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What is Marriage?

Here are answers to some common questions about marriage, including "Can marriage really be lifelong?" and "How should married couples approach having chlldren?"

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1. What is marriage?

The vocation to marriage is inscribed in the very nature of man and woman, as they came from the hand of the Creator. Despite the many variations that marriage has undergone over the centuries in different cultures and social structures, there is always present a sense of the greatness of the marital union. Nevertheless, the dignity of this institution is not always apparent with the same clarity.

God, who created the human person out of love, has also called us to love, the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. As Genesis says, man was created in the image and likeness of God, who is Love. God having created man and woman, the mutual love between them becomes the image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God

loves man. This love is good, very good, in the eyes of the Creator.

Sacred Scripture affirms that man and woman were created for each other. Genesis says that "it is not good that man should be alone." The woman, "flesh of his flesh," his equal, the creature most like man himself, is given to him by God. "Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh." This indefectible union is explained by the Lord himself when he remembers what was "in the beginning," the Creator's plan: "So that they are no longer two but one flesh" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1603-1605).

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- You laugh because I tell you that you have a 'vocation for marriage'? Well, you have just that: a vocation. Commend yourself to the Archangel

> Raphael that he may keep you pure, as he did Tobias, until the end of the way. (*The Way*, 27)

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2. What did Christ say about marriage?

At the beginning of his public life, Jesus performs his first miracle at the request of his Mother on the occasion of a wedding feast (see St. John's account of the wedding feast at Cana: Jn 2:1-11). The Church attaches great importance to Jesus' presence at this wedding. She sees in it the confirmation of the goodness of marriage and the announcement that from now on marriage will be an effective sign of Christ's presence.

In his preaching, Jesus unambiguously taught the original meaning of the union of man and woman, as the Creator wanted it at

the beginning: the authorization given by Moses to disown his wife was a concession to people's hardness of heart; the marital union of man and woman is indissoluble. God himself established it: "What God has joined together, let no man put asunder" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1613-1614).

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- Their pure and noble love is a sacred thing. As a priest, I bless it with all my heart. Christian tradition has often seen in Christ's presence at the wedding feast in Cana a proof of the value God places on marriage. "Our Saviour went to the wedding feast," writes St Cyril of Alexandria, "to make holy the origins of human life."
- Marriage is a sacrament that makes one flesh of two bodies. Theology expresses this fact in a

> striking way when it teaches us that the matter of the sacrament is the bodies of husband and wife. Our Lord sanctifies and blesses the mutual love of husband and wife. He foresees, not only a union of souls, but a union of bodies as well. No Christian, whether or not he is called to the married state, has a right to underestimate the value of marriage. (*Christ is Passing By*, 24)

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3. What do we mean when we say that marriage is a sacrament?

The sacraments are sensible and efficacious signs of grace, instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ to sanctify us. The sacrament of Matrimony is one of the seven sacraments

instituted by Christ which, when received with the proper dispositions, give the grace which is a supernatural help to live marriage in a Christian way.

The unequivocal affirmation by Christ of the indissolubility of the marriage bond could cause perplexity and appear to be an unrealistic requirement. However, Jesus did not impose a heavy burden, impossible to bear, on spouses. Coming to restore the initial order of creation disturbed by sin, Jesus gives them strength and grace to live marriage in the new dimension of the Kingdom of God, through the sacrament of matrimony. This grace of Christian marriage is a fruit of the Cross of Christ, the source of all Christian life.

This is what the Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, refers to when he says: "Husbands, love your

wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her," adding immediately: "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1615-1616).

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- Matrimony is a holy sacrament. When the time comes for you to receive it, ask your spiritual adviser or your confessor to suggest a suitable book. And you will be better prepared to bear worthily the burdens of the home. (*The Way*, 26)

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4. How is the sacrament of matrimony celebrated?

According to the Latin tradition, the spouses confer the sacrament of marriage on each other when they express their consent before a representative of the Church. The spouses are then the ministers of the sacrament.

The priest (or deacon) who attends the celebration of the marriage receives the consent of the spouses in the name of the Church and gives the Church's blessing. The presence of the minister of the Church (and also of the witnesses) visibly expresses that marriage is an ecclesial reality.

For this reason, the Church ordinarily requires the ecclesiastical form of the celebration of marriage for her faithful. Several reasons concur to explain this requirement:

- Sacramental marriage is a liturgical act. Therefore, it is appropriate that it be

celebrated in the public liturgy of the Church.

