

G R I S T

Diocese of New Ulm

Social Concerns Office

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from } **A Basic Theology of Marriage**
<http://catholiceducation.org/articles/sexuality/se0096.html>
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Marriage is the intimate, exclusive, indissoluble **communion of life and love** entered by man and woman at the design of the Creator for the purpose of their own good and the procreation and education of children; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament. (see: *Gaudium et Spes* #48, *Code of Canon Law* #1055)

Intimate communion of life and love:
Marriage is the closest and most intimate of human friendships. It involves the sharing of the whole of a person's life with his/her spouse.

Exclusive communion of life and love: As a mutual gift of two persons to each other, this intimate union excludes such union with anyone else. It demands the total fidelity of the spouses. This exclusivity is essential for the good of the couple's children as well.

Indissoluble communion of life and love:
Husband and wife are joined in authentic conjugal love by the firm and irrevocable act of their own will. Once their mutual consent has been consummated by genital intercourse, an unbreakable bond is established between the spouses. For the baptized, this bond is sealed by the Holy Spirit and becomes absolutely indissoluble. Thus, the Church does not so much teach that divorce is wrong, but that divorce is impossible, regardless of its civil implications.

Entered by man and woman: The complementarity of the sexes is essential to marriage. There is such widespread confusion today about the nature of marriage that some would wish to extend a legal "right" to marry to two persons of the same sex. The very nature of marriage makes such a proposition impossible.

At the design of the Creator: God is the author of marriage. He inscribed the call to marriage in our very being by creating us as male and female. Marriage is governed by his laws. For

marriage to be what it is, it must conform to these laws. Man, therefore, is not free to change the meaning and purposes of marriage.

For the purpose of their own good: "It is not good that the man should be alone" (*Genesis* 2:18). Conversely, it's for their own good, for their benefit, enrichment, and ultimately their salvation, that a man and woman join their lives in marriage. Marriage is the most basic expression of the vocation to love that all men and women have as persons made in God's image.

And the procreation and education of children: "By their very nature, the institution of marriage itself and conjugal love are ordained for the procreation and education of children and find in them their ultimate crown" (*Gaudium et Spes*, #48). Children are not added on to marriage and conjugal love, but spring from the very heart of the spouses' mutual self-giving, as its fruit and fulfillment. Intentional exclusion of children, then, contradicts the very nature and purpose of marriage.

Covenant: While marriage involves a legal contract, this must be subordinate to the spousal covenant which provides a stronger, more sacred framework for marriage. A covenant goes beyond the minimum rights and responsibilities guaranteed by a contract. A covenant calls the spouses to share in the free total, faithful, and fruitful love of God. For it is God who, in the image of his own Covenant with his people, joins the spouses in a more binding and sacred way than any human contract.

Dignity of a sacrament: Marriage between baptized persons is an efficacious sign of the union between Christ and the Church, and, as such, is a means of grace. The marriage of two non-baptized persons, or of one baptized person and one non-baptized person, is considered by the Church a "good and natural" marriage. While not sacramental, such marriages are holy unions that share in the same goods and purposes of sacramental marriage.

“Sacred Scripture begins with the creation of man and woman in the image and likeness of God and concludes with a vision of the ‘wedding feast of the Lamb.’ Scripture speaks throughout of marriage and its ‘mystery,’ its institution and the meaning God has given it, its origin and its end,...the difficulties arising from sin, and its renewal ‘in the Lord’” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1602). Throughout the Old Testament, God’s love for his people is described as the love of a husband for his bride. In the New Testament, Christ embodies this love. He comes as the Heavenly Bridegroom to unite himself indissolubly to his Bride, the Church.

The marriage of Christians is a sacrament by virtue of the spouses’ baptisms. In other words, marriage is a living sign that truly communicates the love of Christ and the Church. The spouses’ vows lived out in their daily commitment, and most specifically in their “one flesh” union, constitute this living sign. As St. Paul says, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the church” (*Ephesians* 5:31-32).

The free exchange of consent properly witnessed by the Church establishes the marriage bond. Sexual union consummates it — seals it, completes it, perfects it. Sexual union, then, is where the words of the wedding vows become flesh. The very “language” that God has inscribed in sexual intercourse is the language of the marriage covenant: the free commitment to a union of love that is indissoluble, faithful, and open to children.

If spouses willfully contradict any of these goods of marriage in their sexual expressions, marital intimacy becomes less than God intended it to be. In turn, spouses, rather than renewing their vows through intercourse, contradict them.

The often disputed sexual moral teachings of the Church become lucid when seen through this lens. Like all sacramental realities, if sexual union is truly to communicate God’s life and love, then it must accurately symbolize it.

Sexual union that is free, total, faithful, and open to new life (i.e., sexual union that truly expresses wedding vows) symbolizes and participates in the communion of Christ and the Church. Masturbation, fornication, adultery, intentionally sterilized sex, homosexual acts, etc. — none of these accurately symbolize, and thus never bring about the love of Christ for the Church. None of these behaviors are marital. Thus, for sexual union to consummate a marriage it must be performed in a “human manner” and be “per se suitable for the generation of children” (Canon 1061).

If men and women are to experience marriage as God intended it “in the beginning,” they must consciously renounce all that is contrary to God’s plan and continually surrender themselves to the grace of redemption. The cross of Christ, therefore, lies at the center of the Church’s theology of marriage.

Since it was man and woman’s turning away from God that distorted their relationship in the first place, it makes sense that restoring marriage requires a radical return to God. Thus, an authentic theology of marriage is not only informational but, above all, transformational. It calls couples to a life of ongoing personal conversion. Only as spouses renounce themselves and take up their crosses to follow Christ can they experience the true joys of marriage that God ardently wishes to shower upon them.

The Church’s teaching on marriage can seem almost impossible to live. “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (*Mt.* 19:26). As we surrender our lives to the grace of redemption, it is truly possible to know the joy and freedom that come from living and loving according to our true dignity as men and women made in the image and likeness of God. It is truly possible for men and women, husbands and wives, to experience restoration of proper balance and mutual self-giving in their relationship.

*For information about
Christopher West’s resources
re. the Theology of the Body, visit:
www.theologyofthebody.net/index.php
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