

What is a Sacramental Marriage?

And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to put her away." But Jesus said to them, "For your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 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. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder." And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. And he said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." ~ Mark 10:2-12



SACRAMENTAL marriage is a covenantal bond de-

signed by God between baptized persons that is an intimate, faithful, indissoluble communion of life and love freely entered into by a man and a woman for their own good and for the procreation and education of offspring (see also *handout on Matrimony*).

Covenantal bond: Because marriage is an exchange of persons, where each pledges to give himself or herself entirely to the other, it is more than a contract; it is a holy *covenant*. Throughout the Sacred Scripture, we are taught that God's covenantal relationship with his people is viewed in terms of a marriage (see, for example, Is 54:5-8; Jer 2:1-3; Ez 16:8-22; Hos 2:14-20; Mk 2:19; Rv 19:6-8). Marriage is the best image we have been given by God to understand his unbreakable and complete love and fidelity to us, and the sacrament of marriage is intended to image God's relationship to us.

Designed by God: We learn in the story of creation that Adam greeted Eve with joy: *"This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh"* (Gn 2:23), and the immediately following verse says: *"Therefore a man leaves his father and mother*

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and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gn 2:24). We are told that each is designed for the

other, and that we are designed for marriage. This "nuptial meaning of the body," as Pope John Paul II termed it, is written into us by God, and we may not change it. No "marriage" is possible between two members of the same sex.

Between baptized persons: Only two baptized persons may enter into a sacramental marriage. Their marriage is a sign of the mystery of Christ's union with his Bride, the Church (see Eph 5:31-32). Pope John Paul II said that "by means of baptism, man and woman are definitively placed within the new and eternal covenant, in the spousal covenant of Christ with the Church. And it is because of this indestructible insertion that the intimate community of conjugal life and love, founded by

the Creator, is elevated and assumed into the spousal charity of Christ, sustained and enriched by his redeeming power" (*The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World* 13).

Intimate: Marriage involves the complete "opening up" of one's entire being to the spouse, holding nothing back physically, spiritual-



ly, or psychologically. It is a self-surrender by each to the other so total that the two spouses sacramentally image the interior life of the Trinity.

Faithful: The very nature of marriage requires that the fidelity of each to the other never be broken; they must always be faithful to each other not only in behavior but in the deepest recesses of their hearts as well.

Indissoluble: Once having freely consented to marriage, the spouses are irrevocably joined so long as both live. The marriage is made before God, and by God (see Mk 10:9), and following the consummation of the marriage in the marriage act, it can never be dissolved. Divorce is not possible, for the consent given is irrevocable. In cases where the good of at least one of the spouses requires separation, the Church permits this but continues to recognize the marriage as valid. These situations demand the surrender of the spouses in humility and faith to the goodness of God's teaching even when experiencing great anguish. Annulments are also given for non-sacramental but valid marriages, under certain conditions.

Communion of life and love: Marriage is a union of individuals of equal personal dignity. St. Paul admonished wives to *"be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord"* (Eph 5:22) and admonished husbands to *"love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her"* (Eph 5:25). Each is to submit to the other in complete mutual self-surrender. By doing so, neither is submerged in the other; on the contrary, as Jesus promises us, *"whoever loves his life for my sake will find it"* (Mt 16:25). Complete self-giving is the only path to becoming most completely who God meant us to be.

Freely entered into: The free consent of the spouses is the indispensable element that makes a marriage. This free consent includes not only both being free to marry (for example, neither is already married), according to the laws of the Church, but also that neither is under any form of coercion or threat.

By a man and a woman: The complementarity of the sexes is essential to marriage. There is such widespread confusion today about the nature of marriage that some seek to extend the "right" to marry to two persons of the same sex. But the very nature of marriage makes such a proposition impossible.

For their own good: "[T]he man and the woman... help and serve each other by their marriage partnership; they become conscious of their unity and experience it more deeply from day to day.... Authentic married love is caught up into divine love and is directed and enriched by the redemptive power of Christ and the salvific action of the Church, with the result that the spouses are effectively led to God....



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spouses are penetrated with the spirit of Christ and their whole life is suffused by faith, hope and charity; thus they increasingly further their own perfection and their mutual sanctification, and together they render glory to God" (Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* 48). Those who are called to the vocation of marriage and have entered into a sacramental marriage help each other to holiness and Heaven.

And the procreation and education of offspring: Too many people enter marriage today thinking that children are optional to their union, but spouses who choose not to have children violate the very meaning of marriage. God has built into the very structure of marriage the capacity and opportunity to create new living love, imaging the Holy Spirit, the very essence of divine love. This creative capacity, to cooperate with God to bring into existence a soul that is immortal, is an awesome grace — a gift beyond understanding. The joyous and generous welcome of children is the sign and the fruit of the genuine self-giving love of the spouses for each other. The Fathers of Vatican II declared that "by its very nature the institution of marriage and married love are ordered to the procreation and education of the offspring and it is in them that it finds its crowning glory" (Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* 48). The spouses also have the privilege and responsibility to educate their children, preparing them to be both members of the human community and future citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven.

(CCC 1625-1629, 1638-1641, 1643-1653)