

OUR CATHOLIC FAITH by Bishop Donald Wuerl

(reprinted from Knights of Columbus Columbia Magazine April 1998)

MARRIAGE

The preparations for marriage are usually extensive, the celebration itself is a moment of great joy, not only for the couple but also for their families and friends. It should be this way because a marriage marks the beginning of two lives coming together to share a whole new reality: their lives as a couple, a husband and wife.

The marriage ritual clearly describes what is happening not only for the couple but also for the Church. The bride and groom stand before the priest or deacon who addresses them in these words: ***“My dear friends, you have come here together in this church so that the Lord may seal and strengthen your love in the presence of the Church’s minister and this community...”*** We are reminded that this man and woman ask the Lord to seal their love publicly in the presence of the Church. The couple declares that they have come freely and without reservation to give themselves to each other and lovingly to accept children from God is this be His plan.

At the heart of the wedding ceremony is the couple’s consent. In fact, of all the seven Sacraments, Marriage is the only one conferred not by the sacred minister but by the participants themselves. The priest or deacon is present to witness the Marriage in the name of the Church and to bless it, but the wedding itself takes place through the public consent of the couple. It is for this reason that the priest invites the man and woman to declare their consent: ***“ Since it is your intention to enter into marriage, join your right hands, and declare your consent before God and the Church.”***

In a tradition-laden formulary used in diocese in the United States, the consent of the groom and bride is expressed in words which proclaim that they promise each other: ***“To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, until death do us part.”*** After receiving their consent, the priest invokes God’s blessing on their decision and reminds everyone that what God has joined, ***“Human beings must not divide”***. Everything about the wedding calls attention to its public nature and its permanency. In another ancient tradition that continues to this day rings are blessed and exchanged as a sign of the couple’s love and fidelity. The ring is worn to announce to all that the two now form one family and are life-long partners.

What is part of the human condition from the beginning according to God’s creative plan – the coming together in a covenant for lifelong support and rearing of children – has been raised by Christ to the level of a Sacrament. The love that brings a couple together becomes a channel of grace. The marriage bond that they form in the exchange of marriage vows becomes an instrument of God’s salvific action among us. Thus, Marriage is viewed by the Church as a Sacrament at the service of communion. Not only does the individual who receives the Sacrament together with his or her spouse benefit from the Sacrament, but so too does the new reality they create – a family – and, through the family the community and the Church.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks of the goods and requirements of conjugal love highlighting the unity and indissolubility of Marriage, the fidelity of conjugal love, and its openness to fertility. We are reminded that the love of the spouses requires of its very nature, the unity and indissolubility of the spouses’ community of persons, which embraces their entire life. Such lifelong commitment in mutual support is a blessing that endures with each passing year while nevertheless requiring commitment, faithfulness, and sacrifice on the part of each of the spouses. The Catechism points out: ***“by its very nature conjugal love requires the inviolable fidelity of the spouses”***

(1646). This follows from the gift they make of themselves to each other that has to be definitive if it is to endure in the face of difficulties.

Finally, the Catechism addresses the openness to offspring with a quotation from the Vatican II document entitled the “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”: ***“ By its very nature the institution of marriage and married love is ordered to the procreation and education of the offspring and it is in them that it finds its crowning glory”*** (48). As the spouses come together to exchange vows publicly and to have their marriage witnessed and blessed by the Church, they form a family. With the passage

of time and the blessing of God, this family should grow stronger in love for God and one another. Their focus on love, faith, prayer and their spiritual communion reflect the very life of the Church itself. For this reason, we may refer to the family as the “domestic church”.

The Second Vatican Council revived the use of this ancient expression and calls the family “***ecclesia domestica***” (*Lumen Gentium*, 11). Following this line of thought, the Catechism points out: “***It is here that the father of the family, the mother, children, and all the members of the family exercise the priesthood of the baptized in a privileged way by the reception of the Sacraments, prayer and charity.***” (1657)

In a society witnessing the collapse of family life and the resulting unraveling of our social order, the Church’s teaching on the indissolubility of marriage and the obligation of parents to their children is a timely remedy. The family is under assault today because marriage is frequently discredited within our culture. As members of the Church, we are obliged to be all the more attentive to the challenges that weaken marriage as a social institution and an expression of God’s plan for the well-being of the human race. Divorce, temporary live-in arrangements, sexuality as a form of entertainment and the general diminishment of respect for the natural order of two-parent families all directly challenge the vision of family life revealed in Sacred Scripture, proclaimed by the Church, and experienced throughout our human history.

The Church firmly proclaims and has always taught that a sacramental marriage between Christians in which there has been true matrimonial consent and consummation is absolutely indissoluble except by the death of one of the partners. As a Sacrament recalling Christ’s undying love for the Church, it creates and expresses a binding tie that endures for life, no matter what happens between the spouses.

Since Marriage is a Sacrament that has important and highly visible social and ecclesiastical implications, it is carefully regulated by Church law. Church law guards the marriage state and determines if and how the Sacrament of Marriage can be administered. Since these laws touch the sacramental life of the Church – its core reality – they are not to be taken lightly.

The celebration of Marriage normally takes place within the Mass. In the liturgy of the Eucharist, in which salvation history rises to its climax, the newly married couple enters the sacramental source of the Paschal Mystery so as to “***eat this bread and drink this cup***” and to “***proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes***” (1 Corinthians 11:26). Here they find the pattern for their own married life. Even in ceremony, the Church seeks to enshrine and consecrate marriage by her most sublime possession, the mystery of faith.

In the human love that brings a woman and man to Marriage, we already hear God speaking to us of the beauty and fidelity of love, its transforming power, and its creative energy. In the Sacrament of Matrimony God speaks to us of the fullness of human love. Our limited experience of love is only a sign and beginning of a love that changes us into God’s children who share in His own wondrous and unending life of love. Christ’s love for the Church is the pattern for married life. “***Love one another as I have loved you***” (John 15:12).