

RCIA CLASS 16 – THE SACRAMENT AND VOCATION OF MARRIAGE

I. There is a universal call to holiness, and marriage is the vocation through which most people live out that call.

A. Jesus called all people to nothing less than perfection. See, e.g., Matt. 5:20, 48.

1. St. Paul begins most of his letters by referring to the people as “the holy ones” or the “ones called to be holy.” See, e.g., Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; Phil. 1:1.

2. The Catechism and the Vatican II Council both affirm this universal call to holiness. See, e.g., Catechism 2013; Vatican II Council, Gaudium et Spes (1965) 40.

B. Marriage is a call for a couple to help each other, their children, and the world along this path to holiness.

1. Marriage reflects God’s covenant with us, and finally the relationship between Christ and His Church. See, e.g., Eph. 5:32.

2. We become more sons and daughters of God by learning how to love, by learning love in truth, for God is love. See 1 John 4:7. Marriage helps the couple to grow into that love, and then to raise children in that context.

3. As the Vatican II Council and the Catechism state, every family is a domestic church, in which the faith is first learned, lived, and show forth to the world. See, Vatican II Council, Lumen Gentium (1965) 11; Catechism 1655-58

a. There is one universal Church, but that Church is also reflected in specific churches, in each nation, in each diocese, in each parish, and in each family. Every Catholic family should reflect and embody the Church.

b. As Jesus promised that He would be with the Church and see the Church through all things, see, e.g., Matt. 16:18, 28:20, so he promises every couple married in His name that He will be with them and see them through all things.

II. God established marriage at the beginning of humanity for the sake of the husband and wife, for the sake of the children, and for the sake of society.

A. God Himself established three institutions on this earth: (1) the Chosen People of Old; (2) the Church; and (3) marriage.

1. At the beginning, God brought Eve to Adam to help him overcome his loneliness, or difficulty in love. Adam brought structure by naming the animals, while Eve brought love to Adam. See Gen. 1:26-28, 2:18-24.

2. However, with Fall, the primordial order was upset, and corruptions entered in. Even among the Chosen People, polygamy and divorce were allowed, although discouraged. See, e.g., Duet. 24:1-4; Mal. 2:14-17.

3. People still understood the goodness of marriage, although that understanding was limited. The Song of Songs, the Books of Ruth and Tobit, and some of the psalms, especially Psalm 45, would be a celebration of marriage among the Chosen People. See also Sir. 26:1-4, 13-18; Prov. 31:10-31. Many of the rabbis interpreted the Song of Songs to be an image of the love between God and His people. For God had often used that marriage imagery to describe the relationship between Him and His people. See, e.g., Is. 54:1-10; Hos. 3:1-3

B. When Christ came to restore all things, He brought marriage back to her primordial sanctity.

1. First, unlike Adam, He was born into a human family, the First Family of the New Creation, and thus brought blessings to all families. This Holy Family is meant to be a model for all Christian families. See Catechism 533 (quoting a 1976 homily of Pope Paul VI on the Feast of the Holy Family.)

2. Christ's first miracle was at the wedding feast of Cana, reflecting His desire to begin His public ministry by blessing a couple at the dawn of their married life together. See John 2:1-11.

3. Starting with the Sermon on the Mount, Christ made it clear that He had an authority Moses did not have, the ability to restore marriage back to her primordial sanctity and permanence. See Matt. 5:31-32, 19:1-9; Mark 10:2-12. And thus He forbade divorce, saying, "What God has joined, let no man tear asunder." Mark 10:9.

C. But, as with all things, Jesus not only restored, but sanctified the gift of marriage. In particular, He raised marriage to a higher level than before, making the institution an image of the love between Him and His church.

1. John the Baptist had described Jesus as the Bridegroom, and Jesus Himself used this imagery. See Matt. 9:14-15; Mark 2:19-20; John 3:29.

2. As the letter to the Ephesians and the Book of Revelation make clear, the Church is the Bride of Christ, and at the end of all things, there will be a never-ending wedding feast of the Lamb. See Eph. 5:21-33; Rev. 19:6-9, 21:1-3, 9-11.

D. Thus, marriage is, to this day, not only a sacred institution that establishes the most fundamental natural bond in society, but also for Christians a sacrament that commissions each couple to establish a "domestic church" and uphold and advance the call to holiness for each other, their children, and all the world. See Catechism 1617, 2204.

III. The institution of marriage is based upon the fact that man and woman reflect God's love and creative goodness in complementary ways, and in love join together to glorify God and bring His kingdom to earth in pure and total love.

A. "The respective perfections of man and woman reflect something of the infinite perfections of God: those of a mother and those of a father and husband." Catechism 370. "God created man in His image; in the divine image He created him; male and female, He created them." Genesis 1:27.

B. One's expression of masculinity or femininity is an essential part of the person's response to this role of reflecting God's creative love. "Sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul. It especially concerns the capacity to love and procreate, and in a more general way the aptitude to form bonds of communion with others." Catechism 2332.

