

Sacrament of Marriage

The Sacrament

Although the definition and meaning of marriage vary depending on culture, country, religion, and historical time, in the Catholic Church marriage is a **sacrament** (also known as matrimony). Like the other six sacraments, it is a visible sign of an invisible grace—a privileged place to encounter God. So in the church's eyes, it is **much more than a civil and legal contract**.

The church recognizes and respects **civil marriages** that people enter into throughout the world, but differentiates these from sacramental marriage.

According to the church's definition, the sacrament of marriage is:

- ▶ **Life-long.** The partners enter with a commitment to stay together until death, not presuming they will simply divorce “if it doesn't work out.”
- ▶ **Exclusive.** The partners commit to faithfulness to each another and to sexual monogamy.
- ▶ **Between a man and a woman and open to children.** These long-held beliefs start with the creation stories in Genesis. God's first commandment tells man and woman to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28). Later we read that the man “clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). Early in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the formula of a man and a woman coming together to create children was set. Note that *all* married couples are called to fruitfulness in a wider sense, even if they have not yet had children or can't have biological children.
- ▶ **Entered into free from any outside pressures or fear.** This requirement might seem obvious, but it is still commonplace for couples to marry because of familial or societal pressure. This happens in cultures with arranged marriages, but it also happens in our own society to secure immigration status, to co-parent a baby that is on the way, to ease financial pressure for one or the other partners, etc.

▶ **Ordered toward the good of the spouses.** For a marriage to be sacramental, the partnership must benefit both the husband and wife. Remember, marriage is more than simply a legal contract in this way.

▶ **Between two baptized people.** The church respects civil marriages when one or both spouses are unbaptized. There is no fault in these. However, for a wedding to be celebrated as one of the seven sacraments, the partners must have already been initiated into the Christian community by baptism. The ceremony should take place in a church with a bishop, priest, or deacon as a witness, or the couple must receive permission to be married in another setting.

In the Image of God

The starting point for the Catholic Church's teaching on matters of sexuality and marriage is found in the **creation story** in the book of Genesis. God created the material world out of nothing, declaring everything he made “very good.” The climax was humankind. “In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27).

From the beginning, the Bible claims that **our physical bodies are good**. If we are made of body and spirit—and created in the image of God—then the flesh is not inherently evil or sinful such that we must subdue or escape it. In fact, we are called to use our bodies as beautiful expressions of our truest selves. One way that we can do that is through our sexuality.

Sexuality: A Wonderful Gift

When in the proper context, the church sees sexuality and marriage as a **good and holy thing**. The bishops teach that human sexuality is both a wonderful gift *and* an awesome responsibility. Our sexuality is to be celebrated and revered, not objectified or regarded as dirty or sinful. Nor should we be ashamed of, or apologetic about, our sexuality.

The church encourages sexual union within marriage as its proper context. Pope Francis reminds us that sexual intimacy is a “**path of growth** in the life of grace for the couple” (*Joy of Love*, 74). The Catechism notes that conjugal love includes body and spirit, instinct, feeling, and emotions aimed at a **deeply personal unity**. The church teaches that sex is important for bringing a married couple together and for possibly creating new life.

At the same time, church teaching reminds us that when sex is taken lightly, is used to dominate, possess, or control, or is closed off from human fruitfulness, then it is sinful. The **sinfulness** is a result of a rupture in the relationship among self, others, and God. This is not a judgment against the pleasure or beauty of sexuality. Church teachings are trying to preserve the goodness of this gift and are calling us to use it for good in the world.

In a time with casual attitudes toward sex, the church remains steadfast in promoting exclusive, life-long, marriage commitments as the **most fulfilling and joyful** way to be in a healthy sexual relationship.

The Purpose of Marriage

The sacrament of marriage is a **vocation**, a particular way of living out the call to be a Christian disciple. Marriage is not just about what the couple gets out of the relationship, but about how the couple will serve others and bring Christ to others.

In marriage, God brings together two people to **change the world**, making it a better place. By bringing together their gifts, talents, and lives, God makes the sum greater than the parts. Through marriage, two people shift from having individual calls as Christians to being called *together*. This requires setting aside individual desires, and at times, sacrificing in order to best follow that common call. How each couple is called to help bring about God's kingdom is unique and distinctive.

As with all sacraments, marriage **bears fruit** for the individuals receiving the sacrament, for the church, and for the world.

Celebrating the Sacrament

Most people assume that the presiding priest or deacon ministers the sacrament of marriage, but that is not actually the case. In fact, it is **the couple who ministers the sacrament** to each other while the presider acts as a witness. The two become Christ for each other in a special way.

The Ideal vs. the Real

We know that there is a difference between our hopes and ideals, on the one hand, and our **lived reality** on the other. Pope Francis has consistently reminded bishops, priests, and other church leaders to respond with compassion and understanding to those who cannot or are not living up to the “ideal” of a sacramental marriage as defined by Catholic teaching.

In real life, some people have affairs, use artificial contraception, use sex to control others, have same sex partners, and get divorced. The pope knows these things are a reality and that they always will be. While he wants to uphold the ideals of sacramental marriage and the values behind them, he also reminds us of **Jesus' mercy and compassion** for people who fell short of the religious ideals of his time, even—and perhaps most especially—in the sexual mores of the day. If the Lord responded with mercy and compassion to such people, we are called to refrain from judgment of others and do the same.

Dig deeper: CCC: #1601-1666; CCA: Chapter 21; *Our Catholic Life*: Book 5, Session 7; *The Joy of Love* (*Amoris Laetitia*).

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