

# Getting a Degree in Marriage

## Does The Church Understand Marriage?

By Bernard Haring, C.S.S.R.

**PASTORS ARE OFTEN ASKED:** "Does the Church understand us married couples and the difficulties which we, despite our good will, often have?"

Others ask more pointedly: "What in fact does our marriage have to do with religion? The Church must be satisfied if we, by our church wedding, got her blessing, and in our family circle pray now and then. But the way we plan our married and family life the Church must leave to us!"

The basic answer here is: religion is life from God, life with God and life in God. If you fix the focus and meaning of your life, namely of your marriage and family, merely alongside of religion, then religion insofar as we can still call it such, will become for you a mere legal burden or emotional illusion and finally a dead thing.

The true God, whom you adore is the living God and the dispenser of life. As a living person and dispenser of life, he stands in the middle of your marriage.

For Christian couples their material union with its normal love-play and all other loving intimacies stand in the light and abundant graces of the Sacrament of Matrimony. In marital oneness and in the diversity of every-day life the love of the spouses should be a salutary image of the love of Christ for his Church. Through healthy marital love the spouses know that Christ "is in their midst" and they make possible for each other an ever more intimate "knowledge" of the love of God.

From all this it is clear that, by contracting marriage, there is not merely a question of getting "the blessing of the Church." Marriage is, above all, a sacrament, which means it is a "holy reality that is intended to sanctify the spouses," as St. Thomas says. In the matter of marriage morals, the Church is not at all restraining life or love, but is ever concerned about proclaiming the glad tidings of life and love and pointing out the sure way in which husband and wife can experience exhilarating nearness to God, the Giver of Life and the mighty Lover.

But already some may object: "This is all well and good. And we Christian couples do let ourselves be instructed by the Church to say 'yes' to a full married life. But the Church makes too great a demand on us. We cannot have a baby every year!"

### No Example

The Church really does not place before you as an example to be imitated, the couple that may have given life to ten children, but then bother little or not at all, about their upbringing. He who gives life to a child must also rear it to a life worthy of man. But we must state this most emphatically: The so-called "lower class" who do not rear their eight or ten children, as they should, still stand high above those who have awakened life, and then with malicious hand snuff it out in the mother's womb. Certainly, God forgives even such great crimes if the perpetrator sincerely repents. But every Christian must use every means in his power to prevent such depravity. Often other people are more to blame for such crimes than the immediate performers of the criminal act. Do we not sometimes hear of mothers who have suggested this manner of murder to their daughters?

Today Catholic couples may insist: "The Church, therefore, in principle approves of planned parenthood. And in this we are in perfect accord with her." We also realize that this is something entirely different from the viewpoint of mere expediency of our unbelieving fellow-citizens. But despite all this,

it is demanded of us that we live like celibates during the period between the two desired children."

### Celibacy Not the Ideal

This is another serious misunderstanding. True, the Church demands that married couples strive for a high ideal. But this ideal is certainly not that you should live as celibates beside each other. For it is indeed your deep and ardent marital love that again and again prepares you interiorly to assume the burden of another child. Therefore this tender love must be kept alive during these, at times painful, intervals during which your sincere conviction assures you that you cannot increase the number of your children. It is difficult to outline in such circumstances what is good, better, or merely permissible to the married couple. But definite limits and distinctions can and must be made by pastoral theology.

1. Just as the understanding of your true responsibility toward each other and before God is worlds apart from the standpoint of mere utility, so also the cultivation of your love must differ interiorly from the cheap, technical "solutions" of the mechanical side of marital intercourse. There must always be kept alive the respect for the most intimate union in which God, the Creator, is the third Partner.

2. If, for good reasons, it is not advisable to have another child at present, you can at ways, without qualms of conscience, practice "periodic abstinence," that is, restrict marital intercourse to those days on which conception is impossible, or at least improbable. Of course, this does not offer a "fool-proof" solution. In the first place, it depends very definitely on the spirit in which one has recourse to these periods of abstinence; secondly, this way is often not feasible for those couples who for serious reasons of health should not procreate. In modern times medical research has developed more accurate methods for establishing the days more or less suitable for conception. In any case, you should consult a competent and conscientious doctor.

