

PASTORAL LETTER



WHAT CAN MARRIAGE OFFER?

*The Most Reverend Gerard J Holohan
Bishop of Bunbury*

June 2012

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ

One of the current great debates in our society is the question: ‘What is a marriage?’ There are so many different points of view.

In many ways marriage has been trivialised over recent decades. Major media figures, for example, have suggested that divorce and marriage are the norm and that life long commitment is a thing of the past.

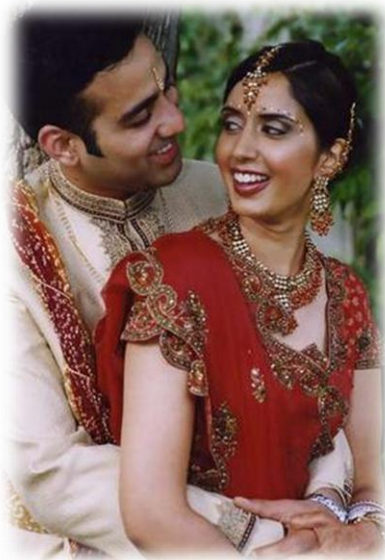
More recent times have seen TV programmes with farmers and others choosing wives over a series of weeks, using criteria that cannot lead to life long commitment. Young people’s attitudes towards marriage have reflected an increasing fear of commitment. Then there is the question of whether couples of the same sex can enter marriage.

Perhaps we Catholics are partly to blame for contemporary attitudes towards marriage because of our relative silence on the Christian meaning of marriage. Jesus commanded those who follow him to teach his Gospel to others. This includes sharing the meaning of Christian marriage in families as well as with friends, our work colleagues and everyone else with whom we have conversations.

At this time, let us reflect again for ourselves on Catholic teaching on marriage.

1. Marriage before religion

From earliest times, all known cultures have recognised as special the committed relationship between a man and a woman that is open to the conception of their child. Down through the centuries, this relationship has been the focus of various cultural taboos, rituals and other practices.



While recognising this relationship as special, ideas about it have differed. In ancient times, for example, couples married for a variety of reasons. Often, they had little to do with love. In some cultures, a man and a woman married for commercial, status and political reasons. In others, there were polygamy and divorce.

In times past, as well as in many countries today, concubines were distinguished from wives. Even in cultures where wives were bought and sold, the basic idea of marriage was a special union between a man and a woman that was open to their children.

From human nature

Being so universal, it is clear that this basic idea stems from our human nature itself. Marriage is not an institution that grew from any law, religion or other influence. It stems from human nature itself, from the most basic yearnings of the human heart.

This is often forgotten when people discuss that possibility of a committed relationship between two people of the same sex being called marriage.

2. The challenge of God

Around the era of King Solomon, who had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, a radical divine teaching was recorded in the Book of Genesis [Kings 11:3]. This was that marriage is a relationship in which a man and a woman ‘become one flesh’ [Genesis 2:24-25].

What does ‘One flesh’ mean?

In the language of the Bible, the flesh is the external aspect of the human person. The body is the ‘language’ by which a person expresses him or herself verbally and non-verbally.

Being ‘one flesh’, therefore, meant more than physical union. It also meant becoming one intellectually, spiritually and emotionally. In short: it meant a man and a woman becoming one at every level that makes us human beings.



This was a radical challenge for the culture of the time of King Solomon. It is not possible to become ‘one flesh’ with more than one spouse. Jesus later confirmed this to be marriage in God’s plan [Matthew 19:6]:

They are no longer two, therefore, but one flesh.

Spouses called to marriage by God

Over time, God also revealed that marriage is a vocation. In God’s plan, as with Rebekah and Isaac the son of Abraham, it is God who calls husband and wife together [Genesis 24: 42-52].

God does this through the personal love each has for the other. The Book of Tobit portrays marriage as being built upon faith and prayer under God’s guidance, and protected by God as the couple daily lived God’s law [Tobit 3: 16; 7: 11; 8: 4-9; 14:1, 8-13].

