

Tract 9: Why Is Marriage a Sacrament?

An immediate response to the question above could be something like, “Marriage is a sacrament because it is one of the seven signs that Jesus instituted and entrusted to the Church in order to dispense grace to us.” However, this answer is not completely satisfying, because upon hearing this rather rote response one might immediately ask, “But what does it really mean to call marriage a sacrament?” The answer to this question is deeper and richer than the questioner might imagine, because it takes us back to the dawn of time, and impinges upon our understanding of the human person, the human person’s relationship to God, and our understanding of salvation.

Now, more than ever, it is important to understand why marriage is a sacrament. Now, more than ever, it is important to understand what marriage is a sacramental sign of, because our culture is quickly forgetting what marriage is; and, should we forget what marriage is, and what it is a sign of, we will forget what it means to be human and we will forget our relationship with God. Thus marriage is more important than many people realize! It is, in fact, an irreplaceable sacrament for understanding human existence and our ultimate destiny.

Marriage as the Primordial Sacrament of God’s Love

First of all, marriage is a sign that is fundamental to understanding the history of salvation. In fact, God’s plan to save us can be read in terms of marriage. The history of salvation, as recorded in the Bible, begins and ends with marriages. In Genesis, the first book of the Bible, we see God creating Adam and Eve and calling them to marriage, where the two become one (Gen 2:24), giving them the command to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it (Gen 1:28). In the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, we are told that all of salvation history culminates with the

marriage of Christ and the Church—the wedding feast of the Lamb (Rev 19:6–9). In between the first and last books of the Bible, we see the greatest of all love stories unfold—it is the story of God’s plan to wed himself to humanity! The prophets of the Old Testament often presented God as Israel’s Spouse (see Isa 62) and compared Israel’s relationship with God to marriage (Hos 2:18–20, 3:1; Jer 3:20, 30:14; 31:1–3; Ezek 15:8–15, 16:59–60, 62–63). In the New Testament, Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a wedding feast (Matt 22:1–14) and presents himself as the Bridegroom (Matt 9:14; 22:1–2; 25:1). St. Paul speaks about Christ as the Bridegroom who has come to offer himself for the sanctification of his Bride, the Church (see Eph 5). In fact, God created marriage in order to provide us with a living sign of the love that he offers us in this greatest of love stories.

It was Pope St. John Paul II, in a work called *Theology of the Body*, who called marriage the “primordial sacrament” of God’s love. By this he meant that God created marriage to be a sign of his love from the very beginning of creation. In other words, if we ask, “Why does marriage exist?” the answer is that God created man and woman and called them together in marriage in order to be a constant sign, the first sacrament, of the type of love that God wants to share with us. From the dawn of time, he wanted spouses to experience married love as a pointer to his love. He wants everyone to be able to look at married couples and be able to say, “That’s how much God loves me—right there!”

The special love that God offers to us human persons is called the love of the covenant. God established his covenant first with Adam and Eve, and he renewed it several times throughout salvation history—with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, with David, and finally with Jesus Christ, who established the definitive covenant between God and humanity. The essence of the covenant that God forged and continually renewed with humanity is, “I will be your God. You will be my people” (see Gen 17:7; Exod 6:7; Lev 26:12; Jer 7:23, 11:4, 30:22, 31:1, 33, 32:38; Ezek 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; 37:23, 27; Zech 8:8; 2 Cor 6:16; Heb 8:10; Rev 21:3, 7). This covenant is literally a mutual exchange of persons. While a covenant might have contractual elements to it, the covenant that God enters into with humanity is not a simple contract. Contracts normally govern the exchange of goods or services, but the biblical understanding of a covenant involves the unrestrained and unrestricted mutual handing over of both parties to each other. God freely gives his very self to his people, and he asks his people to make a free, mutual gift of self to him in return.

