

When we say forever...



What's special about marriage?

When a couple marry in the Catholic Church, the ceremony speaks of love, permanent commitment, fidelity, openness to children, and perseverance in good times and bad. It is these qualities which make marriage a unique relationship. There is no other human relationship which requires so total a commitment between two people.

In fact, marriage is more than a relationship. It is a union, a communion, between husband and wife. Their life together is now very different from their lives as two separate individuals. Once married, everything they do is done with the other in mind. They do not lose their individual identity, but that identity is enriched by sharing life with the other partner. Their marriage holds out an extraordinary challenge: to become so completely united that everything they do, big or small, is geared towards strengthening and deepening their union. There is no development unless both develop, no happiness unless both are happy. And so their communion grows through their years together. It can never remain static. Day by day husband and wife seek a greater knowledge and understanding of one another. They celebrate and deepen their communion through the most intimate form of communication possible between two people; through sexual intimacy. In the union of sexual intercourse, the couple are also opened to the possibility of children. As the fruit of their love, children expand the marital circle of love and challenge it to achieve new depths.

The sacredness of marriage

If this is the ideal to be sought, it can be seen that marriage is different from other human relationships. There is something sacred about it. That it is possible for a couple to love each other in this way is a gift from God. In their acceptance of this gift, a couple

Have you ever watched a young couple juggle babies and strollers on a bus? Have you ever seen an elderly couple help each other cross the street? Or been to a wedding where the bride and groom's face say it all? Images such as these capture brief moments of what can be the most profound experience of a lifetime: marriage.

Approaching the Topic

A commitment in any relationship is a challenging task. But to surrender oneself to the intimacy and the constant day-to-day demands of married life is perhaps one of the greatest opportunities for fulfilment and growth that a person can face. Is it any wonder, then, that over the centuries of Christian reflection, the Church has come to see marriage as a sign of the unconditional love Christ has for us, and a sign of the unity in which we as Christians are called to live?

not only experience a communion with each other, they experience a sustaining love which is bigger than their own individual efforts. They are drawn into a communion with God who assists and empowers them in their efforts to strengthen and deepen their married life.

For the baptised there is an even more profound dimension to this sacredness. For the baptised, marriage is a sacrament. A sacrament is a sign. This loving communion that exists between a husband and wife is the clearest sign and indication available of the extent to which God loves the human family. That's why the scriptures use so many marital



images to describe God's relationship between God and God's people. Just as married love is a commitment to grow in intimacy, to permanence and to fidelity in good times and in bad, so God's love for us is all these things.

Yet, our understanding of marriage as a sacrament goes even further than this. Not only do a couple mirror or reflect God's love, they embody the presence of Christ in a unique way. They are tangible signs of what it means to be a Christian. In short, the sacrament of marriage reveals to us the intimate relationship we share with Jesus. We are his beloved.

In St Paul's letter to the Christian community at Ephesus, he urges husbands and wives (in terms

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A Sacrament in action

If marriage is a sign of Christ's love for us, what does this mean in practice? The stories and reflections below offer some insights into what married couples can teach the Church about:

Intimacy

'First and foremost, Ben and I are Christ to each other. Whether it be the way we welcome each other home after work, tackle our house renovations, discuss financial matters or make love, we are channels of God's love to one another in countless little day-to-day practicalities.' (Sarah & Ben)

Just as married couples are called to a lifestyle of intimacy, so too are Christians called to be united in mind and heart through the love of Jesus. Married couples remind us that Christianity is not just about observing teachings, but sharing life.

Unity in diversity

'When we married we felt so much in love that we thought there was nothing we didn't know about each other. How wrong we were! I never realised she had such expensive tastes. She didn't know I could make such a mess in the bathroom. We had very different ideas about disciplining our children and handling our finances. Being romantically in love is a lot different from living together for the rest of your lives. But you learn to grow through these differences. That is one of the mysteries of love – how two very different people can learn to forgive, to compromise, to change and be changed' (Mary and Keith)

Just as husbands and wives learn to harmonise their differences into a fruitful relationship, so, too, does the Church community profess to be one body, while consisting of diverse ages, personali-

ties, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. As couples remind us, love is the glue!

Reconciliation

'I have a childhood memory of my parents standing in the kitchen, exchanging sharp words. Suddenly my father broke the cycle of tension, went up to mum and tapped her gently on the arm, saying expectantly, "Hey, tell me something... tell me something..." Her scowl reluctantly relaxed into a half-smile before volunteering her half of the equation. "I love you," she said. Then he took her in his arms. I gradually learned that this little exchange, repeated again and again over 42 years of marriage, symbolised for them a powerful decision: "No issue is so big that we will ever allow it to come between our love for one another". (Vince)

Living together as a Christian community can be difficult! Married couples teach us how to live a reconciling lifestyle: no issue is so big that we will allow it to come between us as brothers and sisters in the Lord. One of the greatest tragedies in the history of Christianity was the Church's failure to apply this lesson during the Reformation.

Age-old truths, ever-changing times

'You can't have five children without your deepest values and expectations being severely tested again and again. When we married, Lara and I thought we had it all worked out neatly. We had read every child psy-

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chology book under the sun and we knew exactly how we wanted our kids to turn out. We threw out the books after the first one turned two. And now the eldest has reached the teenage years we are in for a whole new phase of trial and error.' (Geoff and Lara)

For the Church, too, new generations bring fresh challenges and new questions. Like couples, we must be able to adapt, roll with the punches, test our teachings in the crucible of life experience, and respond to the signs of the times with the ever-freshness of Gospel truth.

