



Marriage: Sacrament of Enduring Love

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The Grandeur of the Christian Vocation

The Second Vatican Council, and later Pope John Paul II, expressed in marvelous terms Catholic teaching about the identity and mission of the Lord Jesus Christ: “Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling.”¹ The Son of God who was made flesh sought to reveal one principal thing about our most high calling, the sublimity of our vocation: we are called to love in truth, to love in a way that participates in and reflects the love of the Father.

Everyone desires to love and to be loved. However, sin has caused in us a

kind of loss of memory, a forgetfulness about the dimensions of that divine love which God desires to be the cause of our joy. Beholding the person and mission of the Lord Jesus, we can recapture our sense of who we are and to what dignity of love we are called. This teaching can help guide our meditation on the Sacrament of Marriage.

Christ Jesus: Revelation and Actual Fountain of the Love of God

Faith believes in the love God has shown to us on the Cross and thus sees in the Cross the truth about the love of God for us. God has sought us out so as to unite himself to us; the Lord has set aside his own interest in order to seek our good. As St. Paul says in his Letter to the Philippians, “He emptied himself” (Phil 2:7). On the Cross, Christ Jesus offers his very self to God the Father on our behalf. By this extreme expression of love that gives to the point of death, he provokes in us the grace to see clearly what the love of God is about: the love of God is a donation of self without reserve, a total handing over, a gift freely offered, and an offering that

1 Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, no. 22, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1996). See also Pope John Paul II, *On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering (Salvifici Doloris)*, no. 31.

generates new and divine life in the world.

This gift is a renewing mystery that heals and elevates us to a real participation in the love of God. This means that, by this grace, we seek to love *even as Christ Jesus has loved us*. This love with which Christ Jesus has loved us, and by which we seek to love in return, continues to be the living fount of the Christian life and is wondrously offered to us as nourishment in the Eucharistic Sacrifice. And as St. Paul says in his Letter to the Ephesians, in Christian marriage, a great sign of this love is shown forth to the world (see 5:32).

Christian Marriage: Sign of the New Covenant

We affirm that the Lord elevated marriage to the status of a sign of the new covenant established by God through the Blood of his Son. In this sense, the Lord instituted the Sacrament of Matrimony. In point of fact, considered as a natural sign, marriage was instituted with the creation of the man and the woman; it was inscribed in nature itself. Neither the man nor the woman was created to be self-sufficient; on the contrary, the differences between them point to their complementary relationship: "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body" (Gn 2:24). From the beginning, marriage implied an intimate union between the man and the woman, and it implied an irrevocable commitment between them. The prophetic tradition of the Old Testament highlighted these two senses of the sign inscribed in the creation of the

man and the woman; the prophets emphasized in this way the truth about God's intimate and faithful relation to his people, Israel. We see this, for example, in the book of the prophet Hosea.

The presence of the Lord Jesus at the Wedding at Cana (see Jn 2) underlines with great force the importance of marriage as a sign that helps us understand the mission of Jesus. God comes in person to seal his covenant of enduring and fruitful love with his people. Further, Jesus often referred to himself using the figure of a groom preparing for the wedding (see Mt 22; Mk 2:18-20) or that of a groom who has returned from a long journey (see Mt 25). All of this points to the truth that Jesus Christ is the true bridegroom preparing himself for the marriage feast of his beloved bride, the Church. Christian tradition affirms that the marriage feast of the Lord Jesus with his Church was celebrated when he gave himself up for her on the Cross (see Eph 5:25).

Marriage: A Great Mystery

From this perspective, we can see better the roots of the Lord's teaching about the indissoluble character of marriage. The preaching of the Lord had the effect of making clearer the teaching of the Old Testament. Although Moses had permitted a man to leave his wife so as to marry another, the Lord says no to this: "I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) and marries another commits adultery" (Mt 19:9). The commitment of love between a man and a woman reflects the irrevocable covenant between God and his people.