In the pages of Sacred Scripture, we can see that this covenantal love that God offers to humanity has *four distinctive qualities*. First of all, God’s

covenantal love for humanity is *free*. God was not compelled to create, because he is utterly sufficient in himself. Nor, once he created, was he obliged to offer any of his creatures a special share in his life. Yet, the God who is Love (1 John 4:8) freely chose to create and freely chose to enter into a covenantal relationship of mutual self-donation with human persons (see Jas 1:5; Rom 8:32). He freely gives himself and he accepts only a free response. *Second*, God's offering of covenantal love is *faithful*. God is the ever-faithful God who always keeps his promises (Deut 7:9). Once he pledges himself to this relationship of mutual self-donation with humanity, he will never revoke his promise. *Third*, God's covenantal love is *forever*. Donating himself totally in this relationship means that this relationship is permanent. He and his people will always be bound together (Ps 136:1–3). *Fourth*, and finally, God's covenantal love is *fruitful* (Isa 55:11). When he gives himself to his people, he wants them to bear fruit in their relationship with him (see Isa 55:11; Luke 13:6–9; John 15:5, 8).

Married love is the *only* love in the created order that possesses these same four qualities. From the beginning, all true marriages have possessed these four qualities, and the uniqueness of married love that is defined by these four qualities can be perceived through human reason. In other words, understanding what marriage is, is a matter of *reason*, not faith! However, our current society is losing its ability to reason to truth. Thankfully, the Catholic rite of marriage reminds all of us about the truth of marriage and what marriage is.

In *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony*, prior to exchanging their consent, there are three questions that are asked of the couple. The presiding priest or deacon asks the following (I have added italics to emphasize the four qualities of married love):

Have you come here to enter into Marriage without coercion, *freely* and wholeheartedly?

The bridegroom and bride each say: I have.

Are you prepared, as you follow the path of Marriage, to love and honor *each other* for *as long as you both shall live*?

The bridegroom and bride each say: I am.

Are you prepared to accept *children* lovingly from God and to bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?

The bridegroom and bride each say: I am.

Notice that the first question pertains to the *freedom* of the couple's mutual self-gift. There is no such thing as a valid "shotgun" wedding. No one can be forced to give a gift of himself/herself to another. The gift must be free!

The second question asks about the couple's intention to live *faithfully for each other*. This is an exclusive relationship into which no one else can intrude. There is no such thing as "open" marriage.

The second question also asks if the couple is willing to be permanently bound to each other *as long as you both shall live* until death. A total mutual gift of self requires permanence, and as Jesus teaches, there is no such thing as divorce (see Matt 19:3–9; Mark 10:2–12; Luke 16:18).

The third question in the marriage rite asks the couple if they are willing to be fruitful by *accepting children from God* and educating them in his truth. It is not possible to want marriage without being open to children. This is part of God's original plan for marriage, and married love is unique among all human loves because married couples can express their love through their bodies in a certain way, and nine months later you may have to give that expression of love a name!

Notice that the four qualities of married love—free, faithful, forever, fruitful—are the same four qualities of God's covenantal love for humanity. This is not an accident! God designed marriage to be a living sign, the primordial sacrament, a sign from the beginning, of his covenantal love. This is why we call marriage a covenant.

Notice also that *only* a man and a woman can participate in a love that possesses *all four* of these qualities. In fact, marriage is a visible sign precisely through the complementarity of the male and female bodies of the spouses! This is why people of the same sex cannot be married. Between two people of the same sex, the complementarity does not exist for them to receive completely each other's gift, soul and body, and share a love that is free, faithful, forever, *and* fruitful. Thus the male body of the husband and the female body of the wife together are the physical, visible sign of God's love!

In the Catholic rite of marriage, when a man and a woman answer in the affirmative to all of the above questions, they are saying that they want marriage. They are proclaiming that they want to share in married love as it was designed by God from the beginning with all that marriage entails. If they say "no" to any of the above questions, they make it known that they do not want to participate in married love. They can go ahead and have the party they had planned to have that evening, but they will not be husband

and wife. No one can be husband and wife who do not pledge to live a love that is free, faithful, forever, and fruitful.

