



What does *Marriage* add to your *Love?*

Pastoral Message to Young Couples On Marriage and Family in the Catholic Church

Dear Couple,

As the two of you enter the journey toward marriage, we wish to encourage and support you in your search to fulfill your deepest desires and find happiness. We would like to suggest some thoughts for your reflection, and to share some insights on Christian marriage that have been offered by other couples engaged on the same journey. The Episcopal Commission for Theology, comprised of four bishops, consulted young couples in their dioceses before writing this pastoral letter. The quotations that appear throughout this letter, unless otherwise indicated, come from these couples, to whom we extend our deepest gratitude. Modern life presents many challenges to those yearning for a life-long commitment to their spouse. Unfortunately, our society's understanding of marriage is undergoing serious debate and change. As a result, our society gives less support to marriage than it should.

We wish to help you understand the Catholic perspective on the sacrament of marriage, in particular with regard to four important dimensions:

1. marriage as a call from God;
2. what the sacrament adds to human love;
3. the meaning of freedom, fidelity, stability and fruitfulness;
4. the mission of the married couple.

Thank you for taking the time and effort to include our message in your preparations for marriage. May God, the author of love, guide and strengthen you in your journey.

Marriage as a Call from God

Marriage is a free gift of God who calls the human being to love. In creating man and woman, God wishes to fulfill your most profound desires. He instills in human nature the desire of a man and a woman to create lasting bonds of love and life. Marriage stems directly from this creative divine plan: “God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1.27).

How are we made in God’s image? This can be viewed from two perspectives:

- God creates us not in isolation but rather as related to one another, as man and woman, equal in dignity but whose complementarity and difference are in themselves an image of God’s being.
- God made man and woman capable of collaborating in his creative work through procreation, able to reproduce and multiply, and therefore to contribute to bringing about new life in the person of the child.

These two dimensions reflect God’s plan from the beginning (Matthew 19.4-6). In the words of one couple with whom we spoke:

“The primary goal of our marriage is to love one another as Christ has loved us, to give ourselves to each other, to support and encourage each other, to bring joy and happiness into our lives. Fulfillment for spouses can only take place in a context in which a man and a woman are committed to each other for life. A stable, lasting relationship is ideal for the procreation of children. How can anyone not be fulfilled in such a context?”

“Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.”

Genesis 2.24



For Catholics, marriage is a special, permanent, exclusive bond between a man and a woman. The first aspect of this relationship is unity in complementarity. Marriage celebrates similarities and differences, somewhat in the image of the unity-in-diversity that lives in the very being of God in whom there is distinction of persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and at the same time, unity in their nature. Similarly, man and woman in their differences are called to manifest their unity in “one body.”

The second dimension that makes marriage a unique bond is its openness to life. This fertility stems naturally from the couple’s unity in complementarity.

“The sexual act is an intimate act of love that leads to life. Love is always creative! This intimate act enables us to give life.”

This is why marriage is lived by a man and a woman in a lasting, exclusive, creative bond.

Marriage is more than a contract. Christian marriage is an intimate partnership in which a man and woman endeavour to give and receive a love so great that it is prepared to give itself entirely for the good of the other, in the image of the love of Jesus. It means “creating a community that lives the Gospel values through sharing, mutual assistance, and charity.” This self-giving love (*agape*) does not exclude, but also encompasses *eros*, the desire for the other as needed for self-fulfillment. This is one of the reflections given to us by Pope Benedict XVI in *Deus caritas est*, his encyclical on Christian love.¹ Through the grace given in the sacrament of marriage, Jesus enables the married couple to give of themselves in a way that is progressively freed from selfishness and the pursuit of individual interests.²

Popular culture often views sexual union without any dimension of mutual commitment from the partners. If sexual expression fails to take into account the true needs and desires that abide in a couple’s hearts, and if it is dissociated from responsibly assumed fertility, it deviates from God’s creative plan and leads to wounds and unfortunate consequences.³

God intends sexuality to be a source of joy and pleasure that would permit the gift of self to the other within marriage. The marriage bond is so great in God’s eyes



“The sacrament of marriage is definitely an opportunity for the promotion of human and spiritual growth. Christ is present with us when we share

our joys and sorrows. Christ is present when we endeavour to meet daily challenges and when we try to build a life together... Yes, the sacrament opens us to another dimension of love that seeks only the good of the other. Through God’s grace, it is a love that forgets itself for the good of the other; that gives without counting and is prepared to suffer for the other.”

that he made it the sign of the love that links Christ and his Church (Ephesians 5.32).⁴

Marriage that is lived in this manner is not merely a couple’s life project; it fulfills the call that comes from God. As one young couple put it,

“It is a call in the sense that it is God who brings together a man and a woman for their own good and for the good of the world.... Jesus’ gift to humankind and the offering of his own life to save the world is an extraordinary model of conjugal love in which the spouses are called to give themselves mutually for their personal development, as well as that of the couple and family, and for the good of all society.”

