

Theory 6

THE SACRAMENT OF MATRIMONY

In this lesson I will refer to many sections from the Catechism of the Catholic Church so that you, the student, can have a quick access guide to some helpful sections on Matrimony as a Holy Sacrament. For brevity's sake, I will summarize these article numbers and offer clarification where necessary.

This section of the Catechism begins with this beautiful quote:

CCC 1601 “The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament.”
(See also 1617)

This, in summary, explains the beautiful teaching of the Catholic Church on marriage. The rest of the section on the Sacrament of Matrimony unpacks this rich text.

Marriage in the order of creation

1602-05 Explains that marriage was designed by God to fulfill His plan for creating in man and woman an image of Himself. Scripture, in fact, uses the image of a wedding feast many times to explain heaven, and the relationship between Christ and His Church (1602). God Himself is therefore the author of marriage (1603). “The well-being of the individual person and of both human and Christian society is closely bound up with the healthy state of conjugal and family life” (*Gaudium et spes*). *Here, conjugal means ‘something pertaining to the husband and wife.’ It means to mix or comingle.* Thus, both personal and social well-being and harmony necessitate healthy marriages. God has designed men and women to unite, monogamously, permanently, for procreative purposes.

This is why God created them male and female (1604), and why they are called to the ‘one-flesh’ union (1605). This unity is designed not only for the good of the spouses, but to also bring forth life. ***This is the purpose of marriage in God’s plan!*** Any other

meaning given it undermines this beauty and is imposed on this institution by someone other than God.

Marriage is a gift from God, between one man and one woman, for their own good, which implies permanence, and the bringing forth of life. There is no other definition of marriage, nor is there a right to sex without babies.

Marriage in the Lord

At Cana, as a way to inaugurate His public mission, Jesus obeys His mother's request to perform a miracle—change water into wine. This small, seemingly insignificant feat reveals the dignified nature of both His public mission and of marriage itself. The Church sees in this miracle “the confirmation of the goodness of marriage and the proclamation that thenceforth marriage will be an efficacious sign of Christ's presence” (1613). **This means that marriage is meant to reveal God's incarnate, merciful, steadfast love to our children, and, through them, to society.**

Virginity for the sake of the Kingdom

Now that the dignity of marriage is explained, the writers of the Catechism turn to an even more Christ-like calling, that of Consecrated Virginity and Celibacy. Virginity for the sake of the Kingdom is a sign of Christ's nuptial (marital) love for his bride, the Church.

CCC 1618 “From the beginning of the Church, there have been men and women who have renounced the great good of marriage to follow the Lamb wherever He goes, to be intent on the things of the Lord, to seek to please Him, and to go out to meet the Bridegroom who is coming. Christ Himself has invited certain persons to follow Him in this way of life, of which He remains the model.”

It has been an unfortunate mistake by those who, while trying to encourage vocations to celibacy or the consecrated life, do so by indicating that marriage is somehow for weaker people. If this is so, then you are not really sacrificing much to become a priest, brother, or nun. After all, the value of something is determined by the sacrifice one gives for it. If the sacrifice is small, then the value is small. If the sacrifice is great, then the value is great. Marriage is great, which increases the value of the celibate and consecrated life!

Now we can understand this passage:

CCC 1619 Virginity for the sake of the kingdom of heaven is an unfolding of baptismal grace, a powerful sign of the supremacy of the bond with Christ and of the ardent expectation of his return, a sign which also recalls that marriage is a reality of this present age which is passing away.

Celebration of Marriage

CCC 1623 Marriage is normally celebrated in a Church. According to the Latin tradition, the “spouses as ministers of Christ’s grace mutually confer upon each other the sacrament of matrimony by expressing their consent before the Church. In the traditions of the Eastern Churches, the bishops/priests are witnesses to the mutual consent given by the spouses.”

For the sacrament to be valid, the minister must bless the marriage after the consent is given during the ceremony.

The Church holds the exchange of consent between the spouses to be the indispensable element that “makes the marriage.” Thus, the spouses must be free to give consent. This consent binds the spouses together. No human power can substitute for this consent (1625-28).

The effects of this sacrament

CCC 1638-1642

- Perpetual and exclusive *bond* between spouses that gives rise to a covenant guaranteed by God’s fidelity.
- Strengthened and consecrated for the duties and the dignity of marriage, that is for the sanctification of one another, as well as welcoming and educating children

Understanding these teachings helps us understand the Church’s teaching regarding annulments and indissolubility of the marriage bond.

Annulment

If there is present some obstacle preventing this free offering of consent, i.e. coercion, psychological disability, intellectual impairment, then the Church is able to declare the nullity of marriage via ecclesiastical tribunal (1629). This means that an indissoluble, sacramental marriage never existed, and thus the two parties would be free to marry again.

