



Marriage Is God's Plan

My parents celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary with their four sons, four daughters and spouses. There were lots of laughs and tears as we shared stories of family life. It was a beautiful opportunity to reflect on the importance of marriage as the foundation of their many years together as husband and wife. One thing that stood out for me was that my parents lived out their marriage vows as a team, united with their desire for themselves and their children to ultimately be with God forever in heaven. As you can imagine, their eight children would have literally divided and conquered if my parents had not been unified in their priorities as husband and wife.



ANN LANKFORD
 Director of the Office for
 Catechesis and Evangelization

It is helpful, at this point, to mention a practical definition of marriage: Marriage is two incompatible people making a commitment to spend the rest of their lives together, which will always include conflict, in such a way that both persons are able to grow mentally, emotionally and spiritually. My parents, being a joyful team, understood this definition, which led to the longevity of their marriage. And they realized, first and foremost, that the “glue” that held them together and strengthened them for the duties of married life was the grace given through the sacrament of matrimony. Christ gave the Church this sacrament because He knew the seemingly impossible difficulty for a man and

woman to live a perpetual and exclusive union.

Even though living out the sacrament of matrimony will have its struggles, authentic love is at the heart of Christian marriage. We know this to be true because man and woman are created by God for love, as they are created in the image and likeness of God who is love. It is a beautiful thing when God tells us in Scripture it is not good for a man or woman to be alone. (cf. Gn. 2:18) Marriage is God's idea. God designed man and woman in an equal and complementary way so that those called to this vocation may enter into a total, faithful, fruitful and life-long union of marriage.

Love has many layers of meaning and so an explanation of the term regarding marriage is essential. The Christian definition of love is “to will the good of another person.” (CCC #1766) In marriage, this means to hope for and to actively seek what is good for one's spouse. This component of sacrificial love involves a person giving of themselves in service to their spouse, in helping the other in whatever way is needed with a charitable attitude. Sacrificial love includes even making decisions to forgo certain things over time that a husband or wife would personally prefer but is willing to give up out of love for their spouse.

“The mutual love of spouses becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man.” (CCC #1604) The Apostle Paul helps us to understand the very origin of spousal love, which comes from Christ who gave Himself for us



without reserve. Jesus died on the cross, sacrificing all of Himself for the sake of the Church, which is referred to as the Bride of Christ. St. Paul explains this truth: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her.” (Eph. 5:25-26) St. Paul then adds, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one. This is a great mystery and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church.” (Eph. 5:31-32) In sacramental marriage, what God the Father is giving to the couple is the amazing gift of participating in His own Son’s spousal love for the Church. As the Bridegroom, Jesus offered everything for His Bride, the Church, which is made up of you and me and everyone who has received baptism. Christ’s identity as the Bridegroom, and His enduring faithfulness that He will never leave His Bride, have implications for marriage. The first implication is the indissolubility of marriage, that husband and wife are to follow the example of the Bridegroom, to be committed and faithful for life. The second implication

is that, with the help of God’s grace, the union of husband and wife is not a burden that is too heavy or impossible to maintain.

Of course, spouses need the help of God’s grace to live the high calling of sacrificial love in this mutual commitment for life. Grace is the power of the Holy Spirit in us to do what we, in and of ourselves, are not able to do on our own. Grace sets us free; to live free, in and through God. “This grace proper to the Sacrament of matrimony is intended to perfect the couple’s love and to strengthen their indissoluble unity.” (CCC #1641) By cooperating with this grace, spouses help one another to attain holiness—through practicing self-giving love—in their married life and in welcoming and forming their children in the Catholic Faith to know and love Jesus.

“*Christ is the source of this grace [through His death on the Cross]. ‘... Our Savior, the spouse of the Church, now encounters Christian spouses through the Sacrament of Matrimony.’ Christ dwells with them, gives them the strength to take up their crosses and so follow Him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another,*

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to bear one another’s burdens, to ‘be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ,’ and to love one another with supernatural, tender, and fruitful love.” (CCC #1642)

Jesus showed us the depths of His love through His suffering and death on the cross. In other words, love and suffering are deeply connected. In the same way, Christian marriage also involves love and suffering, and so we can say that the life shared by husband and wife is deeply connected to the cross. And the fruit of being connected to the cross is living with ever greater self-giving love: “The more you love when your spouse suffers, you suffer with them; the more you suffer on their behalf, the more capacity you have to love.” (See “*Jesus the Bridegroom: The Greatest Love Story Ever Told*,” by Dr. Brant Pitre) “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. This grace of Christian marriage is a fruit of Christ’s cross, the source of all Christian life.” (CCC #1615)

There is also great hope here as Jesus Christ rose from the dead. We can live the joy of the resurrection. As all adults know, living out whichever

vocation we are called to has its ups and downs. Along with the difficulties and trials in the case of marriage, there are also times of great joy and love shared between the spouses and within their family.

It is crucial that spouses continue to work at keeping their marriage fresh and interesting. This is hard for us, as we can become bored and see only weaknesses and faults. To hold things in proper perspective, continue to be thankful for your spouse. Look at them with fresh eyes each day by making a simple list of things for which you are thankful, such as my spouse is funny, told a good story, loves our children, works hard to keep our home orderly, cooks a nourishing meal, etc. Try this for 40 days and you will be amazed at the renewal that will take place in your heart.

Always remember that it takes three persons to make a good marriage. What does this mean? No one can live out this vocation without Christ at the center of their marriage. Husband, wife and most importantly, the Person of Christ working in, through and with the couple, brings a foretaste of the joy of heaven—that “joy unspeakable and full of glory” that we have been promised in Him. †



Helpful Resources

- *Three to Get Married* by Archbishop Fulton Sheen (book)
- *You. Life, Love and the Theology of the Body*, Ascension Press (DVD Series)
- *Jesus The Bridegroom: The Greatest Love Story Ever Told*, Dr. Brant Pitre (book)