Moreover, married couples will find it helpful to learn these laws of nature, especially so that they may prepare in a special way for those great moments in which they realize that God offers his creative love for their cooperation. Newly developed hormone preparations can nowadays help many women to stabilize to a certain extent their irregular periods, so that, after such a cure, periodic abstinence may no longer seem impossible.

3. The following may be considered as a guiding principle: The Church by no means expects married couples to be perfect from the very beginning of their married life, but that *together they strive for the perfect ideal.*

The couple would answer: "We are prepared to strive constantly. We wish also frankly to admit our weakness and our culpable action at times. But with regard to the reception of Holy Communion and in the confessional, are we not at times too easily branded guilty of mortal sin and treated harshly?"

This is, without a doubt, a knotty problem that in the end is also a problem in the "examination of conscience" for confession. To annul entirely different actions are confessed as "a sin against marriage." If the confessor is to make a distinction and to help others make a distinction, then the penitents must take pains not to designate with the same name actions that are entirely different. Let us indicate here only the most important distinctions.

1. One would actually have to confess: "I did not want to have any more children and persuaded my wife to go along with me." Here there is prevention of conception, by those who do not want to have any children, or at most only one or two, and for this purpose intentionally abuse the marriage act or use means to prevent conception. Their intention and their actions are clearly contradictory to the purpose of marriage. For them marriage is no road to salvation, no expression of their love of God and one another, as long as they do not sincerely repent.

2. Others, perhaps, would have to confess: "We tried to solve the problem of responsible parenthood only from a worldly standpoint. If we had realized what a child is worth before God and what meaning our marriage has, we would not so cautiously have singled out the so-called sterile days for our marital intercourse." Such a confession shows that whereas formerly there was much superficiality, and dependence on the evil spirit of the world about them played an important part, there was still a good will present that now manifests itself in a more serious consideration of the duties of marriage.

3. Perhaps once a married woman can confess: "I love children, and in our marital intercourse I have always performed my part in the correct way, but I took too little pains to win the heart of my husband and to deter him from acting similarly. I did not show him that tenderness that would have helped him continue in his self-control." Such a confession manifests an alert conscience that realizes chastity and love cannot be separated.

4. Not a few might confess: "We certainly have not made the question, whether we should have another child easy for ourselves. We have prayed and reflected. But at times we have not taken enough pains to practice self-control in showing marital affection." It is evident that here there is no question of merely denying the marriage right, which is words apart from the actual misuse of marriage, as mentioned in case 1. And yet here there may be question of the actual awakening of a healthy conscience, which now demands a more earnest effort in cultivating marital love.

### Receiving Communion

"But" I hear so many married people ask, "with all our good will, after denying this right to our partner, may we not go to Holy Communion, without previous confession, since we need this (sacramental) help and comfort in a special way?"

Where really sincere effort and prayer are evident beyond a doubt, your confessor will also affirm that in occasional, not intentional refusals, there is not necessarily a question of mortal sin. Whenever good will is evident, and in an individual case there is room for doubt as to whether or not a refusal was really freely willed, one may receive Communion without previous confession. But it is advisable to mention the circumstances in one's next confession.

God does not look at the exterior of things, but he searches the heart of man. In the end all depends on the good intention. This good will always manifests itself in a sincere effort to bring to order not only the *thoughts and desires of the heart*, but also the *external actions*.

The tremendous transformation of society nowadays poses new problems on this regard. More than ever before, one must learn to distinguish clearly the changing elements from the unchanging things in marriage and the family.

In many instances the marital roles are actually reversed: the woman becomes a dominant and controlling figure; and a man, because of the increasing responsibilities of the house, usually finds his role as husband and father, with his own mother, which leads him to abdicate his duties and privileges as the head of the house.

