Sacrament of Marriage

Biblical Foundations of Marriage

Old Testament

- In the Old Testament, the patriarchal system considered women to be property of the husband. Thus, one must delve deeper to find God’s intention for marriage in the Old Testament texts. One way to uncover a theology of marriage is to consider the marriage metaphors and images that were used to describe God’s relationship with the people of Israel.

- Images from the Song of Songs are resplendent with themes of love and tenderness, passion and intimacy:

  Hark! My lover—he comes springing across the mountains, leaping across the hills. My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag. Here he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattices. My lover speaks; he says to me, “Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one, and come!”

  (NAB, Song of Songs, 2:8-9)

- Such texts reveal an understanding of marriage rooted in the covenant between God and human beings. In the text from the Song of Songs, God is the pursuer and we are his lover. One need look no further than the Song of Songs, Hosea 1-3, Jeremiah 2:2; Ezekiel 16; 23; Malachi 2:14-16 to discover the concept of marriage as covenant and intimate union with spouse and God.

- There was no specific marriage ritual in ancient Israel, but great importance was given to the blessing the parents bestowed on the couple.

New Testament

- The marriage ceremony at the time of Jesus began with betrothal or promise of marriage. This occurred before the bridegroom (usually 18 years of age) “took possession” of his bride (usually 12 years old). This betrothal was usually accompanied by a large, extended family banquet which spanned several days. At the end of the extended feast, the bride was escorted to her new home. Contractually speaking, the marriage was a legal arrangement between the fathers of the couple.

- A variety of grounds existed for the husband to publicly dismiss or divorce his wife. If he did divorce the wife, he was denied access to her dowry. Wives were treated as marginal members of society. The Torah did try to improve their status by freeing them to marry again so long as the husband provided a letter of divorce (Deut 24:1-4).
• Just as we can look to the metaphors of the Old Testament to uncover a covenant theology of marriage, so too can we look to Jesus for the same theology.

• Jesus was referred to as the new Bridegroom. His relationship to the Church was likened to the spousal relationship. Salvation was likened to a marriage feast. Marriage “in the Lord” was understood as a means of achieving salvation (1 Cor 7: 12-16).

• Jesus was explicit in his teaching of marriage and divorce. Jesus insisted that God intends the life-long unity of partners. Separation, breach, divorce, therefore goes against the divine will of God. If that is so, there should be no legal provision for it.

  #1. EXEGESIS OF Mark 10:2-16. The Pharisees ask Jesus a question about divorce.

  Jesus refused to be distracted by small-minded arguments about divorce. He moved the dialogue right to its center, to the heart of the matter. For Jesus, divorce and all that it involved was not the issue. God’s intention for marriage was the issue.

  The Pharisees as always sought to trip Jesus with his own words. They deferred to Deuteronomy and thus Moses who allowed divorce. They were correct. Jesus did not argue with their assertion. Jesus simply moved them from the action of Moses to the reason for it in the first place. He insisted that Moses allowed divorce because of the arrogant, willful sinfulness of the people. The people refused to accept God’s authority over their lives and God’s intention for them at the creation of the world.

  Moses allowance of divorce was not the formulation of law, but rather a concession to the law. That concession was necessary because of the sinfulness of the people. Put simply, Moses concession to the law was a result of sin. Jesus understood divorce as a concession to human sin and weakness. God intended unity, equality, complementarity, wholeness, and union of body, soul, and spirit for the married couple. God intended a life-long unbreakable covenant of love.

  Jesus further clarified the issue when he was alone with his disciples. Remarriage after divorce is the same as adultery, for both husband and wife. Why? The first marriage was not broken. Jesus went further than the law by suggesting that the husband was to be held to the same standard as the wife. Jesus challenged the provision in the Torah in which only a woman could be guilty of adultery.

  Some scholars hint that Mark’s Jesus was being pastorally sensitive to the situation of the Gentile Christians. Under Roman law, women were allowed to divorce their husbands. According to Jewish law, a man could not commit adultery against his wife; adultery was understood as sexual relations between a married woman and a man other than her husband. Therefore, a husband could not commit adultery against his wife, only against another married man. Jewish law forbade women to divorce their husbands.