- Marriage creates rights and duties in the Church between the spouses and towards the children.
- Since marriage is a state of life in the Church, there must be certainty about it (hence the obligation to have witnesses).
- The public nature of consent protects the "Yes" once given and helps spouses to remain faithful to it.

In the Latin Rite, the celebration of marriage between two Catholic faithful ordinarily -- but not necessarily -- takes place within the Holy Mass. The Eucharist is the memorial of the New Covenant, in which Christ is forever united to the Church, His beloved bride for whom He gave His life.

Since it is a sacrament, spouses must make themselves available to receive its grace. Therefore, it is fitting that they prepare themselves well for the celebration of their marriage by receiving the sacrament of Penance.

In this sacrament the spouses receive the Holy Spirit as a communion of love from Christ and the Church. The Holy Spirit is the seal of the covenant of the spouses, the ever-generous source of their love, the strength with which their fidelity will be renewed (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1621-1624).

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- Love which leads to marriage and family, can also be a marvellous divine way, a vocation, a path for a complete dedication to our God. What I have told you about doing things perfectly, about putting love into the little duties of each

> day, about discovering that 'divine something' contained in these details, finds a special place in that vital sphere in which human love is enclosed. (*Conversations*, 121)

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5. What is the essential aspect of the celebration of marriage? What is marital consent?

The protagonists of the marriage covenant are a baptized man and woman, free to enter into marriage and who freely express their consent. "To be free" means:

- not to be forced;
- not to be impeded by natural or ecclesiastical law.

The Church considers the exchange of consent between spouses as the indispensable element "that makes

up marriage." If consent is lacking, there is no marriage.

Consent consists of "a human act by which the spouses give and receive each other": "I receive you as my wife" and "I receive you as my husband" (*Ritual of the Celebration of Marriage*, 62). This consent which unites the spouses to each other finds its fullness in the fact that the two "become one flesh."

Consent must be an act of the will of each of the contracting parties, free from violence or serious external fear. No human power can replace this consent. If this freedom is lacking, marriage is invalid (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1625-1627).

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- To love is… to cherish but one thought, to live for the person loved, not to belong to oneself,

to be happily and freely, with one's heart and soul, subjected to another's will… and at the same time to one's own. (*Furrow*, 797)

- You have never felt so absolutely free as you do now that your freedom is interwoven with love and detachment, with security and insecurity; for you do not trust yourself at all, but trust in God for everything. (*Furrow*, 787)
- I constantly tell those who have been called by God to form a home to love one another always, to love each other with the love of their youth. Any one who thinks that love ends when the worries and difficulties that life brings with it begin, has a poor idea of marriage, which is a sacrament and an ideal and a vocation, It is precisely then that love grows strong. Torrents of worries and difficulties are

> incapable of drowning true love because people who sacrifice themselves generously together are brought closer by their sacrifice. As Scripture says, *aquae multae*, a host of difficulties, physical and moral, *non potuerunt extinguere caritatem*, cannot extinguish love (Cant 8:7). (*Conversations*, 91)

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6. Can the sacrament of matrimony be null?

For lack of freedom (or for other reasons that make the marriage null and void), the Church, after examining the situation by the competent ecclesiastical tribunal, can declare "the nullity of the marriage," that is, that the marriage never existed at all.

In order for the "Yes" of the spouses to be a free and responsible act, and for the marriage covenant to have a solid and stable human and Christian foundation, the preparation for marriage is of primary importance.

The example and teaching given by parents and families are the privileged way of this preparation.

The role of pastors and of the Christian community as "God's family" is indispensable for the transmission of the human and Christian values of marriage and the family, and this is all the more so in our age when many young people have experienced broken homes that no longer sufficiently ensure this initiation (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1625-1632).

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- As long as we walk on this earth, suffering will always be

the touchstone of love. If we were to describe what occurs in the married state, we could say that there are two sides to the coin. On the one hand, there is the joy of knowing that one is loved, the desire and enthusiasm involved in starting a family and taking care of it, the love of husband and wife, the happiness of seeing the children grow up. On the other hand, there are also sorrows and difficulties — the passing of time that consumes the body and threatens the character with the temptation to bitterness, the seemingly monotonous succession of days that are apparently always the same.