## HOW TO PLAN A CHRISTIAN WEDDING

By Rita Struble

THESE ARE THE WEEKS, before your wedding, of many exciting plans, shopping trips, and budget talks. A few months ago you women wouldn't have glanced twice at an ad for a special bargain in dish towels. Sterling silver plate, stainless steel—all simply names for knives and forks and spoons until now—suddenly become important considerations when these items are going to be used in your own place and belong to you, not your parents. Furniture was just something to sit on until recently; now you're becoming expert at tapestry vs. mohair, mahogany or bleached oak, French provincial as opposed to Swedish modern. And you men have probably switched from who-dunnits, Westerns, and the sports pages to do-it-yourself and budgeting manuals.

For all of these things are important to the success of your first home—and your marriage.

All of this is being practical, a hard virtue to maintain these last few months before marriage, but a most necessary one. In vowing to give each other the rainbow, moon, planets, and the popular songs would have it, you must remember that soon the practical necessities of day-to-day living will also require your attention.

It is a pleasure, for example, for the future bride to select a lovely pattern in sterling for her silver service. But if you can afford only two or three place settings now, and if you are proceeding on the romantic notion that you will give each other more sterling ware for the next decade of birthdays and anniversaries—a word of caution! In the face of ordinary expenses of living, sterling quickly becomes a luxury, and you might find yourself with the same "service for three" at the end of ten years. Far more practical would be an initial choice of silver plate, or the new and beautiful stainless-steel flatware. For the same price as your three-place settings of sterling, you can own a service for twelve—very handy if you ever plan to entertain more than one fine guest.

The same thing can apply to imported china versus some less glamorous dinner sets. For that matter, the logic is the same if you're talking about automobiles. Don't over-reach yourselves by going heavily into debt for an imported sports job if your income runs more to secondhand clunkers. Believe it or not, some families manage to survive for quite some time with no automobile at all—or television set.

Dishes, knives, and forks are necessary, of course, only if you plan to eat at home—and that depends upon the wife's cooking. Seriously, part of the wife's obligation in marriage is to feed her husband and family. While you can do this at a level sufficient to ward off starvation, provided you learn to operate a can opener and to "thaw," there is little love in that type of menu. To say, "I never cared for cooking," is no excuse. If friend husband should say, a week after the wedding, "I never cared for hard work," I'm staying home for a while "would you wives be amused?" He's expected to work from now on, for his family, to improve his position, to increase his skill and his income.

And wives should do the same in their contribution to their homes. Learn to cook! Learn to be efficient housewives. Practice now on your families. Learn those womanly skills that are expected of you. Marriage requires maturity; it is immature to learn of one's

shortcomings and cling to them. In marriage it is selfish as well.

There is joy and a wonderful sense of achievement in preparing an excellent meal in welcoming your husband at the day's end to a well-kept home. There are the everyday ways in which women show their love. Not words, not excuses, but a generous, gracious service for the one you love. In exactly the same way, husbands show their love by going out daily to earn the money needed to maintain their home, to support their family.

"You can't cook right with the wrong size pot" is an old saying of many good cooks. So, in your list of wedding gift suggestions to your relatives, and in your own purchases, don't skimp on kitchen ware. It's an incentive to do-it-yourself to have the right set of tools.

Do you know what else is a practical essential, especially for the first year? An extraordinary supply of patience! The husband is new to his role; to the responsibility he acquired in just a few moments of brief ceremony. His is the ultimate concern for the future, for the material spiritual welfare of his family. This is a new way of thinking for him; it changes his attitudes and actions, but this change will take time and the help of a patient understanding wife.

And the wife must change too, with her husband's aid. She must learn to organize her tasks, to use her time at home efficiently, to make wise purchases of food and household items. Tasks which have become completely automatic for her mother may well seem staggering to her. As one young bride wrote, "I don't even mind cooking, and I'm not so bad at it, if only I could manage to get everything done at once and make it all come out even for the same meal." Patience at this point, husbands! A gentle sense of humor and a helping hand is the way in which you demonstrate your love. And pretend not to notice that the toast is burned!

This patience, practical virtue that it is, does not come automatically as a sacramental bonus. As Christ told St. Paul nearly two thousand years ago, His grace is sufficient for us. But He doesn't force it, nor drop it like mana into our homes. We must cooperate with the sacraments to get their benefit; we must pray and work at becoming good husbands and wives through constant effort.