  Jesus teaching clearly transcends the practice and cultural norms of his day. Jesus’ intention for marriage was rooted in the equality, love, and complementarity God intended for husband and wife at the creation of the world. Two are to become one flesh. The marriage bond is a covenant like the covenant God forged with human beings. It cannot and must not be broken. To break the bond is to go against God’s creation and intention for humanity. Marriage is rooted in the two great
commandments. Jesus’ teaching about divorce is affirmed throughout the New Testament (1 Cor. 7:10; Mt. 19:3-9; 5:31-32; Lk 16:16.).

- Jesus recognized that Moses allowed for it, but Moses’ concession was a result of human sin. There is evidence, however, in Matthew’s Gospel that exceptions were made, and some marriages were deemed unlawful (see Mt 5:32). Exceptions have been made throughout history and continue to be made today. Nevertheless, Jesus presented the ideal, and the ideal is the norm.

- St. Paul also weighed in on matters concerning marriage and divorce. While holding Jesus’ instruction concerning marriage in the highest esteem and honor, he nevertheless recognized exceptions to Jesus’ teaching.

  Christian married people were fearful that having sexual relations with an unbelieving spouse would make them unholy. Paul insisted that the Christian partner sanctifies (makes holy) the unbeliever and their children (1 Cor 7, 14). The Christian partner was not allowed to separate from the unbelieving spouse because of Jesus’ prohibition against divorce. However, the unbelieving partner was free to separate, thus freeing the Christian partner to remarry (9vs. 12-16). This is the basis of one of the Church’s forms of dissolving a marriage called the Pauline privilege. Paul himself held Jesus’ instruction in high esteem, but nevertheless realized the need to make exceptions.

Historical Foundations of Marriage

- As the Church grew and developed, so did its response to marriage. In the early centuries, marriage consisted of a civil ceremony that served as a public announcement of marriage. The couple then celebrated religious rituals to inaugurate their common life together.

- Civil marriage in the fourth and fifth century was considered affirmed by God. Marriage was understood as an image of the union between Christ and his Church and was for the purpose of begetting children and fostering love of spouse and imitating the love of Christ.

- Marriage in ancient Rome included four elements.
  1. The desire to marry
  2. Consent that could be verified
  3. Taking the wife into the home of the husband
  4. Living together as husband and wife

- When Christians married, they retained these elements but added other elements of religious significance such as blessing of the couple, a rite of putting on the veil, a prayer of petition and a prayer of blessing. The bride’s white veil symbolized the union of Jesus Christ with his bride, the Church.

- The Council of Florence in 1439 deferred to St. Thomas Aquinas when it named three positive effects of marriage:
  1. The begetting of children and their education to worship God
  2. Faithfulness of the partners toward one another
3. The life-long, unbreakable bond of the couple mirrored after Christ’s unbreakable bond with his Church

- The Church teaches that sacraments confer grace specific to each sacrament. The Council of Trent in 1547 listed an official number of seven sacraments which confer grace. Marriage officially became one of the seven sacraments, even though it was designated as such at the Council of Verona in 1184.

- Thus, marriage in the first thousand years of history consisted of a civil ceremony and independent religious rituals of blessing.

- In the second thousand years, the Church created a form of marriage that would qualify it as valid marriage and required that the marriage take place before the pastor or other designated priest.

- One amazingly liberating action taken by the Church was to require free consent of the partners. This effectively eliminated the practice of “bartering for” the spouse as if in a market-place transaction as was often the custom in clan and tribal cultures. Consent given under duress is considered invalid.

Marriage Foundations Today

- The Second Vatican Council set out to renew and deepen the theology of marriage. The Council described marriage as a community of love, a sharing in life and love, a vocation *(Gaudium et Spes, 47, 49).*

- The Church insisted that God himself is the author of marriage. It is not a human institution. “The vocation to marriage is written in the very nature if man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator” (CCC, 1603).

- The Council returned to the concept of covenant (and all biblical meanings inherent in that word) to describe marriage.

- The sacrament provides a special strength or grace proper to the sacrament. Jesus Christ is the source of this grace. Jesus dwells in the couple and gives the grace and strength to carry the crosses of life, to follow Christ, to forgive one another, to bear one another’s faults and burdens, and to love with a tender, fruitful, intimate love (CCC, 1642). (For a marriage to be valid, each person must have the ability to enter into such a covenant of love in the first place.)

