

# THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY MATRIMONY

In many ways the Bible is like a wedding album or the story of a marriage. It begins with the story of the creation of Adam and Eve and ends with the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. In between is a beautiful but dramatic story. It is a story of love to be sure, but also a story of a painful loss of love caused by sin and the journey back to find and renew this love again in Christ Jesus.

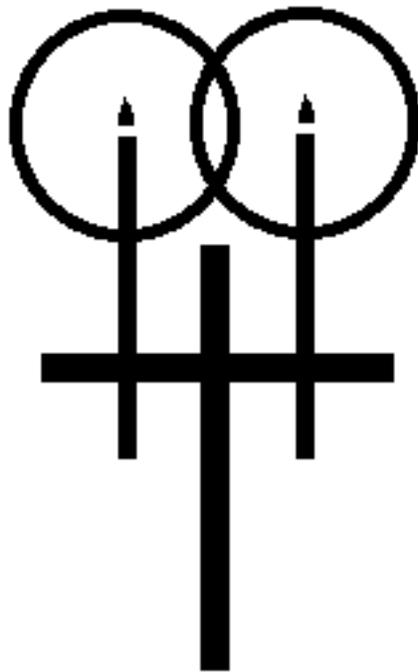
## God is the Author of Marriage

The Book of Genesis speaks to us not only of our creation but also of our very nature. In the first place, we are made for love because we are created in the image and likeness of God who is love. A second and very important truth taught to us in the scriptural account of our creation is that man and woman were made for one another. God himself declares, *It is not good for the man to be alone* (Gn 2:18). So God created Eve from the very flesh, the very human nature of Adam. When Adam beheld Eve he was delighted and declared, *Here at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh* (Gn 2:23). God also teaches in the Genesis account that this in this creative act of His is the origin and understanding of Marriage, *For this reason a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.* (Gn 2:24).

In Chapter One of Genesis we are also given another important teaching about marriage. Adam and Eve are instructed by God, *Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it* (Gn 1:28). Thus the love of Adam and Eve was to reflect the love of God which is fruitful and life giving.

Here then is God's plan for marriage: a man and a woman in a unity of life and fruitful love so profound that they may be said to be one flesh. Adam sees Eve as his equal, bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. He is delighted to behold her and acknowledge that it is not good that he should ever be without her and that he is completed and helped by her. Although

the scriptural account does not record Eve's reflections we may presume they were the same. Alone it was not possible for them to be fruitful and multiply. Alone and apart they could only find death, together as one they would experience gifts of life and the family.



## The Painful Reality of Sin.

The wondrous communion of Adam and Eve intended by God and described in the book of Genesis was seriously disturbed by the consequences that flowed from the Original Sin committed by them. This is dramatically illustrated by Adam's response to God. When God noted that they had eaten from the tree of which he had forbidden them to eat Adam blamed Eve saying *It was that woman you put here with me, she gave me the fruit and so I ate it.* (Gn 3:12). See how strongly this contrasts with his former appreciation of Eve whom he described as one with him, as bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh! Now division and hostility are experienced and expressed. It is also highly significant that both realize that they are naked (Gn 3:7). Whereas before

their relationship was one of complete openness and trust, now they experience embarrassment and vulnerability before one another and before God. They must cover up and feel compelled to hide significant aspects of themselves. God himself describes the consequences that will flow from the awful reality they have chosen. His words to Eve are particularly poignant: *I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you* (Gn 3:16). Adam too shall now have to toil for food to eat and the experience of Eve as a helpmate or co-worker with him seems greatly diminished. (Gn. 3:17-19)

It is quite clear that sin and evil inflicted great harm on the original joy and communion between Adam and Eve. The Catechism describes quite well these sad realities, *This experience [of the evil flowing from Original Sin] makes itself felt in the relationships between man and woman. Their union has always been threatened by discord, a spirit of domination, infidelity, jealousy, and conflicts that can escalate into hatred and separation. This disorder can manifest itself more or less acutely, and can be more or less overcome according to the circumstances of cultures, eras, and individuals, but it does seem to have a universal character. According to faith the disorder we notice so painfully does not stem from the nature of man and woman, nor from the nature of their relations, but from sin. As a break with God, the first sin had for its first consequence the rupture of the original communion between man and woman. Their relations were distorted by mutual recriminations; their mutual attraction, the Creator's own gift, changed into a relationship of domination and lust; and the beautiful vocation of man and woman to be fruitful, multiply, and subdue the earth was burdened by the pain of childbirth and the toil of work.* (Catechism 1606-1607).

