

CHAPTER 49

Marriage and Family in Christianity

In the beginning, at the creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be made one with his wife and the two shall become one flesh.

— Mk. 10:6-8

The sacrament of marriage

Marriage in the Christian tradition is a sacrament, the sanctification of the union of a man and a woman for a life together and for procreation. A sacrament is a sacred act and under a visible sign, the invisible gift of the Holy Spirit is conferred. The sacraments, of which there are seven (Baptism, Confession, Holy Communion, Confirmation, Marriage, Holy Orders and the Last Rites) may only be administered by the established church. For a Christian, marriage is thus intimately connected to his or her spiritual life and salvation. It is a sacrament to restore the chastity that was lost at the time of the Fall of Adam and Eve as is recorded in the Bible.

Through marriage two lives are united into one through the sacrament of love administered by the minister or priest during the wedding service. Marriage lays the foundation for the family. It is holy because it anticipates the Kingdom of Heaven and in itself constitutes a little kingdom.

The model for understanding marriage is the Christian view of God as Trinity. The three persons of the Trinity—the Father, Son and Holy Spirit—are united into oneness through love. A married person is in the image of the triune God. Thus, marriage is regarded as “the union of two persons in one being, a single substance”, or “the union in one body and soul, but in two persons.”

The traditional purpose of marriage is three-fold. It is a relationship of conjugal love between the spouses, for their mutual support and comfort; it is the proper place for sexual intercourse; and it is for the procreation of children.

The marriage service

The marriage service usually takes place in a church, is ministered by a priest or minister and is attended by family, friends and relatives. In recognition of marriage as a social institution, it is an event through which the wedding couple declare publicly before God and those



When husband and wife are united in marriage, they are no longer seen as something earthly, but as the image of God Himself.

— John Chrysostom,
early Christian saint



“Love should be essentially an act of will, of decision to commit my life completely to that of one other person. This is, indeed, the rationale behind the idea of the insolubility of marriage, as it is behind the many forms of traditional marriage in which the two partners never choose each other, but are chosen for each other—yet are expected to love each other.”

— Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*

present their intentions. Traditionally, the bride is dressed in white, symbolizing purity.

In the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, the couple confess their sins to a priest before the service and receive absolution. They then receive Holy Communion. After the Divine Liturgy, they turn their thoughts to the image of marriage, which according to St. Paul is the union of the church with Christ.

The traditional elements of a Christian marriage service are:

1. A time of welcome during which the couple and all those present are reminded about what is at stake in a marriage.
2. Scriptural reading so that those present may reflect on the significance of marriage in light of Christian teaching.
3. A time of prayer in which the church invites the couple and the congregation to beseech God's presence and support to the marrying couple to be sustained throughout their lives.
4. Recitation of the wedding vows by the minister or priest, sometimes together with the couple, the latter giving their public assent to love, comfort, honor and keep each other as long as they shall live; to cherish each other for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, throughout their lives.
5. Expressions of unity: the joining of hands and the exchanging of rings symbolize the couple's promise of lifelong fidelity to each other.
6. Blessing prayer in which the minister or priest invokes God's blessing upon the marriage of the man and woman.
7. Pronouncement of the marriage in which the minister or priest pronounces them man (husband) and wife, sometimes adding “those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder”, thus asserting the eternal nature of the marital union.

Virginity, celibacy and chastity

When a couple marry, they should be virgins. This is a state of integrity in which the couple have not wasted or misdirected the sexual forces of their bodies and souls. Instead they have preserved them for their proper fulfillment in marriage. Physically speaking, a virgin is someone, man or woman, who has not had sexual intercourse. However, the church has always recognized that it is the inner quality of innocence and purity that is most important. Marriage does not extinguish this quality if a person's heart remains pure in front of God and, in a woman, virginity blossoms into motherhood.

You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

— Matt. 5:27-30

Celibacy is the state of a person who has taken a vow, usually a religious one, not to marry or have sexual relations. Monks and nuns are people who have taken a vow to live celibate lives. They have decided to dedicate their lives exclusively to God and, in a sense, are married to God.

An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband.

— 1 Cor. 7:32-43

Chastity is the preservation of sexual purity according to one's state in life—virginity for the unmarried, continence for the widowed, and fidelity for the married. In Christianity, the violation of chastity, either by fornication or adultery, is regarded as one of the worst sins.

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? Therefore, honor God with your body.

— 1 Cor. 6:18-20

Conjugal love

The Bible is full of stories about love. There are stories of couples who were deeply in love with each other, such as Jacob who loved Rachel so much that he was prepared to work for her father for seven years before being allowed to marry her (Genesis 29). In another story Elkanah comforts Hannah his wife, who desperately wanted children, by telling her that she is "worth more than ten sons." (1 Sam. 1:8) There is praise for faithfulness based on a love that can outlive death. There is celebration of fidelity towards the "love of one's youth." Then, there are the stories of Samson and Delilah, and David and Bathsheba, which depict the power of selfish love and lust, and how it can corrupt and destroy individuals, families and whole societies.

St. Paul wrote about the beauty of unconditional love. It is this quality of love that should be brought to a marriage by both partners.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

— 1 Cor. 13:4-8



Love is very mysterious. It can come and go suddenly, seemingly without explanation. Christians believe that human love is unstable because people are very changeable due to the Fall. Conjugal love is particularly vulnerable. It can become dry and empty if the couple tire of one another. Sexual love (*eros*) is so powerful that it can corrupt a relationship as well as the spiritual life of the couple.