- Church fathers maintained the importance of marriage in begetting children but understood the nature of married love finding fulfillment in those children.

- The Council stressed the importance of marital love and described the sacrament in terms of the love between husband and wife.

- Church fathers described the love of husband and wife and the effects of that love. They insisted that marital love is expressed and perfected in the marital act (GS 49).

- The teaching of the Council insisted that marital relations performed in accordance with human dignity must be honored with great reverence.
The Church retained the language of contract but elevated the concept of covenant. Contract is used in a legalistic sense. It is used in relation to the exchange of vows and the legal relationship that flows from those vows (married life). The free consent of both parties also falls under the contractual context of marriage. Thus, marriage is both a legal relationship (contract) as well as a religious relationship (covenant).

When we contrast the word contract with the word covenant, we are given a glimpse of what covenant implies. Contracts deal mostly with things whereas covenants deal with people. Contracts arrange the services of persons; covenants require their personal ownership and personal investment. Contracts exist for a specified time; covenants last forever. Contracts can be broken resulting in loss of revenue or property; covenants are not to be broken, but if they are, they cause heartbreaking wounds. Contracts are worldly affairs that belong to things secular; covenants are sacred affairs that belong in the home or the Church.

Contracts are best litigated by civil or canon lawyers; covenants are recognized by theologians, clergy, poets, and catechists. The state guarantees and witnesses the contract; God guarantees and witnesses the covenant. In some circumstances, children can enter into a contract; a covenant is not child’s play but can only be entered into by conscious mentally, emotionally and spiritually mature adults (adapt. Paul Palmer, Theological Studies, 33 [1972]: 639).

Rite of marriage

Acknowledging that our rituals express our theology, we hear the language of covenant expressed in the Nuptial Blessing in the Rite of Marriage. In that prayer, we are reminded that God, in order to reveal his plan of love for the world, made the union between husband and wife a reflection of the covenant he forged with his people.

The blessing also reminds us that Christian marriage is a sign of the marriage between Jesus and the Church (cf. Nuptial Blessing, Rite of Marriage).

The sacrament of marriage is a liturgical act—that means it is a public act. As such, it is appropriate that it take place in the public liturgy of the Church. The following elements are included in the rite of marriage.

- **Question:**
  The priest asks about each person’s freedom of choice, about their faithfulness to each other, and their willingness to raise children.

- **Consent**
  The priest invites the couple to declare their consent.
  - The couple joins hands.
  - The joining of hands is a sign of the unbreakable bond of marriage and the commitment to be faithful to one another.
  - The bridegroom takes the woman to be his wife, and the bride takes the man to be her husband.
The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that it is in this consent that the spouses are bound together as one flesh. So important is this free consent that if it is in any way coerced, or not freely entered into, then the marriage is invalid (CCC, 1628).

The priest receives their consent and declares that what God has joined together no one shall divide.

The priest or deacon receives the consent of the spouses on behalf of the Church and gives the Church’s blessing (1628).

- **Blessing of rings**
  The priest blesses the rings that the bride and groom give to each other as a sign of their fidelity.

- **Exchange of rings**
  The couple exchange rings and declare them a sign of their fidelity to one another.

- **Nuptial blessing**
  The priest blesses the couple on behalf of the Church.

**Symbols of Marriage**

- The primary symbols of marriage are the joining of hands and the conferral of rings. The love and permanence of the union is expressed in those symbols. The couple themselves are to become a symbol of marriage – their lives together should be a reflection of Christ’s love for the Church.

**Canon Law and Marriage**

- Canon law is the official book of law for the Catholic Church that sets forth legislation on all matters pertaining to the Church.

- Canon law affirms that marriage is directed to the good of the spouses and to the procreation and education of offspring (1055).

- Canon law upholds the life-long bond as an essential characteristic of a valid marriage (1056).

- Canon law affirms marriage as a contract, a covenant, and a sacrament of the Church.

- Canon law asserts that marriage is a sign of the covenant God forged with humanity and Christ established with his Church.

- Canon law insists that the sacrament of marriage provides the spouses with a special strength and grace and a consecration so that they may effectively fulfill the dignity and obligations of the married state (1134).