The love for another person that reflects the call of God marry them is personal – that is, it is not simply emotional or romantic. It is the movement of the will to be committed to the good of the other.

The experience of divided human nature

These few points are part of a rich tapestry of gradually developing divine teaching on marriage before the coming of Christ. However, despite this teaching, people found themselves divided within.

Selfishness undermined love: temptations to be unfaithful undermined marital love and fidelity. Recognising the power of such influences, God allowed divorce and remarriage. As Jesus explained [Matthew 19:8]:

It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but it was not like this in the beginning.

Divided human nature undermined marriage as intended by God. This changed, however, with the coming of Christ. He instituted the Sacrament of Marriage to empower married couples to live as planned originally by God.

3. *Christ strengthens love through the Sacrament of Marriage*

At Easter, we celebrated that Jesus shares the power of his resurrection with all who believe in him. This includes empowering the love of his baptised followers so that they can live the ever closer relationship of marriage as originally intended by God.

Christ instituted the Sacrament of Marriage to strengthen the love of the couple for each other, empowering them to rise above divided human nature – especially selfishness. Its purpose was to help them love to a level beyond human love alone.



Through this sacrament, Christ consecrates the couple to God. The marriage begins when a baptised man and woman give and receive each other’s consent to marry. At that moment, God establishes a marriage bond that can never be dissolved while both live.

Now the couple can meet Christ in a new way. Now he dwells with them. There are, as it were, three partners in the marriage. For the Sacrament of Marriage to bear full fruit, each of the couple needs to be committed to their new relationship with Christ – as well as each other. For example, as they need to be committed to communicating with each other, they need also to be committed to communicating with Christ in daily marriage. As they need to respect the rights that flow from the personal dignity of each, they need to be committed to the rights of Christ as Son of God as well as Son of man.

Within their marriage, Christ seeks to empower the couple in particular ways. Catholics need to emphasise these ways when speaking to others about marriage. Their ultimate purpose is to help couples purify their love for each other of all self centredness. [Catechism of the Catholic Church 1642].

In times of difficulty

Giving oneself to another in marriage brings many obvious and not so obvious challenges. These include remaining 'other focussed' and selfless, as well as maintaining mutual communication. Then there are the challenges and demands of raising a family.

Marriage and family life are not valued highly in our society. There are major financial and societal pressures militating against them.

Through the Sacrament of Marriage, Christ strengthens the love of the faithful married couple to rise above the difficulties of their life together. He is with them, helping them to carry their daily crosses.

When forgiveness is needed

Forgiveness is perhaps the hardest of all Christian teachings to live. Married couples can cause hurt to each other in many accidental and deliberate ways. Each can come to take the other for granted.

Over time, the ideals and shared dreams of their wedding day can be forgotten. The couple's first hopes can be shattered by their experiences of each other's failings. One or both can even be unfaithful.



Through the Sacrament of Marriage, Christ empowers each spouse to forgive the other. Though it can take time, even the deepest of hurts can be forgiven with his power.

In times when one is more burdened

There are times in most marriages where one spouse faces greater difficulties and pressures than the other. Their source may be ill health, finances, employment pressures or responsibility for an aging parent.

During such times, the demands on married relationships can seem all one way. The other spouse can feel stressed by having to give extra support while, at the same time, having to fulfil their normal responsibilities.

Through the Sacrament of Marriage, Christ strengthens spouses to keep helping each other in times of burden.

When there is a 'stand off'

Though the Son of God, Jesus Christ 'became as human beings are'. He did not count equality with God something to be grasped' [Philippians 2:6-7]. This concept is radically different from modern Australian attitudes, which are more focussed on personal rights than personal self giving.

All Christians, called to become more like Christ, are called at times not to insist on their rights for the sake of love. Instead, they are called to surrender to the other, provided the ways they do so are moral. This is as for Christians who are married as for other Christians.

