



A Model for the Immediate Catechesis for the Sacrament of Marriage

By Dominic Lombardi, MA, STL, Director

Family Life Office, Archdiocese of Philadelphia

Introduction

In his apostolic exhortation *On the Family* (*Familiaris Consortio* [FC]), Pope John Paul II made the following statement, which can serve as the mission statement for the immediate catechesis for the Sacrament of Marriage.

The very preparation for Christian marriage is itself a journey of faith. It is a special opportunity for the engaged to rediscover and deepen the faith received in baptism and nourished by their Christian upbringing. In this way they come to recognize and freely accept their vocation to follow Christ and to serve the kingdom of God in the married state. (no. 51 [Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), 1982])

Several questions quickly surface. How can the Church prepare and accompany the couple along this journey? What is the Church's

responsibility toward the engaged person, and what is the engaged person's responsibility to the Church? In today's culture of individualism and the fracturing of the institution of marriage, how does one awaken and strengthen faith? How does the Church help the couple to embrace the fullness of this mystery that is marriage, a mystery that is to be a sign of God's love to the world?

This brief reflection proposes that the vows themselves provide us with the form that marriage preparation takes in its immediate phase, that is, "the months and weeks immediately preceding the wedding" (FC, no. 66).

The Vows as the Logic of the Theology of Marriage

Although Christian marriage has many facets, its core identity shapes the content and form of catechesis for the Sacrament of Marriage. This core is God, who is love and who calls the engaged to share in his love through their love for each other. As God's love for us is faithful, enduring, and fruitful,

so is the love between a man and woman in marriage, whose spousal love in turn is a sign (sacrament) of God's love to the world. Hence, catechesis about the Sacrament of Marriage is fundamentally about the dimensions, signs, expressions, and movement of authentic love. As Pope Benedict XVI stated in *God Is Love (Deus Caritas Est)*, "God's way of loving becomes the measure of human love" (no. 11 [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006]).

The vows—and the goods of marriage that they affirm (fidelity, permanence, openness to fertility)—identify the very heart of what marriage preparation is about. This theology of marriage informs the other categories of marriage preparation, which traditionally have also included communication, sexual intimacy, and spirituality. Although all of these categories are important, they often are addressed as separate topics. What informs and unifies them is the logic of the vows, which is the logic of self-giving love. This is the theological foundation on which marriage preparation needs to build.

Communicating Love

Communication is one of the areas that most interests engaged couples when they come to marriage preparation. In this context, communication is understood as practical skills in how to be a good listener, express oneself clearly, have an argument, and so on. All of these skills are important. However, in the end, they are about communicating something deeper: true love, which redeems and fulfills. Hence, at its foundation, a communication talk to

the engaged couple addresses the theological reality of what it means to be open to each other in truth and love, and what this looks like concretely in the couple's relationship. A place to turn for this catechesis is Genesis 2:24-25: "And the two of them become one body. The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame." Here, communication is a stance of giving and receiving the gift of self. It is the stance of loving the other in light of his or her authentic fulfillment in Jesus Christ, who said, "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (Jn 10:10). An avenue to pursue with the engaged couple is to break open the Word of God by reading the passage describing Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:7-42). In his dialogue with the woman, Jesus reveals that love always seeks communion (fidelity), is rooted in the truth (permanence), and seeks most abundant life (fruitfulness).

Sexual Intimacy and the Vocation to Chastity

It is this same paradigm that provides the framework for addressing a topic that is sometimes given short shrift in marriage preparation: sexuality. This is an area within our contemporary culture that has been profoundly warped by the focus on autonomy and self-centeredness. It is no wonder that sexuality has become such a source of woundedness in many people's lives. The Church's message in regard to sexuality and marriage is not about antiquated rules, but about loving one another in truth. Hence, the Church's message is an expression of authentic freedom. The word that best describes

this teaching is “chastity,” an excellent definition of which we find in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