- Canon law affirms that the regular form for marriage requires the legal act of requesting and requiring the free consent of the couple (1108 #2).

**Conditions for a Valid Marriage**

- A marriage is valid only if each person is fully competent to enter into the marriage and both partners possess an absolute free will and desire to marry one another.
• A marriage is valid if consent is given before the bishop of the diocese or the pastor of the parish (or another priest, deacon, or designated lay person).

• A marriage is valid when two witnesses to the consent are present (1108 #1).
  o Witnesses are required because marriage is considered a state of life in the Church—just as priesthood is a state of life in the Church, thus there must be certainty that the marriage took place. Hence, two witnesses are required to testify to it. (CCC, 1631)
  o A marriage is absolutely indissoluble (unbreakable) if in the eyes of the Catholic Church. The marriage is deemed valid by the Church, if the marriage is consummated and if both partners are baptized.

Annulments

• The Church’s teaching regarding marriage validity between baptized and non-baptized persons is complex and requires the ministry and assistance of the Church.

• In order for a person to be fully initiated in the Catholic Church, there must be no marriage impediments. In other words, if the person is in an irregular marriage, the impediments must be officially removed before the person is free to enter the Church.

• A person seeking entrance to the Church or access to the sacraments must be free to do so.

• A person is in an irregular marriage if that person or his or her spouse was married before, and subsequently divorced.

• If such is the case, an annulment of the first marriage is required before the person is free to have their present marriage blessed or enter the Church or have access to the sacraments.

• The annulment process has the potential to bring healing and closure to the wounds caused by divorce. The Church always seeks to err on the side of compassion and will do everything in its power to assist people in removing the impediments that would keep them from the sacraments of the Church. It is important that such persons meet with their pastor or pastoral associate to discuss all of his or her options.
Sacrament of Holy Orders

- Holy Orders is the sacrament by which a man is permanently made a deacon, a priest, or a bishop.
- The primary sign is the Bishop laying hands upon the head of the person who is being ordained.
- Only bishops can ordain.
- Ordination is understood as a sacrament, a visible sign that includes a hidden reality. For example, in the Eucharist, bread is the visible sign and the hidden reality is that it is also Christ’s body.
- The visible sign in the sacrament of Holy Orders is the laying on of hands on the head of the candidate. The hidden reality is that through the sign the deacon, priest or bishop is made an effective representative of Jesus.
- The ministry of the priest can also be described by the Latin term, *in persona Christi*. He functions “in the person of Christ.” In other words, he is Christ’s representative on earth. When he is acting *in persona Christi*, that is, in the person of Jesus, it is Christ himself who is acting and who is present. Christ is present in his work, his ministry, and in his actions.
- Our liturgy documents tell us that Christ is present to us in four ways when we celebrate the Mass.
  1. **Christ is present in the gathered community.** Thus, we are to be open to his presence when the community gathers for Mass.
  2. **Christ is present when the Scriptures are proclaimed;** it is as though Christ himself were speaking to us.
  3. **Christ is also preeminently present in the elements of bread and wine.**
  4. **Christ is present in the person of the priest.**
- The priest is a visible sign of Christ’s presence to us; the hidden reality is Christ’s effective action and presence in his ministry.
- A priest who is committed to his vocation lives a righteous, faithful life and is committed to serving God’s people. His ministry is the greatest gift he could give to the people of God.

Why Is this Sacrament Called “Orders”? 

- The word “order” in ancient times referred to a civil group, a governing body.
- There is an order of priests, an order of deacons, an order of catechumens, an order of virgins, an order of spouses, and an order of widows, among others (CCC, #1537).
- Entrance into one of these groups or orders is accomplished with a special rite.
- Those who are preparing for baptism as adults celebrate a rite of acceptance into the order of catechumens. As such they are blessed and enter into the order of catechumens—it is part of the sacrament of baptism they will receive.
• The sacrament of holy orders and the sacrament of marriage are called sacraments of service because those who celebrate them place themselves at the service of communion (CCC, #1533).
• They are directed toward the salvation of others. They contribute to the salvation of the individual in so far as the individuals reach out to others and build up the body of Christ.