The consequences of the divisions caused by sin continued to be felt down through the pages of the Old Testament in the polygamy of the patriarchs, which only gradually came to be forbidden, and in the permitting of divorce under Mosaic Law. Our Lord Jesus would later indicate that the fact divorce was permitted was an indication of the "hardness of your hearts" (Mt 19:8).

### Still a noble grace.

Yet despite the distortion caused by sin God continued to point to marriage's lofty status by presenting it as one of the primary images of his covenant relationship to his people. God was the faithful spouse of his bride, Israel. Through the prophets he reminded his bride that she was espoused to him. Sin was infidelity but God's love was everlasting and, though he chastise Israel, he would never forsake her. God even used romantic imagery. Consider this example from the Prophet Hosea: *"Therefore, behold, I will allure Israel, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her...And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. "And in that day, says the LORD, you will call me, 'My husband'...and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD. (Hosea 2:14-20)* And so it was that God never cast aside the lofty ideals of marriage. He continued to proclaim them to his people.

### Established by Christ as a Sacrament

It is in this context that Jesus proclaimed an absolute return to God's plan. In the Gospels Jesus proclaims his intention to return to God's original plan for marriage. Divorce had entered the scene through sin. Jesus came to destroy the ancient power of sin and cancels its effects. He is able to empower couples through his healing grace to live to original vision of marriage given by God. This too is clearly taught in the Catechism: *In his preaching Jesus unequivocally taught the original meaning of the union of man and woman as the Creator willed it from the beginning. Permission given by Moses to divorce one's wife was a concession to the hardness of hearts. (Mt. 19:8) The matrimonial union of man and woman is*

*indissoluble: God himself has determined it "what therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder." (Mt 19:6) This unequivocal insistence on the indissolubility of the marriage bond may have left some perplexed and could seem to be a demand impossible to realize. However, Jesus...himself gives the strength and grace to live marriage in the*



*new dimension of the Reign of God. It is by following Christ, renouncing themselves, and taking up their crosses that spouses will be able to "receive" the original meaning of marriage and live it with the help of Christ. (Mt. 19:11) (Catechism 1614-1615). It is in the context of his solemn teaching on marriage that Christ established marriage as a sacrament. The Catholic Church has acknowledged it as such ever since.*

### The Outward Sign

The outward sign, that which is seen and heard is the exchange of consent (vows) before the Church. The Church is represented by a priest or a deacon. The vows are usually worded in this or a similar fashion: *I take you to be my wife/husband. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life.*

### The Graces of this Sacrament.

The three most basic qualities of Christian Marriage are that it is: permanent, faithful and fruitful. The

graces of the Sacrament all serve to create and preserve these realities.

**Permanence and faithfulness:** Since God himself is the author of every valid marriage there arises a bond between the couple that can never be broken. Marital love is also of its nature always undivided and exclusive. This love is a special love which never to be shared by the spouses with others. This stable and faithful relationship is itself a great blessing since it provides the couple a sturdy foundation on which to live and experience trust, mutual support, and encouragement. It also provides the best environment in which to raise children. *It can seem difficult, even impossible, to bind oneself for life to another human being. This makes it all the more important to proclaim the Good News that God loves us with a definitive and irrevocable love, that married couples share in this love, that it supports and sustains them, and that by their own faithfulness they can be witnesses to God's faithful love. (Catechism 1649)* In addition to these graces, Christian couples receive all the graces they need to perfect their love for one another and strengthen their unity. By these graces they assist one another to grow in maturity and holiness. *Marriage helps to overcome self-absorption, egoism, pursuit of one's own pleasure, and to open oneself to the other, to mutual aid and to self-giving (Catechism 1609)*

**Fruitfulness:** Children are the supreme gift of marriage and contribute greatly to the good of the parents themselves. God's love is fruitful and marital love is to be a reflection of that love. When God established marriage he instructed the first spouses as to its nature, *Be fruitful and multiply (Gn 1:28)*. So by its very nature the institution of marriage and married love is ordered to the procreation and education of children. This of course includes more than a college education. It includes every aspect of the personal development of children: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and supernatural life. God grants to parents an awesome dignity when He entrusts the care of immortal souls to them. This of itself helps us to glimpse the high calling of the marital life and helps us understand how crucial and necessary the Sacrament of Matrimony is for the Church and for the world.