With Christ’s help, the married couple is able to bring to the world the additional love that it needs. In his spousal love for the Church, Christ is the Catholic couple’s guide and model:

“In our marriage, Christ can be our example to follow, for he loved to the point of giving his life for those he loves. As a couple, this can remind us that we must love each other and make sacrifices for the

good of the couple and the family. He also abandoned himself to his Father, and we too must abandon ourselves to the Father, trusting in his grace.”

To give one’s life for one’s friends, this is the witness of supreme love, the self-giving love that Christ lived and taught (see John 14-17).

What the Sacrament Adds to Human Love

What does the sacrament of marriage add to human love? One of the young couples we consulted stated:

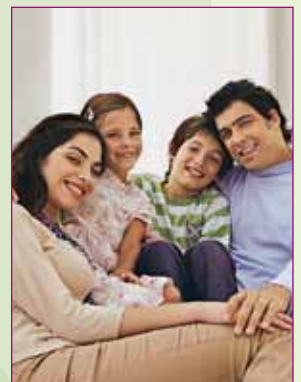
“When we recognize that the source of this love is Love personified, God, it is just as natural to give ourselves to Christ, as a couple, in the sacrament of marriage. It means ‘building on rock’ (Matthew 7.24).”

The sacrament of marriage allows the couple to be united in Christ, giving them the grace, the strength, the power they need to live this commitment. Here is what it means for this husband, married for many years:

“For my wife and me, marriage is a *ménage à trois*, for Christ cannot be on the outside of our commitment.”

Admittedly, this image is strong, but it conveys the idea that Christ unites the two spouses. This means that Christ will accompany the couple throughout their lives, giving them the necessary grace to grow and be fruitful. Christ’s love is present through his Spirit. Through the sacrament of marriage, the man and woman become

“The sacrament situates us in God’s Love and gives us a social and ecclesial mission in the human and Christian education of our children. It is through our children that we can better understand the sacrament of marriage: it reveals to us our mission to love as God has loved us.”





“God calls us to the freedom to do good. It is there that we realize that we are created in God’s image.”

instruments of the Holy Spirit and of God’s grace, for each other, their family and the broader community, in order to love each other mutually as Christ loves his Spouse, the Church.

Modern society usually defines a couple’s happiness by feelings of love or passion, which hold such sway in the arts, culture and advertising. While feelings are valid and positive, they can vary in intensity and duration. Christian marriage cannot be built on solid rock if it does not *also* involve the free decision to build a relationship together. It is a relationship based on feelings of love, certainly, but also on profound mutual respect, values, hopes and freely shared interests, the desire to establish a family, and ultimately, the shared conviction that marriage is the couple’s response to God’s call to holiness. Holiness is not so much moral perfection as love taken seriously in its fullness:

“The couple is called to know – and to communicate – a little better, the face of God through their love and with their children.”

As the marriage matures, the spouses learn to esteem and love each other ever more deeply and completely. This requires time, patience, humility, self-renunciation, and a spirit of service, support and forgiveness! (1 Corinthians 13.4-7) It is one of the reasons why the Church considers the indissoluble dimension of the marriage bond to be essential.⁵

“The couple’s foundation is, of course, love, but in choosing marriage, we are choosing to journey together and to increase our love as a couple. It can therefore be said that love is the cause, but also the goal of marriage.”

For Catholics, marriage goes beyond the uniquely legal institution that is a traditional part of societies. A couple could effectively base their relationship solely on human love, since marriage is obviously not the exclusive right of Christians, but a great human institution that crosses centuries, cultures and diverse religions. However, as this young couple reminds us, “The fact that Catholic couples collaborate in God’s grace enables them to experience a much deeper reality than human love,” without excluding or diminishing the latter in any way. God’s love makes up for the limits of human love. Through the Holy Spirit, God is present with the spouses to transform them and make them instruments of divine love for the world. They become an “icon” of God’s love, which is free, faithful, permanent and fruitful.

