

Matrimony: Sacrament at the Service of Communion

Our wedding was a first for both of our families. Everyone was learning as we made the plans, and everyone had different expectations. You may have had a similar experience; the bride has ideas of what will be perfect, but her parents see it as an occasion to celebrate family relationships or impress the neighbors, while the groom wonders what the fuss is about. After many disagreements and bills, a frustrated father blurts out, “Whose wedding do you think this is, anyway?” The couple usually sees the wedding as “their day,” but Christian marriage is about more than the two of them. Marriage, like all the sacraments, is never just a private event. Weddings are such a sign of God’s love that they have a transformative effect on the whole family and on everyone who attends.

When we call Christian marriage a sacrament, we are not only talking about the grace the couple receives to live out their promises. We are saying a marriage is a sign of God’s love, taking shape in ordinary events of life, in the day-to-day loving and sacrifices that life together calls for. When we baptize our children, we pledge publicly to teach and model for our children the most basic Christian values. We hope that they will someday say, “When I look at my parents’ marriage, I see love, respect, politeness, fun and tenderness. They have been through tough times, but they have always made me feel safe and secure in our home. I want my marriage to be like theirs.” As the years roll by, married couples sanctify their marriages and families in their own homes, the “domestic church,” which is a true expression in miniature of the larger church.

Sacramental marriage reflects the paschal mystery, taking its inner meaning from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Like Jesus, the spouses in sacramental marriage “die” to selfishness and “rise” to selfless service to one another, their children, their extended family, and beyond the doors of their home into their community and society. In his first encyclical message, “God is Love,” Pope Benedict XVI reminds married couples of their responsibility to reveal God’s love to society: “Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbor. The concept of

‘neighbor’ is now universalized, yet it remains concrete. Despite being extended to all mankind, it is not reduced to a generic, abstract and undemanding expression of love, but calls for my own practical commitment here and now” (God is Love, 15).

Research indicates that marriage helps men to become better fathers, reduces their likeliness to quarrel and fall prey to addiction, and provides many physical health benefits. Women on the other hand, are more likely to gain financially, to be protected from crime and abuse, and to receive psychological benefits, according to “Why Is Marriage Good For Both Men and Women?” a short presentation in “Making a Case for Marriage,” which can be found on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Web site - www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/menwomeneng.shtml.

As a society and as committed Christians, we must look at what we can do to promote healthy marriages while committing ourselves to finding ways to assist those families who have found it necessary to leave hurting or hurtful marriages.

As leaders of the Christian Family Movement, we help groups of married couples form small-group networks for family enrichment. Couples who have enjoyed the small group experience of Why Catholic? would enjoy forming such a group in their parish. For more information on CFM-USA, a network of Catholics and their families, visit www.cfm.org. In the Archdiocese of Baltimore, resources for marriage enrichment are available at <https://www.archbalt.org/marriage-family/marriage-enrichment/index.cfm> Whatever can be done to help people achieve satisfactory marriages, whether done by church, family, or government organizations would be beneficial not only for the family members but also for society in general.

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This is the final article in a series of articles on the six-week spring session of Why Catholic?