



## HLI EDUCATION SERIES

*Looking at life and family issues in the light of faith and reason.*

# PART I: MARRIAGE: WHAT IS THE CHURCH THINKING?

*A gift from God in the beginning, renewed and elevated by Christ; marriage is the great sign of how God loves us, pointing toward the flourishing of all persons and societies.*





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**I**n the beginning was marriage. It was part of the Creator's plan from the beginning – the way through which God wished not only to continue the race of men which He had created, but to reveal the very mystery of His inner life in the Trinity.

*Then God said, 'Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.' (Gen 1: 26-27 RSVCE).*

Men and women were created with complete, but at the same time complementary, natures. In a very real way, men and women were made for each other in both nature and spirit. The necessity for love and unity is built into our nature as men and women, and it is intimately connected with the fruitfulness of family life. Indeed, as we shall see, the sacramental union towards which men and women are called is inseparable from the manifestation of that very love's fruitfulness: children and the creation of society's most basic unit, the family.

Man and woman united in love were also united in the first sin in the Garden of Eden, and their relationship was consequently damaged. Yet, as the Nuptial Blessing given at all wedding Masses in the Latin rite

alludes, married love — unitive and fruitful — alone was not lost, of all the superlative gifts of God, destroyed neither by original sin, nor washed away by the purifying flood. Indeed one might say that this married love alone, though damaged and distorted in many ways, saw humanity through the long dark night that covered the preparation of the salvation of the Messiah. Throughout the Old Testament from the Psalms to the prophet Hosea, from the Song of Solomon to the story of Tobit, marriage kept returning, a recurring theme of the faithful lover who had not abandoned His spouse.

Christ came not only to teach and to heal, but also to restore. He renewed for men and women the vision of God first articulated in the Garden, a vision of married love shocking to His contemporaries because of its purity and holiness. We remember what Our Lord said when the Pharisees tried to trip Him up on the question of divorce:

*He answered, "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder." They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" He said to them, "For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery." (Mat 19: 1 – 9 RSVCE)*

With these words, marriage had been renewed, but Christ had not yet finished. Marriage was to be elevated from merely the good natural outcome of tendencies built into the human person, but it was to be raised, to become a supernatural sign of the union and love of Christ for His bride, the Church. It was to be a sign that became a sacrament, an occasion of grace, one of the precious channels of divine life left by Christ to His Church.

### **The Sacrament of Matrimony**

Not content with simply teaching an elevated, heavenly doctrine of marriage;



not content with even leaving the most powerful example of spousal love ever given, He further enriched Christian marriage with sanctifying grace, fortifying it and strengthening it against all the challenges that would arise against it, from the ancient world to the present day. Our Lord Jesus made marriage a sacrament.

What does it mean when we say that Jesus made marriage one of the seven sacraments of the Church? The question is so important to the Church that it received an extended treatment and focus in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World:

*For as God of old made Himself present to His people through a covenant of love and fidelity, so now the Savior of men and the Spouse of the Church comes into the lives of married Christians through the sacrament of matrimony.*

*... Authentic married love is caught up into divine love and is governed and enriched by Christ's redeeming power and the saving activity of the Church, so that this love may lead the spouses to God with powerful effect and may aid and strengthen them in sublime office of being a father or a mother. For this reason Christian spouses have a special sacrament by which they are fortified and receive a kind of consecration in the duties and dignity of their state. By virtue of this sacrament, as spouses fulfill their conjugal and family obligation, they are penetrated with the spirit of Christ, which suffuses their whole lives with faith, hope and charity. Thus they increasingly advance the perfection of their own personalities, as well as their mutual sanctification, and hence contribute jointly to the glory of God. (n. 48)*

There really is so much here: Since the beginning of the Church, faithful married love has been a witness, a testimony of the holiness that Christ intended for it. Yet even as marriage witnesses God's love for us, it reveals the mystery of Himself, the Most Blessed Trinity, and Christ's love for the Church. The grace made available to spouses through Christian marriage lived faithfully transforms them and their children, strengthening them for a journey that experience tells us has many and varied challenges.

The New Testament further points to how central marriage is to our flourishing: Since St. Paul outlined his vision of marriage as the symbol of Christ and His Church, faithful Christian marriage has stood out in every society of which Christians have been a part. (cf. Eph 5: 27, 32)

### **Getting the History of Christian Marriage Right**

Since her beginning, therefore, the Church has defended marriage as well. No one has been stronger proponents of the sacredness of marriage than the Roman popes, from St. Calixtus in the third century, to St. Nicholas I in the ninth, to Clement VII in the sixteenth, and to the popes of the previous 100 years, the papacy and the episcopacy has been at the forefront of attempts to defend marriage from those who would wish to challenge the words of Christ.



