

THE SACREDNESS OF MARRIAGE

If this is the ideal to be sought, it can be seen that marriage is different from other human relationships. There is something sacred about it. That it is possible for a couple to love each other in this way is a gift from God. In their acceptance of this gift, a couple not only experience a communion with each other, they experience a sustaining love which is bigger than their own individual efforts. They are drawn into a communion with God who assists and empowers them in their efforts to strengthen and deepen their married life.

For the baptised there is an even more profound dimension to this sacredness. For the baptised, marriage is a sacrament. A sacrament is a sign. This loving communion that exists between a husband and wife is the clearest sign and indication available of the extent to which God loves the human family. That's why the scriptures use so many marital images to describe God's relationship between God and God's people. Just as married love is a commitment to grow in intimacy, to permanence and to fidelity in good times and in bad, so God's love for us is all these things.

Yet, our understanding of marriage as a sacrament goes even further than this. Not only do a couple mirror or reflect God's love, they embody the presence of Christ in a unique way. They are tangible signs of what it means to be a Christian. In short, the sacrament of marriage reveals to us the intimate relationship we share with Jesus. We are his beloved.

In St Paul's letter to the Christian community at Ephesus, he urges husbands and wives (in terms appropriate to his day) to mutually surrender to one another in love. He then continues:

Because of this a man shall leave his father and mother to be united with his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a very great mystery, and I refer to Christ and the Church. (Ephesians 5.31-32)

So, when a couple marries in the Catholic Church, they are not simply saying 'yes' to each other. They are saying 'yes' to the Christian community:

'Yes, we commit ourselves to being a sign of Christ's love to you.'

'Yes, we will strive to love one another so totally and unconditionally that you will see in us the love Jesus has for you.'

'Yes, we will love each other forever, because that is the way Christ has promised to love his Church and, by the witness of our lives, we will make his extraordinary promise believable.'

In turn, the community of faith offers its support to the couple as they journey through life. It also undertakes a responsibility, not just to support and nurture marital vocations, but to call its couples to ever-greater heights of faith and love.

WHAT'S SPECIAL ABOUT MARRIAGE?

When a couple marry in the Catholic Church, the ceremony speaks of love, permanent commitment, fidelity, openness to children, and perseverance in good times and bad. It is these qualities which make marriage a unique relationship. There is no other human relationship which requires so total a commitment between two people.

In fact, marriage is more than a relationship. It is a union, a communion, between husband and wife. Their life together is now very different from their lives as two separate individuals. Once married, everything they do is done with the other in mind. They do not lose their individual identity, but that identity is enriched by sharing life with the other partner. Their marriage holds out an extraordinary challenge: to become so completely united that everything they do, big or small, is geared towards strengthening and deepening their union. There is no development unless both develop, no happiness unless both are happy. And so their communion grows through their years together. It can never remain static.

Day by day husband and wife seek a greater knowledge and understanding of one another. They celebrate and deepen their communion through the most intimate form of communication possible between two people: through sexual intimacy. In the union of sexual intercourse, the couple are also opened to the possibility of children. As the fruit of their love, children expand the marital circle of love and challenge it to achieve new depths.