II Church in the Modern World, 48**).

“In the Latin Rite 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. In the Eucharist, the memorial of the New Covenant is realized - the New Covenant in which Christ has united himself forever to the Church, his beloved bride for whom he gave himself up. It is therefore fitting that the spouses should seal their consent to give themselves to each other through the offering of their own lives by uniting it to the offering of Christ for his Church made present in the Eucharistic sacrifice, and by receiving the Eucharist so that, communicating in the same Body and the same Blood of Christ, they may form but ‘one body’ in Christ” (**CCC 1621**).

According to this teaching of the church, we find two very important points in marriage: commitment and fidelity between the couples. The books of Ruth and Tobit bear moving witness to an elevated sense of marriage and to the fidelity and tenderness of spouses.

Unlike the other sacraments, the priest or deacon is only a witness, but it is the bride and groom; who performs the marriage as the minister of marriage, but for the validity of the sacrament, their blessing is also necessary. The priest, the attendants and the congregation witness what the bride and groom do. The Church holds the exchange of consent between the spouses to be the indispensable element that “makes the marriage. “The consent consists in a “human act by which the partners mutually give themselves to each other”: “I take you to be my wife” – “I take you to be my husband.” This consent that binds the spouses to each other finds its fulfillment in the two “becoming one flesh” (**CCC1626-27**).

Indissolubility: Following **Mark 10:2-9**, and because of its understanding of marriage as a covenant, a marriage that is both sacramental and consummated is indissoluble. An annulment is a very different thing from a divorce. Divorce is the legal dissolution of a marriage. An annulment is the legal declaration that a valid sacramental marriage never existed.