

Marriage: Gift from God
A Pastoral Letter
Most Reverend W. Francis Malooly
Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Wilmington

God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and God said to them: "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:27-28).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines marriage simply: "The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament."

These few lines from the Bible and the authoritative teaching the Catholic Church summarize the meaning of marriage. Marriage is created by God for the good of spouses and the procreation and education of children. When two baptized people marry this fundamental institution becomes a holy sacrament. If we understand these simple facts we will know the good and the blessing of marriage and understand why it must be cherished and defended.

The Church believes that marriage like all of God's creation has a meaning. This meaning is revealed to us in Scripture and tradition, but its meaning is known to all persons of good will through the right use of reason. Marriage exists in every human culture because it is fundamental to human society. Humanity is hard wired for marriage.

From the beginning of the Bible the Church learns the meaning of marriage and human sexuality. God created both. Sexuality and marriage are created for one another; the man and the woman are created for one another. Human sexual differences are an aspect of the image of God that we bear.

At the very least every human culture recognizes that the sexual instincts and sexual appetites of human beings need to be channeled and that children who result from sexual relationships between men and women need to be cared for and nurtured. This wisdom was not achieved easily and human sinfulness always challenges and weakens it. Still, the truth about marriage is not undone by human sin and human folly. It remains what it is – a gift of God to men and women, the ultimate expression of love between husband and wife, for the survival and the blessing of the entire human race.

Marriage is a unique and exclusive relationship between one man and one woman. It is not merely a private institution. Marriage is the foundation for family, where children learn the values and virtues that will make them good and productive people. The importance of marriage for children highlights the importance of marriage for all of society.

Marriage thus belongs to all peoples but in the Church it is additionally valued as a Sacrament, a means of God's saving grace. Marriage is nothing less than a participation in the covenant between Christ and the Church. Simply and gloriously, the grace of marriage assists husband and wife on their way to final salvation. The grace of marriage also strengthens them for their responsibility in the beautiful vocation of child bearing and child rearing and the very real challenges of sharing their lives amidst a culture that militates against permanence.

As Christians we need to remember that the meaning of marriage is not determined by romantic love. While romance is part of the relationship between husband and wife, the foundation of any marriage is the gift of total self to another promised in the solemn vows on the wedding day and lived day by day, year by year. This understanding will help us to better understand and resist contemporary assaults on marriage. Romantic love is important but it is not our feelings that constitute marriage. If it were, marriage would disappear when feelings change, as it too often does for our contemporaries.

Marriage is constituted by the vows that couples take and sexual activity appropriate to the generation of children. Those vows include a promise to love one other. That is a promise to live in sacrificial self-giving, not to feel a certain way. Feelings may ebb and flow, but the command to love one another endures. If married couples place that Christ-like value at the heart of their marriage, the feelings will endure. Without such a sacrificial commitment the volatility of human emotions will corrode the marriage bond. Romantic love can only bloom in the soil of authentic sacrificial love.

One good way to step back from the romanticism and emotionalism that confuse our modern ideas of marriage is to look at St. Augustine's reflections on the three goods of marriage. Sixteen centuries ago he described them with three Latin words: *proles*, *fides*, and *sacramentum*.

Proles means offspring and refers to the good of procreation. The marital union reflects the unity of the triune God; in transmitting human life couples participate in God's creative and sustaining work. He allows us to pass on his own gift of life.

Fides means faith or faithfulness and refers to the blessing of fidelity and exclusiveness and to the joy, security, and goodness of mutual commitment. The marriage bond echoes the love among the persons of the Trinity and the love of God for the world and the Church, the bride of Christ.

Sacramentum refers of course to the graced sacramental bond. The bond is a blessing in itself, protecting the couple from impermanence and uncertainty. The sacramental bond does not restrict freedom; it creates it. And it nourishes not just the couple but the entire community of both the world and the Church.

We live in a society in which these good purposes of marriage are not well understood. We live in a society that has driven wedges between sex, marriage, and procreation – a

society that has separated what God has joined together. We live in a society that has increasingly embraced the notion that marriage is about adult life-style choices. Many have forgotten that children are its most precious fruit and an essential part of its meaning. Children contribute “very substantially to the welfare of their parents” in the words of the Second Vatican Council. In a world that tends to see children as an economic burden or a life-style choice, the Council reminds us of the joy and humanizing challenge that children bring to adults. In caring for children adults gain not only love and affection but high purpose and growth in character.

If unrestrained romanticism damages marriage so also does its opposite – the individualism, isolation, and plain selfishness of our era. Out of fear or because of the pursuit of other goals fewer people are marrying. This has led to a host of often unrecognized problems, not least of which is the withholding of the gift of new life. Living according to God’s design for life and love does not mean that couples cannot plan their families. They can do so in moral and responsible ways. But fear of marriage and parenthood and the relentless pursuit of pleasure and economic advancement threaten authentic happiness and the fabric and future of society itself.

Although it is squeezed between romanticism and individualism and threatened by challenges to its God-given meaning and purpose, marriage remains the gift that God intends. It remains a pre-eminent blessing, and it is the state of life to which God calls the vast majority of people.

Thus the Church is called to defend and foster marriage, to strengthen the lives of married couples, and when necessary to remind the state in simple terms what marriage is and that it is not a creature of the state. This we do for the authentic good of all; it is an attack on no one. The Church’s teaching about marriage is a message of joy, of purpose and of life. Marriage and child-bearing are arguably the simplest earthly expression of the virtue of hope. In the face of secularist despair the Church continues to call all people to cherish this gift, to nourish and strengthen it. It calls young people to discern whether God is calling them to marriage and, if so, to seek a faithful spouse and to do so without anxiety, knowing that God will bless them. The Church calls spouses to honor their vows by sacrificial love and openness to new life. It reminds parents that their vocation as parents is at the pinnacle of their baptismal calling. It offers to the victims of marital breakdown its pastoral support and the comfort of God’s grace.

In this Year of Faith we are called to understand Christian teaching on marriage and to shape our lives in accordance with the truth in all areas but especially in this area where so much is at stake.

+W. Francis Malooly
Bishop of Wilmington
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