Erotic love is usually associated with sexual attraction. It is egocentric and seeks after its own happiness.

In contrast, *agape* love is absolutely selfless and seeks the happiness of others, thus expressing the essence of God's love towards people.

In other words erotic love is passion-love. I want you so that *I* can be happy. I want to *receive*. On the other hand *agape* love is altruistic-love. I want to give to you so that *you* can be happy. I want to *give*.

God's love is always fresh and unchanging. As God is the parent of all humankind, in sanctifying our marriage God is entrusting us with one of his sons or daughters. Like any good parent, God is concerned about the well being and happiness of his children. He does not want us to be hurt. If we can love our spouse with the love that God has for that person, that love will never die but will become deeper and stronger. It means that only love that is engrafted to the love of God can assume the respon-

sibility of marriage. In this way *agape* is able to transform *eros*. Human love is raised up to the level of divine love.

"The love of God and the love of man are not two loves, but aspects of the same unifying love."

— Maximus the Confessor, Greek theologian

The goal is that the "two should become one." For this, it is necessary for each partner to give up his or her "self-ness". Each must grow until they are able to live and die for one another. Each becomes part of a new unity, a new and higher level of existence. To be happy, both spouses have to be happy. One cannot be happy without the other. No decision is made in isolation. The pain of one becomes the pain of both. Whatever you do, the other is involved. In the Orthodox marriage ceremony the man and woman are crowned. These crowns refer to the martyrdom of love that each will go through on the painful course to becoming one as they drink the one cup of life.

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

— 1 Jn. 4:12

Here it must be said that loving someone is quite different from liking someone. There are always traits and qualities that a loving couple dislike in each other. It may be arrogance, laziness, talkativeness or impatience. It may be some habit or taste inherited from a parent. How does one deal with traits one dislikes? The intimate nature of married life makes it a greater spiritual challenge than the monastic life. In

other social groups one can avoid a person who has irritating traits. You can control yourself and put up with another's exasperating traits for a limited time. But in a marriage there is no escape. You have to come to terms with your marriage partner and learn to accept him or her, warts and all.

Christians believe that through the sacrament of marriage God's blessing and grace will help the couple face and overcome their difficulties. God's love helps a couple to love each other and to change and grow. Without that loving support a marriage can soon end up "on the rocks." Marriage is thus a place for spiritual growth, the overcoming of self-centeredness and the denial of self. For it to work, each partner must be absolutely committed to the other. We are challenged to deny ourselves as we are confronted with the uglier parts of our character and those of our partner. As you can see, marriage is a responsibility not to be undertaken lightly.

Parental love

The Christian family should be a place where one's faith is experienced and lived all day everyday.

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

— Col. 3: 18-21

A family is based on the dynamic of love between husband and wife as well as between parents and children. In the same way that God's love is creative, human love also strives to be creative. In creating children conjugal love gives rise to parental love. Christians should see their children as a gift from God. Marriage involves giving up one's singleness as each spouse becomes a part of the other and form the entity of a couple. With the arrival of children parents find themselves giving more and more of themselves as they become a family. In this process each family member is challenged to discover new dimensions to his or her character. It is one of the paradoxes of the spiritual life that self-fulfillment comes only through self-denial.

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.

— Lk. 9:24

The model for parental love is God's love, that is, it is completely self-giving and sacrificial. As Jesus lived and died for humankind, good parents will live and die for their children. Parental love should not be given in expectation of being appreciated. Such love is its own reward. A mother's love for her child fills her own life and enriches it. Love should be given for its own sake. Parental love should be freely given and the children's growth to independence welcomed. The child belongs not to the parent but to God. Thus, his or her freedom and own portion of responsibility have to be respected.

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

Jn. 15:12-13

Through marriage and parenthood Christians have the opportunity to experience God's love and understand His character more deeply. It is interesting that in the Bible God's relationship to man is frequently described using the metaphors of marriage and family.

Divorce

Christian marriage is regarded as a covenant, a binding relationship of mutual loyalty. The promises made during the marriage ceremony are for life. Of course, like any relationship the marital one is subject to stresses and strains, but the expectation is that if something goes wrong there will be repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. A model for this relationship is that between God and Israel in the Old Testament. Although Israel was often unfaithful God was always willing to forgive. Thus, there has always been a strong theological prejudice in Christianity against divorce.

It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

— Matt. 5:31-32



Tragically, not all marriages work. Sometimes they breakdown. The causes of marital breakdown vary but the outcome is always the same: the death of love.

Divorce is a declaration of the absence or destruction of love. It is a recognition that a marriage has died. One of the main causes of marital breakdown is adultery. Marriage only becomes real through love. Adultery, however, destroys the mystical essence of marriage and causes the death of love. In permitting divorce (or annulment in Catholicism) Christianity shows its respect for the person and for the sacrament of love. However, traditionally churches made divorce difficult because they wanted to prevent easy divorces and instead encourage couples to work on their difficulties and try to overcome them. Some have argued that since marriage is an important social institution, divorce should not be permitted except under extreme circumstances, such as repeated infidelity or abuse on the part of one of the partners. However, the trend in recent decades has been to loosen the requirements for divorce, with the implication that one's individual happiness took precedence over the social welfare.

Questions for Discussion



- In what way does becoming a parent give a person an opportunity to deepen his or her relationship with God?
- What does it mean in practice to say that "the two should become one"?
- What is the difference between liking and loving? Is it possible to love someone you do not like?
- What is the difference between a religious marriage and a civil marriage?