

What the Church Says About Marriage

By Father Robert F. O'Neill
Official
Marriage Tribunal

Jesus said, "What God has joined, let no man put asunder." The Catholic Church has accepted over the years a very literal interpretation of His words. Furthermore, when we see the reality of marriage as described by Sacred Scripture — namely, "The two shall become one flesh" — we see marriage as a permanent union that can be ended only by the death of one of the partners. Experience, too, has born out this type of thinking. Every young couple about to be married plans on spending the rest of their lives with the partner. Indeed, often young people will say how they could not imagine living without the partner they love so much. Church Law and teaching, therefore, reflect this basic philosophy.

For baptized persons, the Catholic Church sees an even more wonderful event: namely, a sacrament. When two baptized persons pledge themselves to each other in marriage for life, they receive the sacrament of marriage, sanctifying grace, and the guarantee of God's blessings and helps, throughout their married life. For Catholics, the Church feels that there are certain acceptable ways for celebrating this sacrament. Therefore, when a Catholic is to be married, and the marriage is to be recognized, the marriage must take place before a priest and two witnesses. This is called the form of marriage. In recent years, the Church has permitted a dispensation from form allowing another, usually a Protestant minister, to be viewed as the official Church witness to the sacrament. These cases are still rather rare but they are possible. It is encouraging to

see the desire on the part of prospective brides and grooms to have God as a part of their marriage and to celebrate their marriage in a sacramental way, seeing God as a real partner in their loving relationship.

Occasionally, a Catholic is married without the benefits of a priest present or a dispensation form, and in cases like this, the Church does not recognize the marriage. It is possible later to have the couple go to a Catholic priest and discuss having the marriage recognized by the Church and it is certainly advised so that the benefits of the sacrament can truly be a part of their marriage. However, grace does build on nature and if the marriage seems to be in trouble, the blessing of the Church is not going to guarantee a solution to all problems. Our priests are well trained in giving advice to persons in this type of situation and every priest has had a great deal of experience along these lines.

For those who are not Catholics, the Church recognizes their marriages as true and valid ones, if they are recognized by the particular state in which the couple lives. This means that a marriage of two Protestants before a Protestant minister and also a marriage of two Protestants before a Justice of the Peace is recognized by us. That means that should the marriage fail and one of the partners wishes to marry another, we would say he or she is not free to marry because the marriage is recognized by God and lasting until death.

As I mentioned previously, once a couple have entered a true and valid marriage, they are not allowed to marry again even after a civil divorce as long as the partner still

lives. However, the question is what is a true and valid marriage, what has truly God joined? Because of changes in Church thought, especially since the Vatican Council, because of advances in the behavioral sciences enabling us to understand human nature better, because of new changes in Church Law regarding procedures of Church Tribunals, a Church annulment of a marriage is much more common today than in the past. Annulments are still an exception to the rule and certainly not possible in every case, but when there were serious difficulties from the beginning of a marriage, or the marriage was very short, an annulment should be considered. This procedure is possible for any marriage, even those of non-Catholics, and again the priests of the parishes are well trained in assisting people wishing to investigate the possibility of a Church annulment. No annulment procedure is begun until the marriage is certainly ended by civil divorce and there are no civil effects to Church annulment process.

Divorce is always a sad experience for the partners, for children and for families. When it does occur, the Rochester Diocese is fortunate to have the outstanding Divorced and Separated groups that are so helpful to so many. There are also many programs that help prevent marriage failures, such as an outstanding Pre-Cana program, marriage enrichment programs, and good priests and Sisters who are willing to give of their time to enrich marriages and to assist those in trouble. Continued effort is needed at marriage enrichment since the family is indeed the basis of society and the more happy and successful families we can have, the better will be our society in our diocese.

Wisdom of Experience

In October 1980, many couples in the diocese who were celebrating their Silver or Gold anniversaries during the year gathered at a special celebration in Canandaigua. They were asked to give their responses to the following question.

Because we believe in your wisdom... because we believe many married and engaged couples have much to learn from you... would you please share with us your thoughts on this question: How has your marriage helped you to discover the meaning of faith?

A few of the reflections:

"A successful marriage depends on two people developing a complete trust and caring for one another. This is achieved by loving each other as Christ loves us, by accepting and sharing our joys, hopes and sorrows. The elements that make a good marriage when applied to one's Christian faith make a strong believer."

"Our faith in the Lord has kept our marriage together for fifty years. He has helped us with our problems and heard our prayers many times. Without faith life has no meaning."

"Love is built on trust, grounded in an abiding faith in God and neighbor, and most especially in one's spouse. At times in marriage when love seems stretched taut it is the reality of faith that makes it possible to continue to enrich and be nurtured."

"Faith means believing in yourself and in your love. God put us here for a definite purpose. With the two of us believing in God and His infinite wisdom, through marriage, we feel we can do anything with His help — bringing six children into the world, seeing them through sickness and health, carrying on through family crises (six deaths). Our Lord has given us the strength to carry out our

deep religious convictions — and honesty with one another because we believe in sharing our lives together. Our 25th anniversary was a very special day for us — we happily renewed our wedding vows."

"Our marriage, as all marriages, has had its share of trials, strife, illness, sorrow and joy. Had it not been for our love for God, and our faith in Him that He had the ability and power to aid us at the particular moment when we had just about given up hope, we would have been just another statistic."

Our marriage has been strengthened by our faith in God, and by His great love for us when we have left our lives and problems in His hands."

Attention Brides!

A special note to brides of any age: if you already have credit, keep it in your own name. If you don't have credit on your own, establish some now. Protect your credit by using it wisely. Despite protective legislation, many women fail

to establish their financial identity. Then, as widows or divorcees they pay a high financial and emotional price for this oversight. However, if you take the right steps now, you won't have to prove your financial identity later.

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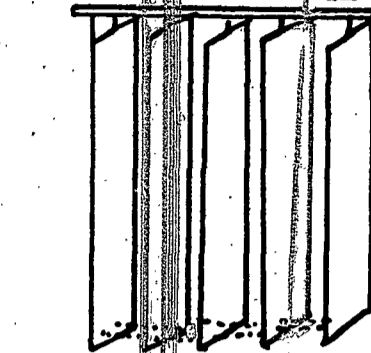
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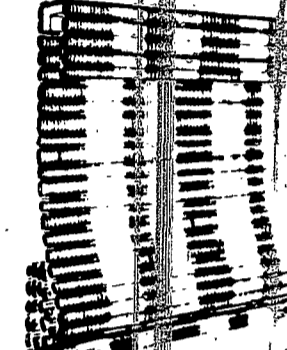
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