- We would have a poor idea of marriage and of human affection if we were to think that love and joy come to an end when faced with such

difficulties. It is precisely then that our true sentiments come to the surface. Then the tenderness of a person's gift of himself takes root and shows itself in a true and profound affection that is stronger than death. (*Christ is Passing By*, 24)

- Husband and wife are called to sanctify their married life and to sanctify themselves in it. It would be a serious mistake if they were to exclude family life from their spiritual development. The marriage union, the care and education of children, the effort to provide for the needs of the family as well as for its security and development, the relationships with other persons who make up the community, all these are among the ordinary human situations that Christian couples are called upon to sanctify. (*Christ is Passing By*, 23)

7. What are the effects of the sacrament of marriage?

The consent by which the spouses give and receive each other is sealed by God himself (cf. Mk 10:9). This is known as the bond of marriage and is established by God so that the marriage celebrated and consummated between the baptized can never be dissolved. This bond which results from the free human act of the spouses and the consummation of marriage is already an irrevocable reality and gives rise to a covenant guaranteed by God's fidelity. The Church has no power to overturn this disposition of divine wisdom.

The grace proper to the sacrament of Matrimony is destined to perfect the love of the spouses, to strengthen their indissoluble union. By means of

this grace "they help each other to sanctify themselves in married life and in the reception and education of children."

Christ is the source of this grace. "For just as God once found his people through a covenant of love and fidelity, so now the Savior of mankind and Spouse of the Church, through the sacrament of Matrimony, meets Christian spouses. He remains with them, he gives them the strength to follow him by taking up their cross, to rise after their falls, to forgive each other, to carry each other's burdens and to love each other with a supernatural, delicate and fruitful love. In the joys of his love and his family life he gives them, already here, an anticipated taste of heaven" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1639-1642).

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- It is important for married people to acquire a clear sense of the dignity of their vocation. They must know that they have been called by God not only to human love but also to a divine love, through their human love. It is important for them to realize that they have been chosen from all eternity to cooperate with the creative power of God by having and then bringing up children. Our Lord asks them to make their home and their entire family life a testimony of all the Christian virtues.
- I shall never tire of repeating that marriage is a great and marvelous divine path. Like everything divine in us, it calls for response to grace, generosity, dedication and service. Selfishness, in

> whatever shape or form, is opposed to the love of God which ought to govern our lives. This is a fundamental point which one must always bear in mind with regard to marriage and the number of children. (*Conversations*, 93)

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8. Can marriage really be lifelong?

"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 aims at a deeply personal unity, a unity that, beyond union in one flesh, leads to forming one heart and soul; it demands *indissolubility* and *faithfulness* in definitive mutual giving; and it is open to *fertility*. In a word it is a

question of the normal characteristics of all natural conjugal love, but with a new significance which not only purifies and strengthens them, but raises them to the extent of making them the expression of specifically Christian values" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1643).

The love of the spouses, by its very nature, requires the unity and indissolubility of the community of persons which embraces the entire life of the spouses: "So that they are no longer two but one flesh." This human communion is confirmed, purified and perfected by the communion in Christ given through the sacrament of matrimony. It is deepened by the shared life of faith and by the Eucharist received in common.

The unity of marriage, distinctly recognized by our Lord, is made

clear in the equal personal dignity which must be accorded to man and wife in mutual and unreserved affection. Polygamy is contrary to conjugal love, which is undivided and exclusive.

By its very nature, conjugal love demands from the spouses an inviolable fidelity. This is a consequence of the gift of self that the spouses make to each other. Authentic love itself tends to be something definitive, not something passing.

Its deepest motive consists in the fidelity of God to his covenant, of Christ to his Church. Through the sacrament of marriage the spouses are enabled to represent and witness to this fidelity. Through the sacrament, the indissolubility of marriage acquires a new and deeper meaning.

It may seem difficult, even impossible, to bind oneself for life to a human being. It is therefore all the more important to proclaim the good news that God loves us with a definitive and irrevocable love, that the spouses share in this love, which comforts and sustains them, and that by their fidelity they become witnesses of God's faithful love (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1644-1648).

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- With regard to chastity in married life, I can assure all married couples that they need not be afraid of showing affection for each other. On the contrary, this inclination is at the root of their family life. What our Lord expects from them is that they should respect each other and that they should be loyal to each other; that they

should act with refinement, naturalness and modesty. I must also tell them that the dignity of their conjugal relations is a result of the love that is expressed in them. And there will be love if those relations are open to fruitfulness, to bringing children into the world.

- When there is chastity in the love of married persons, their marital life is authentic; husband and wife are true to themselves, they understand each other and develop the union between them. When the divine gift of sex is perverted, their intimacy is destroyed, and they can no longer look openly at each other. (*Christ is Passing By*, 25)

9. How should married couples approach having children?

Children are the most excellent gift of marriage and contribute greatly to the good of their parents. God himself who said, "It is not good that man should be alone," and who made man and woman from the beginning, wishing to communicate to them a certain special participation in their own creative work, blessed the man and the woman by saying: "Be fruitful and multiply."

