

““The Sacrament of Marriage: Three Dimensions of a Daring Vocation”

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Marriage is one of the oldest and most universal of human institutions. Almost all human cultures value the life-long commitment between a man and woman. Most Christian traditions value marriage as a biblically grounded commitment sanctioned by God as the only appropriate means for the sharing of sexual union and the procreation of children. Yet Catholic Christians also affirm that marriage is a sacrament of the church. What makes this Catholic understanding of marriage distinctive?

There are lots of good definitions of sacraments. I propose that we think of a sacrament as 1) a symbolic reality 2) celebrated by and for the church 3) in which is experienced the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. Using this admittedly rather simple definition, how might we think of marriage as a sacrament?

Marriage is a Symbolic Reality

The bible deals with the symbolic character of marriage in a number of places. In the Book of Hosea, the marriage between the prophet, Hosea, and his unfaithful spouse, Gomer, is presented as a symbolic expression of God's covenantal love for Israel in spite of Israel's infidelity. In the Letter to the Ephesians the marriage between a man and woman is presented as a symbol of Christ's commitment to the church. In both instances marriage is used as a symbol of God's bond with his people.

It is fairly easy to see how marriage functions as a symbol of God's covenantal love in the bible, but it gets a bit harder for us to think of our own marriages as this kind of symbolic reality. At first glance my own marriage does not seem to traffic in grand and lofty symbols at all. Our marital life is dominated, not by great symbolic acts but by far more ordinary ones: cooking, grocery shopping, paying bills, folding laundry, picking up children or listening as my spouse shares with me the events of her day. The very ordinariness of our marital life makes it difficult to identify the symbolic dimension that makes our marriage sacramental and distinguishes our marriage from other kinds of relationships. Yet it is there. It is there in the very mundane actions I just mentioned. Of course, you do not have to be married to someone to buy groceries for them. You do not have to be married to someone to pick up their children from school and you certainly do not have to be married to someone to listen to them tell you about the events of their day. But these activities take on a different meaning when engaged in by married couples. These simple actions *become* the symbolic expressions of an enduring commitment that is radical precisely because it is lifelong and unconditional. It is not like the many other commitments I make based on a calculation of the benefits I will accrue from the commitment. I make a commitment to the institution where I work, but that commitment is conditional; if the institution fails to live up to the terms of the job I agreed to (e.g., a predetermined salary, benefits, vacation) I will look for employment elsewhere.

My wife's commitment to me and mine to her is of an entirely different sort. She has committed to be *for* me and I *for* her, regardless of the benefits either of us accrues from our relationship or the demands the relationship may impose on us. The commitment itself becomes the most profound gift we can give one another, for this commitment does not have its source in some cold economic analysis.

Within the context of a marriage then, something as simple as folding the laundry can become a gift to one's spouse; it becomes a "symbolic action" that says, in effect, "in this simple act of care, I want you to know that I am now and will always be concerned about you and your needs." I have lots of friends who are most gracious and gladly lend me an ear when I need to complain about some unpleasant encounter I had at work. However, when my wife listens to the same complaint, I feel something different. I recognize that her listening reflects not just a polite concern, she listens with the ears of one who has decided to make my life story, with all of its joys and sorrows, a permanent feature of her own life story. That decision shapes how she listens to me, and how I experience that listening. These simple gestures become symbols of the "now and for always" character of our life together.

The sexual relationship of a husband and wife is another example of the symbolic reality of marriage. If simple actions like cooking a meal or engaging in conversation with one's spouse are symbolic actions that reflect the marital commitment, then, in a special way the sexual relationship between a husband and a wife also takes on that symbolic quality. The point here is not to try and isolate and identify the symbolic significance of each individual event of love making between spouses; the felt significance of these marital encounters varies. Sometimes a couple's lovemaking is warm and playful, sometimes it is intense and passionate, and at yet other times it can seem merely comfortable or even perfunctory and disappointing. The significance of a married couple's sexual relationship lies not in any one marital act but in the rhythm of their entire sexual relationship, in the "habit" of sexual intimacy. David Matzko McCarthy writes: "The everyday meaning of sex... is extended through the day to day ebb and flow of common endeavors, joys, and struggles of love in the home."¹ Indeed, McCarthy contends that most sex in marriage is fairly ordinary:

One set of sexual expressions may need to be redeemed by another, and can be. One night stands and passionate affairs, in contrast, need to be earthshaking and splendid because they are the whole story. They are manic attempts to overcome the fact that there is nothing else. The true superiority of sexual intercourse in marriage is that it does not have to mean very much.²

McCarthy's "anti-romantic" views on marital sexual relations may startle some, but I think he is trying to reclaim the significance of the ordinary commitments and practices of daily married life in the face of a culture that is obsessed with passion, glamour and romance. Marital sexuality exhibits the symbolic character of married life, not in any one act, but in the sustained practice of marital intimacy with one another.