After a couple has made it known that they intend to offer married love to each other, the priest, or deacon, who officiates the wedding asks the couple to exchange their consent by saying (*italics added*):

Since it is your intention to enter the *covenant* of Holy Matrimony, join your right hands, and declare your consent before God and his Church.

The couple then says to each other:

I, take you, to be my wife/husband. I promise to be faithful to you, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, to love you and to honor you all the days of my life.

This is the public statement, before God and the community, to hand themselves over to each other in the covenant of marriage. It is a public vow to enter into a mutual exchange of persons—a covenant.

God has created humanity male and female with such intense personal complementarity that a man and a woman can give themselves totally and completely to each other in the covenant of marriage—soul and body. This means that marriage will satisfy a person's deep longing for intimacy only to the extent that it images God's covenantal love, because that is what marriage is designed to do from the beginning—to be a living sign of God's love as the primordial sacrament!

However, marriage is the primordial sacrament not only because it is a sign of God's covenantal love for us, but also because God intended marriage to be a sign of his own inner life of love. The Book of Genesis tells us that we are made male and female in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:27). From all eternity, the God in whose image we are made is an infinitely intimate communion of persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From all eternity, in the inner life of the One God, this Trinity of persons pour themselves out in love to each other. In the created order, it is the complementarity of male and female sexuality that allows us to image God's inner life of love and to be gift for each other.

Pope St. John Paul II noted that being made in the image of the tri-personal God, human persons are made to be self-giving gifts. In fact, we cannot find happiness without giving ourselves to God and others in love—this is essential to what it means to be a person!

As embodied persons, our sexuality is meant to be a constant reminder that we are meant to be gift. John Paul II called this the “spousal meaning of the body.” By this he meant that our bodies reveal to us that we have the capacity for love, self-giving, and to enter into a communion of love. The complementarity of the male and female bodies shows us that we are built for communion with others. This is true for everyone, even if a particular individual never gets married. Marriage is the fundamental communion of persons upon which all other forms of human communion are based. The human communion of persons of marriage is supposed to be, in God’s design, a sign pointing to the Communion of Persons who is God!

John Paul II also spoke of a “language of the body” that is spoken by spouses in the marital act. He pointed out how the marital act is designed to “speak” a language of mutual self-donation. This “language,” when spoken in truth, is a sign of God’s inner life of self-giving love and a sign of God’s covenantal love for humanity. Through “the language of the body,” spouses pour themselves out to each other, speaking a covenantal language, expressing their wedding vows through their bodies. As the two become one flesh, their bodies “speak” the language that entails making a free gift to each other that is faithful, total, and therefore permanent, and open to bearing fruit. Only a man and a woman joined in marriage can “speak” this language of the body truthfully, and any attempt to engage in sexual activity outside of the marital covenant forces the body to speak a lie.

So, from the beginning, the duality of the sexes and the total reciprocal love of husband and wife that can be spoken through their bodies due to the complementarity of gender was designed to be the primordial sign of God’s covenantal love for us, as well as a sign of his own inner life of self-giving love. In the words of St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, marriage is a “great mystery,” and it is in fact a greater mystery than many people realize, a mystery that stands at the center of our understanding of God, the infinite Communion of Persons, and his covenantal relationship with us!

Marriage as a Sacrament of Redemption

However, St. Paul’s words about marriage being a “great mystery” were not just about marriage as it was created by God in the beginning as the primordial sacrament of his love. With the Incarnation, marriage is not only the primordial sacrament, but it is now also a sacrament of redemption—a sacrament that brings us Christ’s saving love!

Christian marriage is a sacrament of redemption first of all because it is a sign of how God’s redeeming love is offered to us. God the Son offers us

his redemptive, restorative love *as the Bridegroom*! It is on the Cross that *the* Bridegroom pours himself out completely and totally for his Bride, holding nothing back. Thus redemptive love is nuptial love! In offering his very self, body and soul, out of love for his Bride, Jesus sanctifies her in his blood and saves her. The sacraments themselves pour out of Christ's pierced side as he makes his offering of total self-giving on the Cross. This is why John Paul II said that marriage is the sacrament of redemption, because it is out of Christ's nuptial love for his Bride that redemption occurs. Thus nuptial love is the source of and the model of the other sacraments!