Winning the argument is not the most important thing. Bearing with another's habits may be required for the greater good. In Christian marriage, as well as in a variety of other practical circumstances, it is the relationship that is the highest priority.

Through the Sacrament of Marriage, Christ strengthens spouses to serve the other as Christ served.

When things seem stale

Married life can become routine. Some speak of ‘the magic being lost’ and their marriage relationship becoming boring.

Through the Sacrament of Marriage, Christ strengthens and renews married love. He empowers couples ‘to love one another with supernatural, tender and faithful love’ [Catechism 1642].

4. *From promise to reality*

The promise of the Sacrament of Marriage stirs hope. It means that every couple who share a sufficiently mature love can marry, confident that Christ’s power will strengthen them in the face of today’s challenges and pressures.

However, the Sacrament of Marriage is not magical. Rather, its promise depends upon married couples praying, worshipping and striving to live as Jesus taught.

Sadly, many today who enter the Sacrament of Marriage fail to do these things. Instead they deny themselves the strengthening and guidance of Christ.

They choose to rely on their own resources in the face of difficulties and other challenges to married life. Many today even separate as they find modern pressures and attitudes too great for their love for each other to survive.

Daily prayer

Just as a married couple need to communicate with each other for a successful marriage, each needs to communicate with Christ in daily prayer. They need to share with him their difficulties, feelings of being taken for granted, hurts, struggles to put the other first and sense of routine.

They need to share with Christ their shared joys and sorrows, dreams and disappointments. Issues related to their children need to be placed before Christ. It is through their daily prayer that married couples open themselves to Christ’s guidance and strengthening.

Worshipping as Jesus taught

Jesus taught that the Eucharist is essential for anyone wanting to live the Christian life. This includes the Sacrament of Marriage [John 6:53]:

... if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

Through the Eucharist, Christ nourishes the spiritual gifts received through the other sacraments. He nourishes too the spiritual strengthening of married love, received through the Sacrament of Marriage.

The Sacrament of Penance is also important, for this sacrament restores the personal relationship with Christ after sin. The closer each spouse grows to Christ, the more Christ draws the couple closer to each other.

5. *Let us not remain silent*

Jesus taught his disciples to proclaim his Gospel to all people [Matthew 28: 19; Mark 16:15]. This includes each of us. In the current climate, we need to do our best to help others appreciate that:

- Marriage is a relationship between a man and a woman that is open to children
- The marriage relationship stems from human nature itself
- Married couples discover they are called together by God through their maturing personal, as distinct from solely romantic or emotional, love for each other
- Jesus Christ instituted the Sacrament of Marriage

- Through this Sacrament, Christ purifies the love of a married couple, strengthening and guiding them in the face of difficulties
- Couples sharing the Sacrament of Marriage draw on Christ's power by praying, worshipping and living as he taught.

We can make these points in family discussions, conversations with friends and debates in places of employment. With these ideas, we can encourage family members and friends with their marriage problems and in times of crises.

Marriage and same sex relationships

Currently, there are moves to legislate that the life long commitment of a man and a woman that is open to children should no longer be considered special. The unique word for this unique relationship – marriage – in the opinion of many should include couples of the same sex.

This is an attempt to ignore that the origin of marriage is human nature itself, not some human authority. The reality is that men and women will always find their hearts moving them towards a special relationship of commitment to each other that is open to children. This is true, regardless of any Parliamentary law. Such a law would give no more rights to same sex couples than they enjoy already.

Let us proclaim the message of Christ

The variety of views in society today on marriage are the result of others propagating their ideas. Part of the reason there is such trivialisation of marriage is the general silence of followers of Christ.

Let us not remain silent, but let us spread the message of Christ. We need to be as forthright with our ideas as are others who oppose them. We need to remind people today that, despite the challenges of our times, the Sacrament of Marriage offers reassurance that people can marry with great hope and confidence in their future married lives.

God bless

+ Gerard J Holohan
Bishop of Bunbury