The sacrament of marriage must not be confused with the wedding ceremony. This is a common mistake many Catholics make because there are other sacraments of the church, like baptism or anointing of the sick, that we associate exclusively with a ritual action. The wedding

¹ David Matzko McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home* (London: SCM, 2001), 8.

² *Ibid.*

ceremony, at the center of which is the exchange of vows, marks the beginning of the sacrament of marriage. Yet at another level a couple only gradually “grows into” the sacrament by engaging in the innumerable deeds and gestures that constitute the symbolic level of the marriage relationship. It is the life of the marriage as a whole that must be affirmed as symbolic and sacramental.

Marriage is Celebrated by and for the Church

When I was a seminary professor, one of the responsibilities we had was to listen to the seminarians practice preaching. As one of the few married people on our faculty, I always volunteered to listen to them give their wedding homilies. Invariably these homilies would take the form of an exhortation to the couple (“John and Sallie...your preparation for this day has been a long and exciting one...”). It was as if the homily was to be the homilist’s last shot at teaching the couple about the Catholic understanding of marriage. But marriage is not, at least in the Catholic tradition, a private compact made between a man and a woman; rather, it is a covenant made between the couple and God but *before* the Christian community. This is reflected in the church’s requirement that there be a baptized witness (representing the Christian community) to the exchange of vows. The couple promises, through their exchange of vows, to “go public,” as it were, with their love. They promise to offer the gifts of their love in service to the church and the world at large. This shift is reflected in the wedding ceremony itself. The couple stands, facing one another in their exchange of vows. But this inward-looking profession of love and commitment shifts as the couple then turns to face the community side by side. At the end of the liturgy they will process out of the church and into the “world,” again, side by side. This shift suggests an important dimension of the Catholic understanding of marriage; the private love of two people now becomes a public love in which a commitment is made, not just between two lovers, but by the couple to the church. The couple promises to put their love in public service of the kingdom of God. In this regard, I have often thought that one of the recommended readings for the nuptial mass ought to be the story of Jesus sending the disciples in mission, two by two.

The married couple’s relationship is sacramental because in their commitment to one another they are now living within the Christian community in a new and public way. They are now being charged to offer the fruit of their love to the community and in service of God’s reign. For many married couples the fruit of their love will be the children they will bear and raise. But it is important that we not focus too narrowly on childbearing and childrearing, for such a focus offers little to infertile and/or post-menopausal couples. Perhaps Catholicism needs to assert the importance, not only of openness to the procreative dimension of their marriage, but also of the broader, generative aspect of their shared love. Generativity suggests a fecundity or creative productivity that can take many forms. Certainly couples are generative in bringing children into the world and caring for them, but their love is also generative when they adopt a child, or allow an unwed teenage mother to stay with them for an extended period of time. They are generative with their love when they take in an extended family member who requires assistance because of age or infirmity. Their love is generative when they volunteer time together at the local soup kitchen or when they choose to mentor a young engaged couple. In all of these ways the generativity of a married couple’s love binds them to the larger community they serve.

This relationship between the married couple and the community is a reciprocal one, however. There is a reason why there must be community witnesses at the exchange of vows;

the community is also making a promise. It is promising its prayers and support for the couple. I find this aspect of contemporary Christian marriage sadly lacking today. We the Christian community too often abandon the newlyweds at the altar, allowing them to fend for themselves on the path they have chosen. Then we all lament a divorce rate for Catholic marriages that is just as high as the divorce rate for the larger society. The Catholic church rightly emphasizes the need to prepare engaged couples for marriage. The difficulty is, we give these couples lots of wonderful information and insight into the gifts and challenges of married life at a point in their relationship when they are least open to hearing it. First, we try to get through to them at a time when they are distracted by often massive wedding preparations. For many of them, this will be the biggest social event they will ever coordinate in their entire lives (we will save for another article discussion of whether this emphasis is a healthy one or not!). Second, engaged couples are almost always supremely confident that their mutual commitment is firm, that they know their spouses well, that they are fully compatible and that there is no issue or crisis that they will not be able to handle. This confidence is only natural. But it is unlikely to last.

The question we must be willing to ask ourselves as a church is, what are we doing as a Christian community to help support marriage relationships *after the wedding*? Is the church tangibly there for the young couple when they welcome a child into their home and experience unprecedented demands on their time and energy? Is the church ready to be of support when the bloom of new love has gone and daily routine and familiarity lead one or both to question their commitment? Is the church there for them when they suffer tragedy, an infidelity, miscarriage, job loss or debilitating illness?

To assert that marriage is a sacrament is to assert that the church itself has a stake in the success of the marriage relationship. If the Catholic church is to “walk the walk” regarding its teaching about the sacramentality of marriage, its dioceses and parishes must be willing to undergo a comprehensive examination of how they support newly married couples. Do they create opportunities for these couples to share with one another their experiences? Do parishes provide mentoring couples to lend support and share the hard earned wisdom of their marriages? Sustaining sacramental marriages must become just as important in diocesan and parish ministries as preparing engaged couples for marriage.