Marriage is also a sacrament of redemption because it is one of the seven particular signs that Christ entrusted to the Church that allow us to unite ourselves to him and receive his grace. It is incredibly important to note that Jesus worked his first public miracle at a wedding (see John 2:1–9, the Wedding Feast at Cana). This makes sense when you realize that God intended marriage to be the primordial sign of his love in the world. The fact that Jesus worked his first public miracle at a wedding, turning approximately 120 to 180 gallons of water into fine wine, is a sign that he has come to restore God's plan for married love and to elevate it. In the beginning, Adam and Eve possessed the gifts of original holiness and justice (see *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§3775–79), and they had the ability to pass on these gifts to their progeny, but they lost these gifts when they sinned and fell from grace. At the wedding feast at Cana, Jesus's miracle is a sign that he has come to restore and reaffirm God's plan for married love and to offer abundant graces to Christian married couples to live out this plan.

Throughout Scripture, wine is one of the symbols of God's favor and love (see Deut 7:13; 11:14; 33:28; Ps 104:15; Isa 55:1; Jer 31:12; Joel 2:24; Amos 9:14). Christ comes to bless and restore the wine of marriage, marital love, in superabundance. The *Catechism* itself tells us that, "without Christ's help man and woman cannot achieve the union of their lives for which God created them 'in the beginning'" (§1608). In the miracle that he works at Cana, Jesus shows us that he blesses married love and that he will give married couples the love that they need to achieve the union for their lives that God designed.

All married couples will, at times, feel like they have run out of wine in their marriages. However, love is not a feeling or an emotion. Love is an act of the will, and the essence of love is willing the good of the other. The truest love is committing oneself to the good of the other to the point that it entails selflessness and self-sacrifice. *This* is the type of love that Jesus comes to restore.

I am convinced that the reason for marital break-ups is the fact that, when engaged couples are asked, “Why do you want to get married?” many respond, “I want to be happy.” Now, don’t get me wrong, it is reasonable for people to expect that getting married will bring some amount of happiness to their lives. If someone gets married because he or she wants to be unhappy, then this is surely a sign of pathology. Yet, the commitment of marriage is not a commitment to an expectation of happiness. Marriage is not about “happily ever after,” which only exists in fairy-tales, but about “committed ever after.” If you look at the wedding vows (above) in the Catholic rite of matrimony, there is no promise for what one spouse hopes to get, other than promising to receive the totality of the other spouse (“I . . . take you . . .”). Instead, each spouse is promising to give all of himself/herself in service to the good of the other. It is in living out this mutual commitment of self-donation and service to the other’s good that married couples have the opportunity to find happiness, even amidst good times and bad, health and sickness.

Jesus comes not to renew the “feelings” of married love, but to continually renew a married couple’s *commitment* to each other. He makes this clear when, in response to the Pharisees’ question about the practice of divorce, he says that marriage is permanent because it was designed to be so from the beginning (see Matt 19: 3–9; Mark 2–12). This is where Jesus definitively affirms that he has come to restore God’s plan for marriage, the primordial sacrament of God’s love. We must remember that Jesus does not ask anything of us that he does not also give us the grace to achieve.

In the Incarnation, the Son of God comes to redeem the human race and to give us his love in superabundance. Jesus comes to transform our hearts so we can love God and each other by participating in divine love. This includes giving the grace to spouses to assist them in overcoming selfishness and empowering them to selflessly sacrifice for each other the way Christ selflessly sacrificed himself out of love for his beloved Bride, the Church. Jesus has come to transform marriage from something that was holy from the beginning into something that is holy-making! He has taken the created reality of marriage and supernaturalized it. If the natural purpose of marriage, from the beginning, is procreation and the mutual support of the spouses, the supernatural purpose of marriage is for the spouses to aid in the sanctification of each other, to assist in getting each other to heaven, and to put any children that God may give them on that same path. In order to accomplish this supernatural task, Jesus comes to incorporate Christian spouses into the love that he has for his Bride, not some fake counterfeit of love. He does this in the sacrament of marriage.

