

Matrimony manifests Christ's love for church

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

In his letter to the community at Ephesus, St. Paul wrote: "A man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."

Yet St. Paul did not confine his meaning to marriage. "This is a great mystery to me," he added, "but I speak in reference to Christ and the Church" (Ephesians 5:31-32).

As St. Paul struggled to define the mysterious spousal relationship between Christ and his church, modern theologians still struggle to trace the historical origins of the marriage ceremony in the church.

"The natural bonding of men and women has always been happening because it is basic to society," explained Father

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Thomas Mull, priest consultant to the diocesan liturgy office and pastor of Sacred Heart Cathedral. "There seems to be an exchange of promises (vows) since Jesus' time. It wasn't Catholic or Christian — it was civil and natural."

For the first 10 centuries of Christianity, marriage was a strictly civil matter on which the church imposed no special requirements. During that period, governments alone handled matters of marriage and divorce.

But as Father Paul A. Feider of Oshkosh, Wis., notes in his book *The Sacraments: Encountering the Risen Lord*, the Christian community quickly became involved in the development of matrimony as a Christian sacrament.

As early as 107 A.D., leaders of the Christian community expressed pastoral concern and support for Christian men and women wishing to be married, he wrote. By 312 A.D., it was common for priests to bless the legal unions between Christian couples, or for the couples to receive the Eucharist after their civil weddings, he noted.

After the year 500 A.D., a negative view of sexuality began to develop in the church, according to Father Feider. Amid this attitude, Father Mull explained, marriage came to be understood as the justification for sexual behavior, which theologians — especially St. Augustine — considered sinful and evil.

In his book *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church*, Joseph Martos observed that St. Augustine felt that "sexual desire was evil, as a result of original sin, so those who gave in to it cooperated with evil and committed a further sin, even in marriage."

"And for Augustine, as for the stoics, the only fully legitimate reason for having sexual relations was to produce children," Martos noted.

In an effort "to help marrying couples build a life together founded on the values and the love of Christ," the church became more and more involved with marriages between Christians during the eighth century, according to Father Feider.

For instance, the church began to examine couples before marriage to determine whether the prospective spouses were ready for lifelong commitment. If officials found that a couple was not ready to commit or had been living together prior to the marriage, the church would not bestow its blessing on their union.

Yet it wasn't until the Council of Trent, during the 16th century, that marriage was formally declared a sacrament.

In his book *Special Signs of Grace*, Father Joseph M. Champlin of Syracuse



Designed to prepare couples for marriage, the church's pre-Cana programs acquired their name from the story of the wedding at Cana, at which Jesus performed his first public miracle.

noted: "At the same Council of Trent, to counteract harm caused by secret or clandestine marriages, the Church took a drastic step and declared: no Christian marriage would be valid or a sacrament unless contracted in the presence of a priest and two witnesses; those who did not follow this step would be judged guilty of grave sin and treated as adulterers."

Father Mull said that the Council of Trent addressed the topic of marriage and defined it as a sacrament primarily because it was a way of begetting children to be raised in the Catholic faith. In addition, he noted, giving sacramental status to marriage was a way for the church to bless the love of a man and woman in God's name.

St. Thomas Aquinas and other theologians noted that matrimony as a sacrament provided married couples with the positive reinforcement they would need to achieve holiness in their married state of life.

"For Aquinas, Christians were called to an ideal of constant fidelity and perfect love which could not be attained without the supernatural power of God's grace," Martos observed.

Love, however, did not become a dominant aspect in church thinking on marriage for another 500 years, when at Vatican II the church re-examined its regulations on the sacrament.

One of the biggest changes wrought by Vatican II was broadening the sacrament's focus. Whereas early church thinking on the sacrament revolved around the potential for procreation, post-Vatican II thinking emphasizes mutual love and respect between husband and wife, Father Mull said.

Another major change concerned pastoral practice on interfaith — or "mixed" — marriages. Prior to Vatican II, the church did not approve of marriages between Catholics and members of other faiths.

"There was very little acceptance of

mixed marriages," Father Robert P. Ring observed of the days before Vatican II. "They were discouraged — if not forbidden — by the church," noted the pastor of St. Augustine's Church, Rochester.

Father Ring noted it was forbidden to perform interfaith marriages within Catholic churches. Often the ceremonies took place in rectories, he recalled.

Since Vatican II, however, the church permits the celebration of interfaith marriages inside the church.

Today, the church teaches that marriage becomes a sacrament through the vows

"Father, you have made the union of man and woman so holy a mystery that it symbolizes the marriage of Christ to his Church."

From the Rite of Marriage

exchanged between man and woman, and through lifelong fidelity to those promises, said Father Ring.

In order for a marriage to be sacramental, Father Ring noted, three criteria are required: a freely chosen commitment, a desire for fidelity in a permanent relationship and an openness to children.

In his book, Father Champlin stressed the importance of these three factors: "Through that consent a man and a woman, through an irrevocable covenant, mutually give and accept each other in a partnership for the whole of life, a re-

lationship designed both for the good of the spouses through their close, special unity and for the procreation and education of offspring.

Although many marriages between Catholics today take place during wedding Masses, Father Ring noted that few traditions of the wedding ceremony are based in Catholicism. Such customs as the throwing of rice or the father giving the bride away stem from cultural rather than religious roots.

If a marriage does not take place within the context of a Mass, the ceremony follows the format of the Liturgy of the Word. Such a service would consist of a greeting, readings and response, Gospel, homily, reception of consent, exchange of vows, blessing of the rings, prayers of the faithful and nuptial blessing. If the wedding is performed within a Mass, the same format is used, with the Liturgy of the Eucharist following the nuptial blessing.

The church recommends that the readings for either service be taken from Scripture and that hymns be used for the wedding music. But Father Ring acknowledged that popular music can also be used if the tone and the lyrics relate to the Christian understanding of marriage.

"The music should reflect the values that we are talking about in marriage and have some religious significance," he said.

Although wedding ceremonies differ slightly according to cultural and ethnic traditions, Christian marriage is the door through which two people enter into a sacred transformation of their lives, according to Martos.

"Christian wedding ceremonies have always been sacramental, for they have celebrated the sacred value of marriage in a Christian culture, and they have initiated men and women into a style of life that was to be modeled on the relationship between Christ and the Church," he observed.