Marriage is an Encounter with the Transforming Grace of Christ

Finally, as a sacrament, marriage is a symbolic reality that makes possible an encounter with the grace of Christ. In other words, in the love between a husband and wife, a love manifested in the dailiness of their lives together, they abide in God and God abides in them. We considered earlier the ways in which the symbolic realm of marriage is enacted in the simple gestures of love and care that constitute the warp and woof of married life together. The dynamism of giving and receiving lies at the heart of the graced character of marriage. So many of the graces I experience in my own marriage I can only receive as pure gift. I am blessed when a night ending in argument is followed by a day begun anew with a kiss. I am blessed when I return home from work venting frustrations and petty grudges yet still find myself loved and accepted by Diana. It is in these encounters with my spouse that I am touched by God.

Even as we celebrate the grace of God encountered in a couple’s being gift for one another, in their experience of closeness and intimacy, we must also acknowledge that the grace of the sacrament demands conversion as well. In a society that measures the value of all

relationships in terms of the fulfillment of one's needs and fantasies, there is a harsh truth that must be embraced—the goal of sacramental marriage is not my individual happiness! The goal of sacramental marriage is my salvation and that of my spouse. By salvation, I do not mean simply a ticket to heaven, I mean the daily transformations that God effects in me that allow me to become a new creation in Christ. In her frank and rewarding book of reflections on marriage, Nancy Mairs contends that marriage is fundamentally an invitation to conversion:

This [the marriage commitment] was, and has remained, the paradigmatic conversion, infinitely more powerful and penetrating than anything connected with exclusively religious conviction or practice. I might have found another way to God. I might have found a better way to God. But I did not. My spirit has been schooled in wedlock.³

This linkage of marriage and conversion is striking. The biblical word for conversion, *metanoia*, means not just a shift in one's views or opinions but a fundamental change in direction. Marriage, Mairs contends, demands change at the very core of one's being. From the perspective of Christian faith, it is a call to enter into the paschal mystery, that sacred rhythm of life-death-life that Jesus enacted in his life, death and resurrection and that Catholic Christians celebrate every time they gather at the Eucharistic banquet.

Marriage, like all sacraments, is paschal to the core and consequently it is as much about dying as it is about new life. We do not get much of this on television. There is plenty of marital dying, to be sure, but it is usually a foreshadowing of some quick marital exit. Paschal "dying" is an altogether different matter. The widespread romanticization of love and marriage (and both church and society have contributed in their own ways to this romanticization) has done much to obscure the paschal character of Christian marriage. Yet it is virtually impossible for a marriage to survive the inevitable tests, obstacles and challenges that will come before it unless the couple grasps the paschal character of their commitment to one another.

When couples go through periods of their marriage where intimacy seems scarce, they are told by our culture that something is wrong. It is certainly good to celebrate the role of romance and intimacy in marriage, but if marriages are to be sustained in the hard times, we need to remember that marriage is also about the rhythm of dying and rising to which all of us are called as followers of Jesus. In marriage each spouse chooses to find meaning, purpose and companionship in partnership with this one, gifted yet wounded person. But this commitment imposes limits for while each spouse brings many wonderful gifts to their marriage, those gifts are finite. In time each spouse will become aware, often painfully aware, of what the other partner does not and cannot offer at any given moment. For every time that one's spouse is graciously present and attentive in a time of need, there will be a time of emotional if not physical absence.

If the sexual intimacy of marriage is a most tender grace, the experience of sharing a marriage bed with one who at this particular moment may *not* understand me, can be terrifying in its loneliness. As Ronald Rolheiser put it, "It is painful to sleep alone but it is perhaps more painful to sleep alone when you are not sleeping alone."⁴ There is a paschal "dying" that married

³ Nancy Mairs, *Ordinary Time: Cycles in Marriage, Faith, and Renewal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 106.

⁴ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 196

couples have to embrace in the inevitable experience of loneliness that misunderstanding, disagreement or conflict brings. However, when spouses freely accept not only the joys and gifts but also the limits of the marital relationship—when they choose to love even out of the emptiness—in so doing they unite themselves with Christ, enter into the paschal rhythm of life-death-life and work out their salvation.

Concluding Reflections

On the one hand, marriage is one of the most ancient and most common of all human social institutions. Yet, on the other hand, genuinely sacramental Christian marriage is a much more radical reality. I firmly believe that in a consumer oriented culture that thinks that romance and personal satisfaction are the only real criteria for a worthwhile relationship, faithful sacramental marriage is one of the most counter-cultural things the church has to offer the world. It is time for Catholic married couples today to embrace the full meaning and significance of sacramental marriage and to re-discover why sacramental marriage is such a daring yet satisfying Christian vocation.

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