Hence the true development of conjugal love and the rich family life that flows from it, without allowing the other ends of marriage to be postponed, produces in the spouses the strength to cooperate with the love of their Creator and Saviour, who through them increases and enriches their own family more and more every day.

Sanctifying the home day by day, creating, with love, an authentic family atmosphere: that is what marriage is all about.

Parents are the main and first educators of their children. In this sense, the fundamental task of marriage and the family is to be at the service of life.

Spouses to whom God has not granted children can nevertheless have a conjugal life full of meaning, in both human and Christian terms. Their marriage can radiate the fruitfulness of charity, of hospitality, and of sacrifice (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1643-1654).

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- I am moved that the Apostle should call Christian marriage *sacramentum magnum* — a great sacrament. From this, too, I deduce the enormous

importance of the task of parents.

- —You share in the creative power of God: that is why human love is holy, good and noble. It is a gladness of heart which God — in his loving providence — wants others freely to give up. —Each child that God grants you is a wonderful blessing from him: don’t be afraid of children! (*The Forge*, 691)
- Listen to your children. Give them your time, even the time that you have reserved for yourselves. Show them your confidence; believe whatever they tell you, even if sometimes they try to deceive you. Don't be afraid when they rebel, because, at their age, you yourselves were more or less rebellious. Go to meet them half-way and pray for them. If you act in this Christian

manner, they will come to you with simplicity, instead of trying to satisfy their legitimate curiosity by taking it to some rough or vulgar friend. Your confidence, your friendly dealings with your children, will receive an answer in their sincerity in dealing with you. Then, even if there are quarrels and lack of understanding, they will never amount to much; and this is what peace in the family and a truly Christian life mean. (*Christ is Passing By*, 29)

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10. What does the expression "domestic church" refer to?

Christ wanted to be born and grow up in the bosom of the Holy Family of Joseph and Mary. The Church is nothing other than the family of God.

In our day, in a world that is often distanced and even hostile to the faith, families that practice their faith are of primary importance as beacons of a living and radiating faith. That is why the Second Vatican Council calls the family, with an ancient expression, the "domestic church." Within the family, parents must be for their children the first heralds of the faith by word and example.

This is where the baptismal priesthood of the father, the mother, the children, all the members of the family, is exercised in a privileged way "in the reception of the sacraments, in prayer and thanksgiving, with the witness of a holy life, with renunciation and love that is shown in deeds." The home is thus the first school of Christian life and "the school of the richest humanism." Here one learns patience and the joy of work,

fraternal love, generous forgiveness, even repeated, and above all divine worship through prayer and the offering of one's life (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1655-1657).

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- They will achieve this aim by exercising the virtues of faith and hope, facing serenely all the great and small problems which confront any family, and persevering in the love and enthusiasm with which they fulfil their duties. In this way they practice the virtue of charity in all things. They learn to smile and forget about themselves in order to pay attention to others. Husband and wife will listen to each other and to their children, showing them that they are really loved and understood. They will forget about the

unimportant little frictions that selfishness could magnify out of proportion. They will do lovingly all the small acts of service that make up their daily life together.

- The aim is this: to sanctify family life, while creating at the same time a true family atmosphere. Many christian virtues are necessary in order to sanctify each day of one's life. First, the theological virtues, and then all the others: prudence, loyalty, sincerity, humility, industriousness, cheerfulness.... But when we talk about marriage and married life, we must begin by speaking clearly about the mutual love of husband and wife. (*Christ is Passing By*, 23)
- I still pray aloud the bedside prayers I learnt as a child from my mother's lips, and I say so with the pride and gratitude of

> a son. They bring me closer to God and make me feel the love with which I learned to take my first steps as a Christian. And as I offer to God the day that is beginning, or thank Him for the day that is drawing to a close, I ask him to increase, in heaven, the happiness of those whom I especially love and to unite us there forever. (*Conversations*, 103)

11. Does the Church allow spouses to separate?

There are situations in which living together in marriage becomes practically impossible for a variety of reasons. In such cases, the Church admits the physical separation of the spouses and the end of cohabitation. The spouses do not cease to be husband and wife before God; nor are they free to enter into a new union. In this difficult situation, the

best solution would be, if possible, reconciliation. The Christian community is called to help these people to live their situation in a Christian way in fidelity to their marriage bond which remains indissoluble (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1649).

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