

# **SIGNS OF GOD'S LOVE: CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE**

Catechist Training Course – Area D

Catechist Competencies

As a result of this study, the catechist will be able to

1. Demonstrate an understanding of the meaning of the sacrament of marriage as it relates to scripture and tradition
2. Gain pastoral sensitivity for teaching about marriage in diverse groups.
3. Recognize the importance of marriage for the family and the larger society.
4. Provide projects that promote the value of Christian marriage among students of all ages.

Course Reading: NDC #36.C.2

U. S. Adult Catechism Chapter 21

Before you begin: Think about a couple whose marriage you admire. What qualities do you see?

## **Sacrament of Marriage**

The qualities that make any marriage succeed and become a blessing to others are a reflection of essential elements: permanence, faithfulness, and openness to life.

Sacramental marriage is a sharing of the whole of life which makes Christ present through the lives of the couples in these relationships. In Matthew 19, Jesus uses Genesis 2:24 to explain how marriage creates a new reality, a family: A man leaves father and mother to find woman, and joined together in a union that brings them joy and new life to the community. Ephesians 5 extends the metaphor to Christ and the Church, and uses marriage to explain it.

Since apostolic times, the Church has defended Christian marriage from attack by the surrounding culture. While it is beyond the scope of this course to discuss the historical evolution of marriage as a sacrament, one can say with certainty that by the time of the Fourth Lateran Council (13th century) the Church viewed marriage as a sacrament – a vehicle for Christians to receive grace and to experience God's love.

After the Council of Trent, (16th century) the valid marriage ceremony became the visible element that demonstrated the sacramentality of the relationship. The Second Vatican Council shifted the emphasis on marriage from legal contract to covenant of love. While not reducing the importance of the contractual elements of marriage, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) in particular highlighted the covenantal dimensions of sacramental marriage. This emphasis was reinforced in Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae* (1968) and John Paul II's *Familiaris Consortio* (1981).

In the last 40 years, the Church has enriched the theology of marriage by highlighting its role as a partnership for the whole of life, founded on the love of God and the love of the spouses and extending to others, especially children. The traditional formulation (St. Augustine, 5<sup>th</sup> century) of the hierarchical goods of marriage – children, unity of spouses, and sacrament -- yielded to a theology which focused on the permanence, faithfulness and generous openness to life. This image of marriage is reflected in Canon law as “a partnership of the whole of life,” and a sacramental “covenant between baptized persons” (Code of Canon Law 1055 § 1; cf. GS 48 § 1; CCC #1601.)

### **1. Sacramental Marriage is Permanent**

The life-long character of marriage is linked to the unbreakable bond between God and the Church. "Marriage between two baptized persons is a real symbol of the union of Christ and the church, which is not a temporary or "trial" union, but one which is eternally faithful." (*Familiaris Consortio*, 80, 1985). Sacramental marriage is ordered to the salvation of the spouses: "Married love is first of all fully human, that is to say, of the senses and of the spirit at the same time.... It is not then a simple transport of instinct and sentiment, but also and principally an act of free will, intended to endure and grow by

means of the joys and sorrows of daily life, in such a way that husband and wife become one only heart and one only soul and together attain their human perfection” (*Humanae Vitae*, 9, 1968).

## **2. Sacramental Marriage is Faithful**

When a man and a woman say “yes” to marriage, they are also saying “no” to all other partners. They also vow to become a partnership, a partnership that engages in the mission of Jesus Christ. “(Jesus) himself gives the strength and grace to live marriage in the new dimension of the Reign of God. It is by following Christ, renouncing themselves, and taking up their crosses that spouses will be able to ‘receive’ the original meaning of marriage and live it with the help of Christ.” (CCC 1615; cf. Mt. 19:11)

“Faithfulness” also means putting one’s spouse before family of origin. Brides and grooms vow to allow their individual lives to blend without losing their personal integrity. They form a new family: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cling to his wife, and the two shall be made into one.’ This is a great foreshadowing; I mean that it refers to Christ and his Church. In any case, each one should love his wife as he loves himself, the wife for her part showing respect for her husband” (Ephesians 5:31-33 NAB).

## **3. Sacramental Marriage is Open to Children**

Sexual union is integral to the sacrament: (CCC 1604,1643). Spouses are urged to express mutual love in physical ways appropriate to marriage. Marital sexual expression is good, enjoyable and designed by God, and should be an expression of the lover’s identity.

In the wedding ceremony, the couples declare publicly their openness to having children and a bond uniting them in love (CCC 1601). A valid marriage in the Catholic

Church is open to children. “The Church continues to offer clear, challenging and prophetic—even if controversial—guidance to the husband and wife who are struggling with that sensitive and often difficult issue. It teaches that the act of sexual intercourse has two meanings, which cannot be separated: the unitive meaning, by which the love of a couple is symbolized, sustained, and strengthened; and the procreative meaning, by which the couple open themselves to the possibility of cooperating with God in the creation of a new person” (*Faithful to Each Other Forever*, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1989; 41).

Catholic couples are directed to use only natural means to regulate and achieve pregnancy. When a couple follows the natural methods of family planning, they “respect the inseparable connection between the unitive and procreative meanings of human sexuality, act as ministers of God’s plan, and benefit from their sexuality according to the original dynamism of total self-giving without manipulation or alteration.” (*Familiaris Consortio*, 32, 1981).

### **Liturgy Catechesis about Marriage**

Several “signs” are present in the marriage celebrated in the Catholic Church. The Marriage Vows (Statement of Consent) are a public sign of an interior change. The man and woman must be free to contract marriage and freely express their consent. (Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1625, cf. *Code of Canon Law*, #1057§2. The vows must include a statement about the relationship being ‘permanent and exclusive.’ In the dioceses of the United States, the following form of the statement of consent may be used (others are available):

“I N., take you N., to be my husband (wife). 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.”