What does “orders” mean?
• Ordination is the sacramental rite in which a man is incorporated into the order of bishops, or the order of presbyters (priests), or the order of deacons.
• A community does not elect or delegate a person to become a priest but it does play a role in helping call forth the candidates.
• The Holy Spirit gifts them with a sacred power that only comes from Christ.
• Through ordination Jesus himself sets apart and consecrates a man for ministry in the Church. The priesthood continues the priesthood of Jesus. Jesus builds up the Church through the ministerial priesthood.
• Ordination is conferred by the bishop who lays hands on the candidate and prays the prayer of consecration.
• Just as water is the sign of baptism, the laying on of hands is the sign of ordination. The visible sign is the laying on of hands; the hidden reality is the Holy Spirit who permanently consecrates the man with a special, sacred power (character) for service to the Church.

Degrees of priesthood
• The catechism says that there are “two participations in the one priesthood of Christ” (#1546). These are the baptismal priesthood that all the faithful exercise (#1546), and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood of bishops and priests (#1547); there are two degrees of “ministerial participation in the priesthood of Christ”: episcopacy and presbyterate (#1554). Both these forms of priesthood—baptismal and ministerial—participate in the one priesthood of Christ.
• There are three degrees of holy orders: bishops, priests, and deacons.
  o **Bishop:**
    ▪ The highest office is bishop.
    ▪ The office of bishop can be traced back to the apostles in an unbroken line of succession.
    ▪ It is entrusted to the bishops to hand down the teaching of Jesus’ Apostles.
  o **Priests**
    ▪ Priests are coworkers of the bishop.
    ▪ Priests and bishops are conferred with a special character that joins them to the priesthood of Christ.
    ▪ Priests are ordained to:
• preach the gospel;
• celebrate the sacraments;
• shepherd the flock;
• lead a community of believers.

- Priests most fully act in the person of Christ when they preside at the Eucharist.
- Priests are to obey the bishop and serve under his authority.
- Only men can be priests because the Church tells us that Jesus chose his ministerial priesthood from the Apostles who were men.
- The college of bishops (all the bishops speaking together) makes the mission of the twelve Apostles present to us today.
- Priests and bishops are ordained to a celibate life.
- They are consecrated to God alone.
- In the Eastern Church, married men can be ordained. However, if they become single they cannot marry again.

- Deacons

  - The sacred character (sacred gift) given to deacons empowers them to serve the Church, the people of God.
  - “Strengthened by sacramental grace [deacons] are dedicated to the People of God, in conjunction with the bishop and his body of priests, in the service (diakonia) of the liturgy, of the Gospel, and of works of charity” (CCC, #1588).

• If the priest acts in persona Christi, does that mean the priest is perfect and cannot sin? If he acts in the person of Christ doesn’t that mean he is perfect since Christ was perfect?

  No. Priests are sinners just like the rest of us. Sacraments make us holy. However, the sacrament of holy orders does not keep a deacon, priest or bishop from committing sins any more than our participation in the sacraments prevents us from sinning.

• It is important to remember that sacraments are not magic. We are given God’s grace and God’s strength in the sacraments.

• Sacraments should help us avoid sin, but we must be open to that help. We must prayerfully seek it; we must be conscious of it.

• Thus, priests should be able to draw from the strength of the sacrament they received just as married couples should be able to draw strength from the grace of the sacrament of marriage to help them stay faithful to their marriage covenant.

• Because we are sinners, however, we are not always open to receiving and cooperating with that grace. As with all sacraments, it requires a willingness on our part to cooperate with the grace of the sacrament.
- When a priest truly acts in the manner of Christ, when he is engaged in his mission and promoting the kingdom, when the priest celebrates the sacraments, regardless of whether he has committed serious sin or not, the sacrament is valid. Why? Because what takes place in the sacraments is the action of Christ. It is not dependent on the holiness of the priest. It is Jesus’ work through the work of the priest.

- It is important to say that all Catholics—bishops, priests, deacons, religious, and laity—are to refrain from the sacraments if they are in serious sin. But, if a priest who has committed serious sin celebrates Mass, it is still a valid sacrament. The consecration of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ would be valid.

- The reason for this was stated earlier. Christ is the principal actor of the sacraments. Thus sacraments are effective even when performed by an unworthy minister. St. Thomas Aquinas reminded us that Christ might act even through a minister who is spiritually dead.