Both of you hope that the qualities the other possesses, all of the virtues and endearing traits, will remain and grow more lovable in marriage. Then, please, pray together now. This is a habit that is essential to the happiness of your marriage. It's a guarantee of Christ's help, an unbreakable bond between husband and wife. It's a formidable weapon—at times the only one—against doubts, anger, misunderstanding. If you pray together at night, and mean what you say, the sun can't set on your anger or hurt.

We mentioned wedding gifts, from your relatives. You may as well be practical about them. Some will bestow useless bits of nonsense, and even they require an enthusiastic, written-in-ink hand, thank-you notes—"Your lovely antimacassar is just what we needed. However, some sensible guests ask what the couple would like. Here is your chance to request a few really good pieces of religious art. Your marriage is above all sacramental; you expect its grace to be active in you for the rest of your life. Then reflect this in your home. Get one beautiful crucifix, traditional or modern as fits your taste. And what is more

impressive in a Christian home than a good holy water font at your door, that all who enter and leave you may be blessed? You surely expect some pictures to cover your walls, choose religious themes. Today there is no longer the excuse that religious art is inferior and old-fashioned.

Speaking of relatives, we must remember that marriage is a social sacrament, and family ties are important. We can't isolate our selves and still achieve the full joy of family life. We need relatives, not merely as baby-sitters or for emergency loans, but for an exchange of hospitality, sympathy, interests.

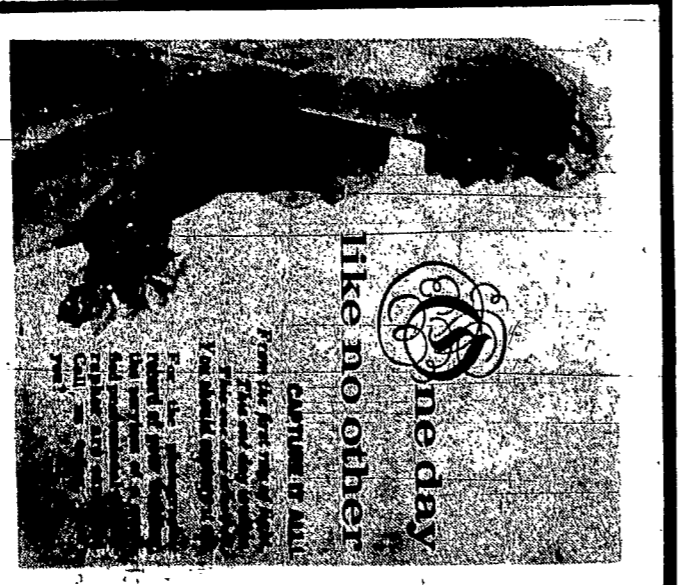
With all of this cooperation and mutual interest between you and your relatives, don't let them smother you. From the moment that you are married, yours is a new family, with its own head, its own structure, the elements of happiness lying within your small union, which will soon be brought into existence by the Sacrament of Matrimony.

Wives-to-be, give your future husband your love and respect as head of your home. You are equal in dignity and importance, but you have your own role in God's plan for families. Your greatest happiness and deepest security will come when you look to your husband for leadership.

Husbands, recognize the responsibilities of your headship, but also recognize the essential equality and dignity of your wife's role. Protect and cherish her as Christ cherishes His Church.

And both of you, look first to each other for strength, understanding and counsel, not to mother, father, sister, brother, and friends. It may seem that we've come a long way—from silverware to family structure. Yet, the virtues and attitudes that you bring to your marriage are the practical tools and materials from which the successful, happy family must be built.

© 1966 MARLBOROUGH PUBLISHING SERVICE



**BRIDAL PICTORIAL PLAN \$59.00**

- Wedding 1 x 18 Photographs in White
- Wedding 1 x 18 Photographs in Color
- 4x6 Color Slides for Memories
- 4x6 Color Slides for Memories
- 4x6 Color Slides for Memories
- 4x6 Color Slides for Memories

or ask for our direct order plan for only \$88.50

**IN EMERALD**

316 West Wacker St. Chicago, Ill. 60601

316 West Wacker St. Chicago, Ill. 60601