

Bishop's Pastoral Letter for Lent 2018

The Sacrament of Matrimony

Dear Members of the Diocese,

I wish you a blessed time of preparation for Easter! Many years, I have written a letter for Lent to the members of the Diocese. In these letters, I have dealt with the Sacraments of the Church. The remaining sacrament is Matrimony, which I wish to address in this letter.

When preparing for marriage, the couple comes to the parish priest to discuss their intentions. In many cases, a course is arranged for the couple, towards the end of which there is a discussion about the questions which will be posed to the couple at their wedding. To each question the bride and the groom must answer in the affirmative. Pondering these questions helps us to understand Matrimony as Sacrament. It is therefore that I deal with them in this pastoral letter.

The first question posed is: "Have you come here to enter into Marriage without coercion, freely and wholeheartedly?" Both respond: "I have." Answers in the affirmative to this question are these days thought of as self-evident. Parents no longer really plan, arrange, let alone coerce their children into marriage. Others seldom do so either. However, no doubt coercion and threatening may take place by one of the parties intending to get married. Yet, a valid marriage does not take place without the free consent and agreement of the bride and groom. This is the foundation from which we must proceed.

At the same time, it is crucial to prepare well for this step, often the most important one in a person's life. Indeed, no couple can get married merely on impulse. Rather, the couple must get to know each other. There are multiple kinds of matters to be considered. The meaning and challenges of marriage are discussed with the priest many times. One cannot stress enough the need for spiritual preparation: confession before the wedding ceremony, asking for the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit at the threshold of marriage. Before the marriage takes place, wedding banns are announced in the parish, because marriage is also a public matter and involves the whole parish.

The second question posed is “Are you prepared, as you follow the path of Marriage, to love and honor each other for as long as you both shall live?” Love, respect, and fidelity are the motives, as well as the conditions, of a good marriage. Without the will to love and to respect one another, the marriage will wither. Crucial in this matter are also the words “as long as you both shall live.” Love, respect, and fidelity cannot be experimented with. They cannot be put into practice for a certain time period, only. As a matter of fact, love, respect, and fidelity would lose their meaning if conditions were placed on them. For example, believing that should the couple face problems, the couple will divorce and the marriage will be dissolved. Diminishing the importance of fidelity is another example of a condition placed on the sacrament. Love, respect, and fidelity do not settle for less than until death. It is exactly here that we find the mystery and beauty of marriage at its most moving. It is even said in the Bible, in the Song of Songs: “Love is as strong as Death.”

The third question: “Are you prepared to accept children lovingly from God and to bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?” Behind this question is the natural thought that the sexual union of woman and man, their mutual self-giving, and their shared love, bears as its fruit life and grows a family. Yet, there are married couples that, for one reason or another, are unable to have children. Pope Francis writes in his exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (The Joy of Love) as follows: A child “is not something owed to one, but is a gift... according to the order of creation, conjugal love between a man and a woman, and the transmission of life are ordered to each other. Thus the Creator made man and woman share in the work of his creation and, at the same time, made them instruments of his love, entrusting to them the responsibility for the future of mankind, through the transmission of human life” (*Amoris laetitia* 81). “Every child has a right to receive love from a mother and a father; both are necessary for a child’s integral and harmonious development... We are speaking not simply of the love of father and mother as individuals, but also of their mutual love...both 'cooperate with the love of God the Creator, and are, in a certain sense, his interpreters' (*Gaudium et spes*, 50). They show their children the maternal and paternal face of the Lord” (*Amoris laetitia*, 172). The family forms a domestic church, within which the child’s faith, and all that it entails, can begin to grow. Already long before catechesis, the child can receive from his parents important examples of a good life and trust in God.

The matrimonial vows, which are often posed as questions, are the focal point of the wedding ceremony. The question given to the bridegroom and the bride is as follows: (Name), do you take (name) for your lawful wife (husband), to have and to hold, from this

day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do you part? By responding "I do" both declare their marriage vows.

This way the bride and the groom give themselves to one another. The promise "I do" is all-encompassing. It means the other person in his entirety, not just a part of the person. The other is received as he is, unconditionally. The commitment and the promise are made permanently, whatever the future may hold.

In marriage man and woman complement each other, with the purpose of saving each other and becoming united to one another. In St. Mark's Gospel we read the words of Jesus: "... from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. 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. Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate" (Mark 10:6-9).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches us about marriage: "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" (CCC1601). According to the teaching of the Latin Church, the Sacrament of Matrimony is born out of the spouses' mutual giving to one another. The Catechism explains the Sacrament as follows: "God who created man out of love also calls him to love the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. For man is created in the image and likeness of God who is himself love (1 John 4:8,6). Since God created him man and woman, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unending love with which God loves man... And this love which God blesses is intended to be fruitful..." (CCC 1604).

St. Paul sees in matrimony a picture of the love of the bridegroom, Christ, for His Bride, which is the Church. Referring to marriage, he says: "This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church" (Eph 5:32). A marriage must reflect the endless, great love of Christ for the Church. The spouses must aspire to the kind of love Christ has for the Church. When Christ talks about how God unites the spouses with one another, it illustrates that God is present in the Sacrament, that He gives it His blessing. The spouses get to know that God Himself is involved in their lives and with their family, protecting, loving, and supporting.

Dear brothers and sisters, we know that life, as well as marriage and family, are in many ways prone to becoming broken and even destroyed. There are various reasons for this. One of the causes may be, that a marriage and family are not joined in communion with God, prayer, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and the Sacraments. The marriage and the family may find themselves in trouble due to the lack of a spiritual life. This may be due to not having the experience of God's great love for us, of a love which can save mankind, and can again and again rekindle a love of God, and those to whom we are connected in life.

St. Paul the Apostle writes brilliantly about love in the First Letter to the Corinthians. It gives each of us support and guidance in life, in whichever situation we may find ourselves. This reading is often used during a wedding ceremony:

"Strive eagerly for the greatest spiritual gifts. The Way of Love. But I shall show you a still more excellent way. If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails" (1 Cor 12:31-13:8).

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