The Meaning of Freedom, Fidelity, Stability and Fruitfulness

Love is always rooted in **freedom**. God has given us freedom in order to love:

“Love cannot be forced. Genuine love is a choice. God calls us to responsible freedom – a freedom lived in love that respects others. We are not free to do as we please without regard for others.”

In fact, true freedom is not independence without responsibility. To love is to grow in relationships that are respectful of each person’s differences. There is no authentic love without freedom.

Properly understood, **fidelity** encompasses all dimensions of human experience, and not only at the sexual level.



“To be faithful also means being at each other’s service in times of difficulty as in times of peace.”

“Fidelity surpasses sexuality. It is also necessary to be faithful to one’s commitment, to honesty, to chastity. Fidelity and friendship are two aspects of conjugal life that ensure the permanence of a marriage. Without these two aspects, the marriage is in danger of collapse.”

Fidelity includes the dimension of the exclusive bond between two spouses. “Trial marriage” without formal commitment or permanence does not meet the challenge of marriage in God’s eyes, for it always introduces a way out. What ensures fidelity is not trial but commitment.

Stability. A couple’s fidelity, trust and freedom thrive over time in a committed relationship. The union that is marriage is not built overnight. The indissolubility of the bond, far from being a prison, is the condition that enables couples to persevere against headwinds and to invest the best of themselves in this lifelong relationship. Remaining together allows a married couple to experience greater inner freedom in the face of all obstacles, in the communion of heart and body that is at the centre of this commitment. “When a couple marries, they marry for life. It enables them to have stability, a long-term vision.”

Lived in freedom, fidelity and stability, marriage is fruitful from every point of view. “**Fertility** enables the couple to participate in a special way in divine creation. Having children together is a couple’s most beautiful experience. The couple must remain open to life, make choices accordingly and accept God’s will.”



“Our experience of indissolubility is that it ultimately brings enormous freedom, freedom from worry that your spouse will grow tired of you, freedom to be yourself and not be reduced to relying on appearances, the freedom to learn and grow and challenge each other with an upright heart.”

Against the tide of our present culture, this generous openness to life is a grace of marriage.⁶

“When spouses are open to life, the joy and happiness they share is immeasurable. It is free, unselfish love that we wish to give each other. Children are the perfect expression of this free, precious love because they are gifts from God.”

A couple may be faced with sterility or infertility.⁷ The fruitfulness of marriage also goes beyond the physical to encompass the spiritual dimension, that is, the desire to manifest the gift of self other than at the biological level.

“Couples can be fertile in other ways. Childless couples or those whose children are grown can devote themselves to the good of the Christian community and society.”

For example, this can consist of awakening younger generations to the challenges of Christian love through the witness of their lives. Or it can mean adopting children or foster parenting. Whether it is their own children or other young people, Christian spouses are called to be a visible sign of God’s love.

The Mission of the Married Couple

Christian marriage is “good news” for today’s world, and our world needs good news!

“This means that the couple and the family can become the example of what the world itself could be: a world in which the love of neighbour exists. Christian spouses have the vocation to teach their children to love Christ with all their hearts and souls through prayer and in their daily lives. The greatest gift parents can give their children is to initiate them into the love of God and their neighbour. In fact, it is in this way that the couple is called to evangelize.”

Proclaiming this good news by living a Christian marriage does not mean there is no suffering. As one couple said,

“In our world, there are so many cracks, wounds and temptations that can easily lead us away from God and true freedom. Our marriage remains a contradictory sign in today’s world: it is a sign that authentic freedom and love happen through rather unpopular things, such as sacrifice, commitment, the free gift of self, and integral respect of the other.” It is true that “joy is not immediate pleasure, but rather a contagious disposition that leads to sowing all that supports and encourages life, hope, trust, the peace of fulfilment for oneself and the other, in a word, happiness.”

The couple and the family are the foundation for society, just as they are the domestic “building block” for the Church. What good news this is for our society which is in a serious crisis! Commitment, respect for life, the openness of sexuality to the gift of life, the indissolubility of the unique bond between a man and a woman in marriage — these are the values and witness that Catholic couples and families offer. No matter society’s failures, God’s design should not be lost, for love is still possible for today’s couple and family. The couple and the family transform the world by being a “school” where children can learn about life and faith.