Commitment and service

'I train lay people for parish ministry and I always make the point that ministry in the Church is not something you do as a hobby, a toy that you hand back into Father's lap when it gets too hard or firesome. It is a commitment from your heart – a bit like married love. Unlike a doting aunt or uncle, you can't give the kids back at the end of the day. No matter how tired, sick, poor or exasperated you feel, you must respond to your family's needs. Even when they grow up and leave home, there is still an enduring bond. To be Catholic is to give from the heart... forever.' (Annie)

For married couples, the many acts of service that take place in family life are not just jobs but an expression of a life vocation. Similarly, lest they simply become 'dogooders', the service that Christians offer others must flow from genuine relationships of love for God and neighbour.

Being life-giving

'When we say "yes" in our wedding vows to having children we had no idea how that "yes" would change our lives forever. You see, children are not simply additions to your life when you otherwise carry on living as before. Children change your lifestyle and stretch your heart, mind and



imagination beyond belief. They challenge your priorities and your ability to cope. They rewrite your definition of a good night's sleep. They challenge your attitudes to life itself. Without a doubt, our kids have made us more "pro-life", more ready to share our life with others.' (Noelene & Michael)

Married couples help the Church community to understand what it means to share their faith. It is not about bible-bashing on soap boxes. It is about making room in our lives for others to share the gift of who we are, and being open to the challenges they pose to us.

Celebrations and rites

'We try to make our family meals a true experience of belonging. If they just become an "eat and run" affair, we miss out on an opportunity to grow together. Similarly, Pat and I try to put special effort into our time together as a couple. If we don't, our love-making can become mechanical, an activity rather than a way of truly being present to one another.' (Pat and Leanne)

Just as couples need to work at their 'life rituals' and celebrations which nourish their relationship, so too must the Church. If our ceremonies and sacraments (such as the Sunday Eucharist) become an 'eat and run' affair or just an activity we squeeze in between all our other priorities, we can lose sight of the very source of our life together.

A story and a doctrine

The paradox of love

'My grandparents have been married for nearly 50 years and their lives are so intertwined it is impossible to imagine one without the other. They complete each other's sentences, seem to read one another's thoughts and anticipate each other's moods and actions with an uncanny sense of the other. In a word, they are **one**. Two unique individuals, personalities, but one life. As children, we used to love spending time at their place. And their home was always full. It had an aura of love and strength that attracted people. In my adult life, I have completed a theology degree and read lots of books. But nothing gives me more insight into the love circle of the Trinity than my grandparents.' (Charlene)

God: The eternal relationship of love

Catholic doctrine speaks of the mystery of God's love in terms of the Trinity: God is one absolute being yet three persons. While at first this might sound like celestial mathematics, a closer look at married love reveals this to be a profound statement about life. God is love – a community of persons, the 'eternal relationship'. Love, by its very nature, has to extend outward and embrace another. Love cannot exist except in the context of relationship. So perfect is the reciprocating love between the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit that, instead of dividing God's personhood, the perfect unity of God is completed and confirmed. Unity in individuality, individuality in unity. Married couples unveil this great Mystery that is the source and centre of our lives. We find our identity through love relationships. As we empty ourselves into another's hands, we discover our true selves.

The Sacrament of Marriage



Catholic Church, they are not simply saying 'yes' to each other. They are saying 'yes' to the Christian community:

'Yes, we commit ourselves to being a sign of Christ's love to you.'

'Yes, we will strive to love one another so totally and unconditionally that you will see in us the love Jesus has for you.'

'Yes, we will love each other forever, because that is the way Christ has promised to love his Church and, by the witness of our lives, we will make his extraordinary promise believable.'

appropriate to his day) to mutually surrender to one another in love. He then continues:

Because of this a man shall leave his father and mother to be united with his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a very great mystery, and I refer to Christ and the Church. (Ephesians 5.31-32)

So when a couple marries in the

In turn, the community of faith offers its support to the couple as they journey through life. It also undertakes a responsibility, not just to support and nurture marital vocations, but to call its couples to ever-greater heights of faith and love.

Lofty ideals in a real world

From the Christian perspective, married couples are called to a lofty vocation indeed. One which is different from marriage outside the Church, and which carries with it great responsibilities, because it involves not just two people but a community of people. This is why divorce is taken so seriously in the Catholic Church. To simply shrug our shoulders and say, 'Oh well, too bad it didn't work out' would be to undermine the truth which marriage signifies: Christ loves us forever, totally and unconditionally.

Having said that, the Church recognises that people do not always marry wisely, and can enter into relationships which, as experience and hindsight shows, never had the foundations of a valid marriage. In such cases, the Church, at the request of the couple, can examine the circumstances of their marriage, and make a judgement as to its validity or otherwise. If a marriage is found to have been invalid, the marriage is annulled

and the person is free to marry in the Church again. Where a marriage is found to have been valid, remarriage in the Church is not permitted. This does not mean, however, that the person is necessarily excluded from taking part in the overall life of the Church community. Although certain pastoral sensitivities may be required, parishes should welcome the divorced as active participants. Indeed, precisely because they have suffered the pain of such agonising loss, divorced people can be outstanding signs of God's love and a source of hope to the whole Church community, reminding us that Christ leads us, through even the darkest hours of our lives, towards new ways of living and loving. Further information about divorce, remarriage and annulment procedures can be obtained from the Catholic marriage tribunal in your city. The telephone book of your local Catholic parish can help you locate this office.

Your Story

Think ... Talk

What has been your experience of marriage?

If you have never been married, ask yourself: What was it like as a child growing up in the presence (or absence) of my own parents? How have other married couples affected my life? How have these experiences shaped my current attitudes towards marriage?

Act

Contact the Catholic agency called Centacare for information about

- marriage enrichment programmes;
- marriage counselling;
- support groups for those grieving a loss through divorce or widowhood.

Centacare's telephone number can be found in the white pages (under 'Catholic'); or seek assistance in your local parish.

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