In fact, the informed student of history is astonished at the charges made by contemporary thinkers over the last 50 years or so, that marriage has damaged women's freedom, that it has impaired and impeded their success, and that it has reduced them to the status of second-class citizens. It can truly be claimed, however, that no institution has ever done more for women's rights and dignity than the Roman Catholic Church.

At the time Christ articulated His vision of marriage (which is God's vision) women were forced into marriages against their will. They had no say. They had no choice over their intended spouses (often indeed the young men did not either). There were no other options than fulfilling the wish of the head of the family. If their spouses later became disinterested, they could be cast away like discarded property in divorce.

Three things revolutionized marriage and human society, courtesy of Christ and His Church.

First, no one could be forced into a Christian marriage. Both parties had freely to consent. This is because spouses take vows, and the Church recognized that any vow not taken freely was no vow at all. Therefore both parties were required to be free to enter into marriages with no compulsion on either side, and were therefore more free to make their choice of partners.

In the beginning of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Capulet is incensed that Juliet will not consent to marry. Capulet needs her consent, she cannot be married without it. In a real sense Christianity neutralizes outside powers, requiring freedom of its young as a precondition to real marriages. It is also why the priest in *Romeo and Juliet* marries them, all he needs is their freely given consent.

Second, for the first time in history, women were free *not to marry*. Since their free consent was needed, they could not be forced into it. They could choose to remain virgins and perhaps join convents, just as young men could vow continence and enter monasteries. This opened up a whole new world of possibility, freedom, and education for young women.

Finally, Christ and the Christian Church forbade divorce, an unblushing rebuke to the world. Women and men who freely entered marriage could not cast each other off. This raised the stature of women considerably, added stability to human society, and refused to give vent to publicly sanctioned adultery and human weakness. Christianity was truly a social revolution.

Yet, as we look around us today, we see marriage – even among Catholics and other Christians – in disarray, with almost unbelievably high divorce rates and couples living together without being married. Marriage seems a revolving door for our unserious celebrities of politics and Hollywood. We even see marriage mocked relentlessly in the academy and the media and under attack in the courts, as with the Supreme Court's July 2015 decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which had the effect of redefining the institution of marriage to include persons of the same sex. A human court has declared that marriage is not what the Author of all creation has declared, not what all of Christian civilization has held for two millennia.

Something has gone terribly wrong. It is time to recover the true meaning, the great gift, of marriage.

### **So, What is Marriage?**

*Marriage is a lifelong partnership of the whole of life, of mutual and exclusive fidelity, established by mutual consent between a man and a woman, and ordered towards the good*





*of the spouses and the procreation of offspring. (Catechism of the Catholic Church n. 1601)*

As we have seen, this great gift to humanity was given by God Himself, renewed by Christ and raised to the level of a sacrament. Marriage was present in the beginning of creation as revealed by God in Scripture, just as His Holy Word concludes with the wedding feast of the Lamb in Revelation. Marriage is essential to God's revelation of Himself as the Most Holy Trinity to His beloved.

Though often not lived to its ideal by fallen men and women, the institution of marriage has been a benefit to every society to the extent that its ideal is upheld, as it is the fundamental building block of society. It is where a society's next generation is born and raised, where a nation's future comes into being.

In other words, the supernatural reality of marriage is confirmed by its natural necessity to the flourishing of any society. The further a society moves from the ideal of marriage, the more it will suffer. Indeed, it is the birthplace of freedom, as history confirms.

In the following articles of this series we will dig deeper into this greatest of gifts, examining each of its facets and their reflection on how we are to live today. We will look at how the truth of marriage is confirmed in ways beyond its beginning in faith, how it shapes society, and the challenges it faces today.

In Faith, in Hope and in Love, we must recover the true meaning of marriage, and we must do so without delay.

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Portions of this article are adapted from a contribution by Professor Donald Prudlo to HLI's *Truth and Charity Forum*. See his entire 5-part series on the US bishops' pastoral letter "Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan" at [www.TruthandCharityForum.org/article-series](http://www.TruthandCharityForum.org/article-series).

### **Resources used in this article, which we recommend for further study:**

- *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, especially paragraphs 1601 – 1666, 2201 – 2213
- *Gaudium et Spes, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*: especially n. 48 – 52
- *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, a 2009 Pastoral Letter from the US Bishops

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*Visit [www.hli.org/marriageseries](http://www.hli.org/marriageseries) for the full HLI Educational Series on Marriage, as well as other helpful resources on marriage.*

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