© Bill Witman

“Catholic marriage is a sign of hope in a time when we are surrounded by despair and fear. Because it is based on faith, respect, commitment and stability, the Catholic couple can be good news for today’s world.”

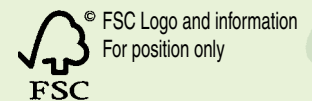
Episcopal Commission for Theology, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops © Conccan, Inc., 2008.

All rights reserved. Printed in Canada.

ISBN: 978-0-88997-574-3 • Legal deposit: Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa

Published by CCCB Publications • Telephone : 1 800 769-1147 • E-mail: publi@ccc.ca

Web site: www.cccbpublications.ca • Code: 184-697



1. For further explanation of *eros* and *agape*, see the encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 25 December 2005, no. 7.
2. In a lecture at the Grand Séminaire de Montréal, 2 May 2007, entitled “Divine ressemblance: La vocation chrétienne au mariage et à la famille dans la mission de l’Église”, Cardinal Marc Ouellet reminded Catholics that in humanity’s present condition love is not possible without suffering, and that Jesus fully assumed human suffering by saving us through the mystery of his death and resurrection.
3. Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, at the close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, (January 2001, no. 47). See also his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, 1981, no. 13.
4. See Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, 1981, no. 13.
5. See Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 48, 1.
6. Fecundity resides in the fact that the couple “is in the image and likeness of God not only by its nature, but also because of its power to perpetuate life through procreation.” (Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, Message, “Marriage in the Present Day,” 10 September 2003, p. 4.)
7. See Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 50, 3.
8. Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 9.

A Word of Thanks and Encouragement

As a young couple, you might find all this quite daunting. But don't forget: a successful marriage means an "educational growth process",⁸ to use the words of Pope John Paul II. It will take time to grow in understanding and in the maturity that comes from successfully meeting the challenges of marriage. As Bishops, we listen to young couples like you and to your questions and needs. The Church needs you: the future belongs to you! This is why many dioceses and eparchies offer marriage preparation sessions as well as opportunities for younger couples to discuss with older and more experienced couples. We encourage you, as a young couple, to take advantage of the services provided in your parish and in your diocese or eparchy. We are profoundly grateful for all those in our dioceses and eparchies who help with marriage preparation and provide pastoral support for couples and families.

May all these efforts expand and strengthen! Whatever fear and despair is to be found in our world, the signs of hope are always greater. This is our reflection on the beauty of sacramental marriage that we wish to share with you, assisted by the wonderful testimonies of many young Canadian couples. We hope you will see in these reflections an invitation for you to enter into the joyful commitment of the sacrament of marriage.

Bishop Luc Bouchard, Chairman,
Saint Paul, Alberta

Bishop Jacques Berthelet, C.S.V.,
Saint-Jean-de-Longueuil, Quebec

Eparchial Bishop David Motiuk,
Edmonton, Alberta

Archbishop Terrence Prendergast, S.J.,
Ottawa, Ontario

Episcopal Commission for Theology,
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

For further reading...

BERTHELET, Bishop Jacques, C.S.V., President, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. "Pastoral Letter to the Canadian Catholic Community on Marriage". 25 November 2002.

Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. Message "Marriage in the Present Day". 10 September 2003.

Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. *In Search of the Good: A Catholic Understanding of Moral Living*. Ottawa: CCCB Publications Service, 2004 (Chapter 12).

Catholic Organization for Life and the Family.

In Love for Life: A Reflection Paper on the Conjugal, Social and Religious Significance of Marriage. Ottawa: CCCB Publications Service, 2002 (44 pp.)

Catholic Organization for Life and the Family (www.colf.ca), *Marriage in the Catholic Church: Frequently Asked Questions*, 2008.

JEFFERY, Peter, C.S.Sp. *The Mystery of Christian Marriage*. New York: Paulist Press, 2006 (226 pp.)

JOHN PAUL II. Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*. November 1981.

LACROIX, Xavier. *L'avenir, c'est l'autre. Dix conférences sur l'amour et la famille*. Paris: Cerf, 2001 (240 pp.)

MYERS, Archbishop John. "New Jersey High Court's Ruling: Same-Sex Marriage". *Origins*, Vol. 36, No. 22 (Nov. 9, 2006), pp. 345-346.

OUELLET, Cardinal Marc. *Divine Likeness: Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family*. Sillery, Quebec: Éditions Anne Sigier, 2006 (316 pp.)

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Married Love and the Gift of Life*. 2006.