The Wedding Rings symbolize the deeper implications of this commitment to love and honor until death. The Husband and Wife become signs of the giving-receiving relationship with God. God gives, they accept; God loves, they respond. The Witnesses represent the community, to whom the new couple is a sign of God’s faithful love for humanity. Family and ethnic customs speak of the joining of two families, not just two individuals. The Church building and the ordained minister signify connection to Church community.

### **Marriage is a Christian Vocation**

“God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation and thus the capacity and responsibility of love and communion. Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.” -- John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 11, 1981

Today, we recognize that all the baptized have a vocation. Vocation today is not for a chosen few, but for all. The former misapprehension that religious vocation is the only God-oriented calling plays itself out in various ways, “not the least of which is that we appear to ask far more of teens preparing for confirmation than we do of those preparing to enter the lifelong covenant of marriage. Vocation involves being attuned and attentive to the voice of God, mediated by the people and events of our lives, in order to discover and grow into the unique name God has give each one of us.”

Marriage and Holy Orders are both Sacraments in Service to Communion. Like Holy Orders, Matrimony is deeply personal but not private. Married couples are called to serve the mission of the Church. Holy Orders and Marriage are both “vowed lives”,

similar paths to God and to service to the mission of Christ, with distinctive differences and arenas of operation. The whole Church has a stake in their vocations.

In daily life, sacramental couples proclaim this message through word and example. They tell others about their faith in God, and show what it means through their life's witness.

### **Revealing the Trinity**

Sacramental couples have the opportunity to demonstrate the dance of the Trinity in the world. In their pastoral document for marriage preparation, *Faithful to Each Other For Ever*, the U. S. Catholic Bishops teach that "God, in creating every woman and man as a totally distinct and different person, nevertheless, wishes those who enter marriage to become one in body and spirit, likewise bonded by an absolute love for each other. The divine love of the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is unconditional, committed, irrevocable, and exclusive or faithful; God's plan is that human marital love will be the same" (NCCB/USCC, 1989).

As they live their vocation, sacramental couples communicate a message of love with their words and their lives. They tell the world:

*God is love.* Given the circumstances of today's world, this message desperately needs to be proclaimed.

*Jesus Christ is the definitive expression of God in the world.* For Christians, he is the primordial sacrament, the fullest expression of God in our midst.

*The Spirit* -- God's graciousness itself -- acts in the world today, leading people to live God's message.

The Triune God invites us to become God's sons and daughters. This is not possible through human activity alone, but it is possible with God's grace.

In *Deus Caritas Est* (19, 2005), the first encyclical of his papacy, Pope Benedict XVI reminds readers that where we see charity, we see the Triune God. He calls the entire Christian community to love one another. This call extends to the church of the home formed in sacramental marriage. Where love is revealed in the lives of sacramental couples, the Trinity is present. True love reveals the Trinity, the perfect community. A proper understanding of the meaning of sacramental marriage will include a sense that all have a stake in marriage. The success of marriage depends greatly on the way in which the community acts toward a couple and their children. We are part of the covenant, because we are the Body of Christ.

### **Pastoral Concerns:**

Whatever ages of the students, the catechist faces special challenges when teaching about sacramental marriage. Many of the students present will have experienced divorce and other loss from marriage. When students say, “That has not been my experience (or my parents’); the catechist should be ready to respond with sensitivity.

The good news about the sacraments is that God always remains faithful, even when people have not been able to do so. The catechist should focus on the grace of God available in the sacrament for people to go on to form their own marriages. For more insights on catechizing persons and their children who are not-quite-connected to the church, read *The Marginal Catholic: Challenge, Don’t Crush*, by Fr. Joseph M. Champlin (Ave Maria Press, 1989).

### **Discussion/Reflection Questions:**

1. Why do all Catholics need catechesis about marriage?

2. What are the challenges to the permanence, faithfulness, and openness to children your students encounter?
3. We have explored how marriage and holy orders are related. How is marriage reflected in the other sacraments?
4. How is the love of God demonstrated in marriages that are struggling or that have ended?
5. What can your parish and civic community do to support marriage?

For further study:

For recent Catholic Documents and Information on Marriage, visit the website of Committee on Marriage and Family, United States Catholic Bishops, <http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/>

*Deus Caritas Est: God is Love*, 2005. In his first encyclical, Pope Benedict describes human love as a single reality, revealed in a special way in sacramental marriage. He uses marriage of husband and wife to call the whole church to charity. Available on-line, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html)

*Familiaris Consortio: On the Family*, 1978

Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation addresses the role of the family in society as a believing and evangelizing community, in dialogue with God and at the service of all people.

*Faithful to Each Other Forever: A Catholic Handbook of Pastoral Help for Marriage Preparation*. US Bishop's Committee for Pastoral Research and Practices, NCCB, 1989. A good description of catechesis for remote, proximate, and immediate preparation for the sacrament.

*A Daring Promise: A Spirituality of Christian Marriage*, Richard Gaillardetz, Ph.D. The Christian tradition shaped by the experience and family life of a married Catholic theologian. Crossroad Publishing Co., 2002.

*A Christian Theology of Marriage and Family*, Julie Hanlon Rubio, Paulist Press, 2003. ISBN 0-8091-4118-3. For a deeper study of the history of marriage.

*Written on Scrolls, Inscribed in Hearts: Biblical Reflections on Marriage*, David M. Thomas, Abbey Press, 1989.