

CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE: a call to love and to serve

The whole Christian faith is about love in the richest meaning of the word, involving the real giving and sharing of oneself in selfless sacrifice. God is such love in its fullness, and the source of all real love. He seeks to draw humanity together into a deep unity within his own life. He does this in many ways, but human friendship, affection and love are his most 'natural' human way of doing so. God makes holy all that is truly human, including all true forms of love.

Friendship is a gift from God, a blessing to be cherished (Ecclesiasticus 6:14-17). Deep spiritual friendship between Christians can be a great support in their life as disciples, especially if they pray and worship together.

The intimate friendship of a man and woman in love is also something rooted in God and blessed by him. The Scriptures often compare God's relationship with us to the love between bridegroom and bride, husband and wife (e.g. Isaiah 62.4-5). All real love is about self-giving, and the special bond of marriage involves two people giving themselves totally to each other until they are parted by death.

Christian marriage is not just an agreement to live together as husband and wife. It is a vocation, a calling from God to a special 'two-some' kind of discipleship. Their union is a sacrament, a living symbol of the holy wedding or 'covenant' of God with us, his Bride. The married couple in their joyful life of mutual love are meant to be the Good News come alive, a kind of visual aid of the intimacy God longs for with us (Ephesians 5:25-33). The Lord will use their love as an instrument to others of his own loving presence.

Christian marriage is no easy calling. It is a Gospel commitment, and like any form of discipleship it is a tough, demanding vocation which involves renouncing oneself and taking up the cross of Christ. It is also a calling filled with the joy of Easter.

Marriage involves the totally free, unreserved, unconditional giving of two people to each other. It is founded not just upon mutual feelings, but upon a promise of commitment. It is God who joins together their lives. Because their union is a sacrament of God's faithful and never-ending love, any real marriage is permanent, even if one partner is unfaithful, just as the Lord remains totally faithful to us even if we turn our back on him. Jesus himself said, 'What God has joined together, let no person put asunder' (Matthew 19:6). There can be no divorce when a marriage is truly sacramental and consummated. Christian marriage is for life, till death us do part.

There are couples who are not really married in the first place, perhaps because they were not seriously committing themselves on their wedding day to all that Christian marriage involves, or because they were personally incapable of giving themselves totally to each other with the degree of commitment required. In such cases, the Church can declare that no marriage actually existed at all (an 'annulment'). This is not the same as divorce, which is the putting asunder of two people who are truly married.

Marriage is a complete giving of two people to each other, a commitment to be totally faithful. This obviously includes sexual faithfulness. Adultery is a very grave failure to live the meaning of marriage, striking deep at God's work of 'at-one-ment'.

This especially intimate unity, which only comes about on the wedding day when the couple give themselves totally to each other in a new way, is wonderfully expressed and deepened in the union of bodies involved in God's holy gift of sexual intercourse. Bride and groom leave their parents, and become one flesh: 'They are no longer two, therefore, but one body' (Matthew 19:5). This is why sexual intercourse outside of marriage is a serious misuse of God's great gift. It is only when a couple have reached the stage of final, no-turning-back commitment in marriage that sexual intercourse becomes the God-filled joy it is meant to be. The complete bodily union of husband and wife is the final sealing of the weaving together of their lives, the supreme physical expression of the deep and total love between them.

God's creative work flows from uniting what he has already created. He brings forth new human life through the loving union of two of his beloved creatures. Permanently to refuse to allow God to work through their union is to shut their life to his creative love. Marriage involves a couple being responsibly but unselfishly open to God's own life-making work through their love-making.

Christian marriage is a call to serve together within the Church, not just a personal agreement between a couple. A Catholic therefore must be married in the presence of the Catholic community, in a Catholic church, unless the Bishop gives permission to do otherwise.