Chastity means the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being. Sexuality, in which man’s belonging to the bodily and biological world is expressed, becomes personal and truly human when it is integrated into the relationship of one person to another, in the complete and lifelong mutual gift of a man and a woman. The virtue of chastity therefore involves the integrity of the person and the integrity of the gift. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana-USCCB, 2000], no. 2337)

To be chaste means to love another in the truth of the meaning of the body. It seeks the fulfillment of the person and never reduces another to be a means to an end. For the engaged couple, this means abstaining from sexual union until they are married. Far from impoverishing their relationship, this abstinence enriches it. First, it affirms the truth that the couple is not yet married. This is essential to the couple’s freedom in discerning the call to the vocation of marriage. Second, chastity as abstinence before marriage protects the truth of the language of the body, that is, the link between sexual union and procreation. Third, it strengthens permanence, in that it leaves space in the relationship for the foundation of friendship to be established, a friendship that will

endure the ups and downs of married life. In the end, chastity is about placing one’s whole self—body and soul, lifestyle and choices—at the service of the Lord. It looks to Christ, in whom is found the fulfillment of chastity and who, in his union with the Church, is the model of unitive and fruitful love.

Spirituality as Identity in God Who Is Love

In the deeper sense of the term, all the dimensions of marriage preparation are about spirituality. In this context, spirituality is not primarily about personal preferences regarding prayer and how this affects one’s betrothed, but about one’s identity in relationship to God. (Although an individual’s prayer life is important, the sad reality is that many couples don’t pray at all.) Spirituality addresses the deep issues of who one is, what is life’s meaning, and how one is to live in light of his or her response to these fundamental questions.

Within marriage preparation, the spiritual identity of the couple can be addressed through the image of the domestic Church. Who they are as a married couple is to be a sacrament of Christ’s union with the Church and, hence, a sign of unitive and fruitful love. Their origin is that of the *imago Dei*. (Note here the genealogy of the person; see Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, no. 9.) Through Baptism, they became members of the family of God. Their destiny is marked by the horizon of the Kingdom of God and the marriage feast of the Lamb. It is this identity that shapes the spirituality of Christian marriage and in which they are called to be a eucharistic

community gathered around the Lord in the home and in the eucharistic celebration of the Mass (hence the significance of celebrating marriage in the context of the Mass). Marriage preparation then should call and model to the engaged couple this spirituality of marriage, encouraging the couple to attend Sunday Mass and to seek the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and assist the couple in finding simple and effective ways to pray together. The parish community invites the engaged couple to join in the prayer and worship of the parish that is to be the couple's spiritual home.

Freedom for Mission

One of the realities encountered in marriage preparation is the contemporary understanding of freedom. For many engaged couples, freedom aligns with individual desire or choice: that is, preference. Church teaching on marriage is seen as one option among many—and an out-of-date one at that. The challenge and opportunity of marriage preparation are to present the proposal of the goods of marriage (fidelity, permanence, and children) as the fulfillment of the couple's freedom, which is a freedom for the good. With God's grace, these goods not only are possible, but also are at the very heart of spousal happiness.

One need only point to the profound unhappiness that the contemporary notion of freedom (license) and marriage (self-serving) has brought about. This provides the opportunity to shed a bright light on the Church's vision of marriage and family, especially in the joy and happiness of couples who have embraced this vision. What can hold couples back is fear, a fear that emanates from their experiences of fragmentation, marital failure in their families of origin, alienation, abuse, and other issues. The antidote to this fear is the experience of communion. Hence, marriage preparation must be an experience of communion with the Church. Without this experience, which embodies the Church's vision of marriage, family, and community, the Church's teaching remains abstract and ineffective.

Ultimately, the goal of marriage preparation is to guide the gaze of the engaged couples to Christ where they find their identity as sons and daughters. Seeing him, they find his love intertwined with theirs. In communion with him they can "be not afraid" and put out into the deep (see Lk 5:4) of faithful, fruitful, and enduring love.

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