

WHAT IS MARRIAGE IN THE EYES OF THE CHURCH?

A Basic Definition of Marriage

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.¹

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. Marriage calls for a mutual self-surrender so intimate and complete that the two become "one," not only in body, but in soul. Far from clouding their uniqueness as persons, true marital love leads to each spouse's deeper discovery of his/her personhood.

Exclusive communion of life and love: As a total gift of two persons to each other (physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually) this intimate union and the good of the children excludes such union with anyone else. It demands total fidelity.

Indissoluble communion of life and love: Husband and wife are not joined by passing emotion or mere erotic inclination, which, selfishly pursued, fades quickly away.² They are called by God to a vocation of holiness, and joined by him in conjugal love by the firm and irrevocable act of their own consent. For the baptized, this bond is sealed by the Holy Spirit, is absolutely indissoluble.³ Thus, the Church does not so much teach that divorce is wrong, but that divorce (in the sense of dissolving a valid marriage) 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 (Gen 1:27). Marriage is governed by His laws, faithfully transmitted by His Bride, the Church. 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 for man to be alone" (Gen 2: 18). Conversely, it is for their own good, for their benefit, enrichment, and ultimately, their salvation, that a man and woman join their lives in the Covenant of Marriage. Marriage is the most basic (but not the only) expression of the vocation to love that all men and women have as persons made in God's image and likeness.

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."⁴ Children are not added on to marriage and conjugal love, but naturally spring from the very heart of the spouses' mutual self-giving as its fruit and fulfillment. Marriage retains its goodness even when couples are physically unable to have

children. But intentional exclusion of children contradicts the very nature and purpose of marriage.

Covenant: Marriage is a sacred covenant. God created marriage to mirror image and participate in his own covenant with His people. Thus, the marital covenant calls couples to share in the very love of God. Contrary to some trends in thought, the Church's recent emphasis on marriage as a covenant does not exclude the idea that marriage is also a contract. It is true that a covenant provides a more sacred framework for marriage, but canon law still purposely uses both terms to describe marriage.⁵

The 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 (see below for a more thorough discussion). The marriage of two non-baptized persons, or of one baptized person and one non-baptized person, while not a sacrament, is considered by the Church a “good and natural” marriage.

1 Cf. GS, n. 48 and CIC, canon 1055

2 Cf. GS, n.49

3 Even if a marriage is not consummated, no human power can claim to dissolve it. However, the Church, in very rare cases, does have the more than human power, given by God, to dissolve non-consummated marriages.

4 Cf. Ibid, n.48

5 Cf. canon 1055

Archdiocese of Denver web site (www.archden.org)