- The way in which a person lives out his masculinity or femininity either reflects God's creative glory or blurs it. "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" 1 Cor. 6:19-20. As C.S. Lewis points out in his book Perelandra, as there is a complementarity of harmony and melody in music, rhyme and meter in poetry, and the like there is a complementarity to humanity and in all of creation. See Perelandra (1944) ch. 16. Blessed Pope John Paul II made a similar point in his talks in the theology of the body that are now collected in book form. See Pope John Paul II, Theology of the Body (1986) 8:1; 10:1-4.

C. One's vocation (e.g., married couples, priests, nuns, brothers) is a most basic way in which one lives out that call to show forth God's love. "Strengthened by so many and such great means of salvation, all the faithful, whatever their condition or state are called by the Lord . . . to that perfect holiness by which the Father Himself is perfect." Vatican II Council, Lumen Gentium (1963) 11.

D. Chastity in any state of life leads people to have full command of their lives so that they can reflect God's love and glory more perfectly. "The chaste person maintains the integrity of the powers of life and love placed in him. . . Chastity leads him who practices it to become a witness to his neighbor of God's fidelity and loving kindness." Catechism 2338, 2346.

IV. The essential requirement of married life (complementarity between men and women, permanence, fidelity, openness to children, and a complete commitment of life) reflect this call of married couples to give of themselves totally in love for the glory of God and salvation of the world. Marriage is thus an image of the union between God and His people. "Conjugal love reveals its true nature and nobility when it is considered in its supreme origin, God, who is love, the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named." Pope Paul VI, Humanae Vitae (1968) 8.

A. Marriage is often presented in Scripture as an image of God's relationship with His people. "For the Lord delights in you and makes your land His spouse. As a young man marries a virgin, your Builder shall marry you; and as a bridegroom rejoices in His bride,

so shall your God rejoice in you.” Isaiah 62:4-5. Christian marriage in particular is a deep image of Christ’s relationship with His Church. “In virtue of the sacrament of Matrimony, by which they signify and share in the mystery of the unity and fruitful love between Christ and the Church, Christian married couples help one another to attain holiness in their married lives and in accepting and educating their children.” Lumen Gentium 11. Thus, St. Paul says, “Husbands love your wives even as Christ loved the Church and handed himself over for her.” Eph. 5:25.

B. By bringing to each other the complementarity goodness of masculinity and femininity, a married couple brings completeness to each other and to God’s creation. Blessed Pope John Paul II continually reiterated this theme. For example, at the end of his talks on the theology of the Body, he said that the majesty and glory of conjugal life “can be realized only through a deep understanding of both the feminine and masculine “I” in reciprocal life.” Theology of the Body 132:4.

C. Because marriage reflects the deep love of God for His people, it is faithful and exclusive until death. “Seeing God’s covenant with Israel in the image of exclusive and faithful married love, the prophets prepared the Chosen People’s conscience for a deepened understanding of the unity and indissolubility of marriage.” Catechism 1611. “What God has joined together, no human being must separate.” Matt. 19:6; Mark 10:9.

- Consequently, a Christian marriage cannot be dissolved by divorce even if there is a separation. “Love seeks to be definitive; it cannot be an arrangement ‘until further notice.’ The intimate union of marriage as a mutual giving of two persons and the good of children demands total fidelity from the spouses and requires an unbreakable union between them.” Catechism 1646. As C.S. Lewis notes in Mere Christianity, by insisting on permanence in marriage, Christianity is not imposing on marriage anything from the outside, but is rather affirming the promise of permanent commitment that people in love naturally wish to make. See Mere Christianity (1952) Book II ch. 6.

D. Because divine love is creative of life, married love must be open to life. “God blessed man and woman with these words, ‘Be fruitful and multiply.’ Hence true married love and the whole structure of family life which results from it, without diminishment of the other ends of marriage, are directed to the disposing the spouses to cooperate valiantly with the love of the Creator and Savior, who through them will increase and enrich His family.” Catechism 1652; Vatican II Council, Gaudium et Spes (1965) 50.

- “Spouses to whom God has not given children can nevertheless have a conjugal life full of meaning. . . Their marriage can radiate a fruitfulness of charity, of hospitality, and of sacrifice.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 1654.

E. Marital love is total, for it involves love for the other person completely, not merely for most natural aspects of the other person. “This love is total, that is to say it is a very special form of personal friendship, in which husband and wife generously share everything, without undue reservation or selfish calculation.” Pope Paul VI, Humanae Vitae 9.

- Because it excludes the fertility of the other person, and because it uses mere

technology, rather than self-discipline, to prevent conception of new life, artificial contraception is gravely contrary to conjugal love. “The innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language, namely that of not giving oneself totally to the other. This leads not only to a positive refusal to be open to life but also to a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 2370; John Paul II, Familiaris Consortio (1981) 32.

F. Because they express the total, faithful, and fruitful love of marriage, conjugal acts are rightful only in marriage and are gravely wrong outside of marriage because they diminish the meaning of conjugal love. “To use this divine gift destroying, even if only partially, its meaning and its purpose is to contradict the nature both of man and of woman and their most intimate relationship and therefore it is to contradict also the plan of God and His will.” Paul VI, Humanae Vitae 13.