


promise, it is specifically a promise that is sacred because it is made with God as a witness. The joining of the partners in marriage is a sacred bonding that brings Christ into their lives as a couple. Just as they are now two people joined into one, so are they **joined together into Christ**. This level of holiness is not one found in a purely secular marriage, although that is also holy. St. Paul compared the holiness of the Marriage bond with the love of Christ for his Church:

“Husbands should love their wives just as Christ loved the Church and sacrificed himself for it to make her holy .. husbands must love their wives as they love their own bodies .. that is the way Christ treats his Church, because it is his body” (Eph.5)

What Does a Catholic Marriage Require of the Couple?

Catholic marriages must reflect the following aspects, in a context that emphasises its spiritual base and its core in the love that exudes from Jesus Christ.:

- **A total giving to each other** - that is a total sharing of possessions, total honesty and open communication with each other, especially when problems arise, and total giving of each other in sexual intercourse that unites the two into one being. Within marriage sexual intercourse becomes a fulfilling and sacred experience ordained by God (Gn.1:27, 9:1 to Noah’s family). Outside marriage it has the opposite effect - it trivialises sex, it debases and dehumanises the participants, it gravely affects their relationship with Christ.
- **A total faithfulness to each other** - the sacred nature of the love of a man and woman for each other in marriage demands faithfulness “until death do us part”. No-one must come between husband and wife, and each partner must be aware of the dangers of letting natural human inclinations endanger their sacred bond with their partner and with Christ. Jesus reminded us of this danger in the Sermon on the Mount **“If a man looks at a woman lustfully he has already committed adultery with her in his heart”** (Mtt.5).
Of course, this warning applies equally to women. This faithfulness is the reason why Jesus forbade re-marriage after divorce (Mtt.5 and 19). However, if a marriage has truly broken down and divorce is needed for legal reasons, divorce itself is not forbidden and is not itself sinful.
- **A total openness to having children** - the fruit of marriage, if this is God’s will, is the creation of children, new life created by the grace and blessings of God. In their love, parents co-operate with God in creation but it brings with it the responsibility to share God’s love with their children by guiding them in the joy of the Faith, to know Jesus and his great love for them.

Our Catholic Faith

25. The Sacrament of Marriage

- a Truly Holy Dimension for Personal Commitment



Questions for Reflection

1. Why is Catholic marriage a sacrament and why does this make it so different from other types of marriage?
2. What commitment do couples in a Catholic marriage make to each other?
3. How would you explain to someone the Catholic Church’s attitude to divorce?

The Fundamental Nature of Marriage

Societies throughout the ages have without exception recognised the importance of a stable social unit of a man and a woman living together. It is a recognition that seems to go to the core of every human emotion, where every person wants to love and be loved during their life, but in a relationship that extends beyond the sensual but essential aspect of physical contact into one that satisfies their whole being, body and spirit. It was also recognised that this partnership of love was ideal for providing security and a sound upbringing for children, children who also served to fulfil a natural/ basic longing of their parents. And so, the unit known as the family came into being.



Over time, this partnership came to be formalised in ceremonies recognised by the wider community, and laws were enacted to give protection and rights to the offspring of that partnership. This was so stability and peace could prevail within the given community. However, historically, the husband was allowed to have physical relations outside his immediate family unit, to the extent even that he could keep women as concubines as part of his property. But even then his wife retained supreme status and legal protection. Marriages could be ended, but only if appropriate security was provided for the former wife.

This purely legal approach to marriage is the norm in secular societies today. As we all know there are **three dangerous developments** today in our society.

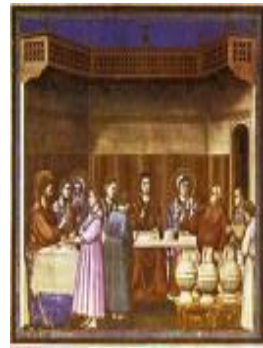
1. The view that marriage is **no longer necessary** for a committed relationship and indeed that it adds nothing to a relationship. This is reflected in the mentality often expressed that “marriage is only a piece of paper”.
2. The traditional concept that marriage is a relationship solely between a man and a woman is coming under increasing scrutiny. Secular society now accepts **partnerships between males alone or females alone**, and the increasing regularisation of these types of relationships may eventually lead to a change in the legal definition of marriage.
3. The historic belief that traditional marriage is the best environment for the rearing of children is now being questioned more and more with the rise in **single parent families**, in turn brought about by rising divorce rates and the collapse of traditional beliefs about the value of marriage itself.

What is the Bible’s Attitude to Marriage?

In the Old Testament, the attitude to marriage reflected that of ancient societies: it was the ideal institution within which to bring up children (Gn.24) but men could own concubines (Abraham Gen.16, David 2 Sam.5, Solomon 1 K.11)

and practise polygamy (Jacob Gen.29, David 2 Sam.2 and 5, Solomon 1 K.11), while divorce was also allowed (Deut.24).

Despite these secular attitudes, the early text Gn.2:24 implies exclusion and monogamy as the ideal, and it is crucial to understanding God’s view of what marriage should be that in describing his own love for Israel, the analogy of marriage is frequently used: “**I shall betroth you to myself for ever, I shall betroth you in .. faithful love and tenderness**” (Hosea 2:19, also Isa.54 and 62).



In the New Testament, the marriage feast of Cana (Jn.2) shows the joy and importance of marriage in Jewish society, and Jesus went beyond the O.T. Law to emphasise the indissolubility of marriage outlined in Gn.2:24 so that divorce is not recognised by God, meaning any subsequent marriage is tantamount to adultery (Mtt.19) . However, Jesus’ answer to the Sadducees indicates that marriage is not eternal and is, indeed, limited to earthly life (Mt. 20).

Elsewhere in the N.T., St. Paul talks in terms of marriage in practical terms that recognises its importance within the Christian community (1 Cor.7) but where he appears to indicate a preference for the unmarried state it must be recognised that this view was expressed in his belief that Jesus’ return was imminent. The later letter to the Ephesians describes marriage in the highest terms (see below).

The Uniqueness of Catholic Marriage

In complete contrast to the prevailing secular attitude to male/female relationships is the deep Catholic truth that **marriage is a sacrament**. What this means is that Catholic marriage is intimately bound up in our beliefs about Jesus Christ: **that it reflects in a real and sacred way Christ’s love** for us all and especially his love for the married couple.

Marriage reflects Christ’s love for us all because marriage also has a community dimension, like all sacraments. The priest or deacon represents the community of Christ’s Church, and the marriage is, therefore, **witnessed by the Church** and the couple are brought ever deeper into the Church by the act of their marriage.

Marriage reflects Christ’s love for the couple because their love for each other is really an extension of Christ’s love for them. Married couples **administer the sacrament to each other** because it is their promises to each other that brings Christ’s grace into the life of their partner and to them both as a couple. It is this bestowal of grace that makes Catholic Marriage so special and identifies it as a sacrament. It is not just a promise between two committed people, a promise that must be made with full consent and with full understanding of the nature of that