In his Letter to the Ephesians 5:31-32, St. Paul teaches that Christian marriage has a special form so as to be a visible manifestation of the love of Christ: “For this reason a man shall leave [his] father and [his] mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church.” St. Paul thus teaches that Christian marriage becomes a sacrament (“a great mystery”) showing forth openly what is contained in the mystery of Christ’s love. The relation between husband and wife both participates in and reflects the relation between Christ and his Church. If we want to know the distinguishing marks of Christian marriage, we have only to contemplate the distinguishing marks of the love of Christ revealed in the Gospel. Likewise, if one wants to see an example of what we mean by the love of Christ, one could look to how this love is reflected in the married life of Christians.

Marriage: A Concrete Sign

The love of Jesus, as we have seen, shows itself in ways quite concrete and clearly distinguishable. The love of Christ for us, for his Church, is an intimate union of generous love, it is an enduring love, and it is a fruitful love. I would like to take each of these three aspects of the love of Christ, and point out their correlation with marriage as an exceptional sign of this love present in the world.

A Generous Love

The testimony given by couples living the Sacrament of Marriage is a concrete testimony. The grace given

by God does not operate in another world; it operates in daily life. Life is a journey and a daily struggle. The love of Christ accompanies us on this road and aids us in this struggle, giving us new strength to encounter in our “today” the joy that Christ showed forth as he gave himself freely for the life of the world. The Lord himself speaks of this: “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. . . . love one another as I love you” (Jn 15:11-12). Daily, a husband dedicates himself generously to the good of his wife, and she dedicates herself daily to his good. This generosity is an expression of the intimate union between themselves, and it shows itself in their daily sacrifices. Above all, this generous love shows itself in their ability to forgive one another. The marital union creates for the couple a road that leads to sanctity, because sanctity consists in our participation in the generous love of Christ Jesus.

An Enduring Love

The marriage commitment is notable for being an enduring commitment. Love sealed with fidelity calls us out of our selfishness. Faithfulness to the marital commitment is one of those aspects of Christian marriage most difficult for the modern world to understand, and for this reason, it is an aspect that takes on greater importance in our times. A world that is losing confidence in the possibility of a faithful and enduring love needs living signs of this reality. This is a mission that the Lord confides in a particular way to married couples. The happiness that is lived in the midst of a faithful and freely generous

marital commitment calls us all to remember our better aspirations; it invites those who are disheartened to have new hope. In this sense, the Sacrament of Marriage contains within itself an evangelizing mission.

A Fruitful Love

Marital love is a fruitful love. As St. Augustine would often say, Christ Jesus, by means of his sacrifice, that is, the flow of his Blood, generates new life on the earth. This means that the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross brought forth the life of the Church. We are the fruits of Christ's generous love. In just such a way, the enduring love between a man and a woman is destined for the generation of new life. This new life shows itself ordinarily in the bringing forth of children; this is a mystery of life that requires the cooperation of the man and the woman with the providential will of God. The presence of children in a family is a great blessing, calling the couple to a new experience of generosity and fidelity expressed in the daily care they give for the lives of their children.

God is the Lord of Life, and we desire to live always with an openness to receive this gift. Nevertheless, it is sometimes the case that for various physical reasons, not all marriages are blessed with children. But all married couples are still destined to live a life of generosity and spiritual fruitfulness. Married couples live not only for themselves but for the good of others. We hear this in one of the blessings given at the end of the wedding Mass: "May you always bear witness to the love of God in this world so that the afflicted and the needy will find in you generous friends and welcome you into the joys of heaven" (*Rite of Marriage*, no. 125).

An Invitation

The Lord invites us all, whether married or not, to contemplate the generous, faithful, and fruitful love made visible in Christian married life, so that we might perceive through this sign what the love of God is about. And by means of this grace of seeing, we are strengthened to follow with greater courage our most high calling, that *sublime vocation to love in truth*, revealed to us in the person and mission of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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