St. Paul points to marriage as one of the seven sacraments when, quoting

Gen 2:24, in his Letter to the Ephesians he says: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one.’ This is a great *mystery*, and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church” (5:31–32; emphasis added). The Greek word that St. Paul uses for “mystery” is *mysterion*. In Latin this is translated as *sacramentum*. Both the Greek and the Latin words mean “sign.” So, St. Paul is saying that the marriage of Christians is a great sign in reference to Christ and the Church. In the verses of Ephesians chapter 5 that precede this statement, St. Paul exhorts couples to participate in the love that Christ shares with his Church when he says: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. . . . As the Church is subject to Christ, so let wives be subject in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her” (5:21, 24–25). St. Paul goes on to say more so that it is clear that Christian spouses are to pour themselves out in loving care for each other, loving each other as Christ loves, encountering Christ through each other. St. Paul knows that Christian spouses cannot do this without Christ gifting them with his love.

It is the sacrament of marriage that *empowers a couple to love with Jesus’s love* and to image God’s selfless love in a communion of persons. Thus Jesus elevates the primordial sacrament of marriage to a sacrament of his redeeming love. By binding a man and a woman together in the sacrament of marriage through their mutual consent and incorporating them into his covenant with the Church, Jesus seeks to live his life again through the married couple. This means that every Christian married couple is called by Jesus to go through the Passion together and to die to sin together in order to experience the resurrection of their love. The passion of marriage is experienced in suffering the conversion of each other, and the death in marriage is each spouse dying to his or her own ego in order to be able to live for the other.

The grace of the sacrament of marriage, which is to love with Jesus’s spousal love, is constantly available throughout married life. Christian spouses need only lean in to Jesus. As the heavenly Bridegroom, he continuously offers Christian spouses the grace to stoke the fire of his love in their hearts. Additionally, the grace that he offers spouses in the sacrament of marriage is particularized to each couple. This is true for every sacrament. Although Jesus offers a particular type of grace in each of the sacraments, each sacrament is an intensely personal encounter with the Risen Christ. For instance, in the sacrament of reconciliation, the type of grace offered is the grace of forgiveness of sins. Yet, encountering Jesus personally in this sacrament, he offers the grace to each of us to help us struggle with and overcome our own

particular sins. In the sacrament of marriage, Jesus empowers a couple to love each other with his love, and he assists a couple to deal with their particular marital struggles so as to be living signs of his redemptive love in the world!

Conclusion

So, why is marriage a sacrament? Marriage is a sacrament, a great sign, because it is a sign of God's covenantal love for humanity, a sign of God's own inner life of love, and between baptized Christians it is an effective sign of Christ's redemptive love for his Church. Whether our culture wants to recognize it or not, marriage will always bear the imprint of God's love, and it will always have the potential to remind us of the Love that God is and the love that he offers to us—a love that will find its fulfillment in the next life when we are all wed to the One Spouse—Jesus Christ!

Marriage is worth living well not only for those who are called to the married life, but in order to lead the world back to God's love—because marriage, made possible by the duality of the sexes, was created by God and stands at the heart of our relationship with him. If we forget about marriage, we will forget about the type of love that God offers to each of us and the type of loving communion into which he beckons us. We will also forget about the redemptive love that the heavenly Bridegroom offers to his Church and the ultimate goal of our existence. In a real sense, if we forget about God's plan for marriage, everything is at stake! That is why marriage is a sacrament.

May all married couples rely upon God's grace to live out the vocation to which they have been called and which they have freely embraced—and may all Christian spouses recognize that in Jesus they have the greatest ally in living out their marriage vows. For those who have conferred the sacrament of marriage on each other, Jesus dwells in their marital commitment and ensures them that nothing they experience in this life can extinguish their love, because *absolutely nothing* can extinguish his love. This is a sacrament, a sign, that the world desperately needs!