However, keep in mind, simply because a declaration of nullity has been granted, it *does NOT mean* that whatever the problem preventing the previous marriage from being sacramental was fixed! If that problem is not identified through careful examination (i.e. mental instability, extreme immaturity, unwillingness to accept and abide by what the Church teaches regarding sacramental matrimony, etc.) and dealt with, then this person’s ability to enter into a valid second marriage is likewise damaged.

Indissolubility

When all of the elements necessary are indeed present in a marriage, which is always assumed in the case of baptized persons without ecclesiastical investigation, then the marriage is indissoluble:

CCC 1640 “The marriage bond itself has been established by God Himself in such a way that a marriage concluded and consummated between baptized persons can never be dissolved. This bond, which results from the free human act of the spouses and their consummation of the marriage is a reality, henceforth irrevocable, and gives rise to a covenant guaranteed by God’s fidelity. The Church does not have the power to contravene this disposition of divine wisdom.”

Sacramentality

Christ is the source of grace in this covenant. This grace is intended to perfect the couple’s love and to strengthen their indissoluble unity. By this grace they “help one another to attain holiness in their marriage life and in welcoming and educating their children” (CCC 1641).

CCC 1643 “Thus, this marital or conjugal love involves a totality, in which all the elements of the person enter—appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will...it demands *indissolubility* and *faithfulness* in definitive mutual giving; and it is open to *fertility*.”

Grace raises this ability found in any healthy marriage to a new level, offering a new destiny and a new capacity! Now, any act of self-giving love within the marriage, performed in a state of grace, of course, produces a purity of love that more and more conforms to the love of Christ for His Bride, the Church. This is true for both spouses. This is why marriage is a sacrament and contributes to the holiness of the spouses. (see 1647)

Difficulty of Living the Sacrament

CCC 1648 “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. Spouses, who with God’s grace give this witness, often in very difficult conditions, deserve the gratitude and support of the ecclesial community.”

CCC 1649 “Yet there are cases when living with each other may become practically impossible for a variety of reasons.

In such cases the Church permits what has been called “separation of bed and board.” This is when the couple lives apart, sometimes indefinitely. Since they are still married in the eyes of the Church, they are not free to marry again (1649).

Note: we will offer some examples for you to examine and to which you will respond in the practicum.

Fertility

CCC 1652 “By its very nature the institution of marriage and married love is ordered to the procreation and education of the offspring and it is in them that it finds its crowning glory...children are the supreme gift of marriage and contribute greatly to the good of the parents themselves...hence, true married love and the whole structure of family life which results from it, without diminishment of the other ends of marriage, are directed to disposing the spouses to cooperate valiantly with the love of the Creator and Savior, who through them will increase and enrich his family from day to day.”

Hence, the two ends of marriage—unity of spouses and procreation of offspring—stand or fall together. If we intentionally render ourselves infertile via sterilization with contraceptives and surgery, we attack the unity end as well.

Summary

Married love reflects the unity and fecundity (fruitfulness) of the Triune Godhead. This is how we image Him, by design. Christ redeemed this bond, damaged by sin/selfishness, to the level of a sacrament. Now, this relationship of life and love truly offers grace!

“How can I ever express the happiness of a marriage joined by the Church, strengthened by an offering, sealed by a blessing, announced by angels, and ratified by the Father?...How wonderful the bond between two believers, now one in hope, one in desire, one in discipline, one in the same service! They are both children of one Father and servants of the same Master, undivided in spirit and flesh, truly two in one flesh. Where the flesh is one, one also is the spirit” (Tertulian).

Practical Tips

There are some practical tips to know and practice in order to live out fully the dignity of marriage.

1. Follow the Church's teachings on marital love. These can be difficult, and our mentees will most likely need encouragement in practicing them, but God does not ask the impossible nor demand us to strive for things beyond our strength.
2. Encourage your mentee to pray together with his or her spouse, especially the Rosary. Our Lady and St. Joseph have much to teach us regarding living a holy marriage. The Rosary is her school of learning.
3. It is also essential for every married person to have a personal prayer life. This means daily meditation, resolution, and frequent use of the sacraments. It also is of great importance to encourage them to study the faith in an ongoing way, such as reading good theology books, lives of the saints, bible studies, etc. School of Faith also has many courses on-line to listen to.
4. Encourage the gift of undivided attention to each other throughout the day, along with gratuitous acts of kindness for one another.
5. Remember to tell your mentee that he or she needs to have a united front when dealing with discipline issues with the children.
6. Remember also that quality time is quantity time! Our families need our presence, and we need to be actively present. They need to know that we are invested in their lives. Our mentees need to know this.
7. Practice common courtesy with our spouses.
8. This list is certainly not exhaustive, but these tips will go a long way in creating the foundation for a successful and holy marriage!

Additional resource in Toolbox: "FAQ's Regarding Divorce and Annulments"