

Pope John Paul II describes this as the nuptial meaning of the body. Going back to the Genesis stories, he sees the sexual differences between man and woman as God's wonderful plan for self-giving love, in and through the body. The body was not made for sex – but for sexual union in marriage. Through the deeply personal language of the body, each partner in marriage says: "I give myself in this most intimate way to you alone and no other person may intrude here." Fidelity as an exclusive relationship is expressed and affirmed in mutual self-giving love.

The gift of love is also a gift of life. Through the sexual language of the human body the couple is called to be open to new life, to the procreation of children.

**Christian marriage is the foundation of the family**

Today some couples are DINKS – "double income, no kids". They refuse to have children when there is no serious reason to prevent them from doing so. Unless they changed their attitude, they would be refused marriage in a Catholic church. They are rejecting an essential part of marriage, one of the two purposes for marriage, God's call to transmit his gift of human life. They are not open to new life.

purpose or "end" of marriage is the procreation of children. This is inseparable from the other purpose of marriage, the sharing of two lives as one. The Second Vatican Council even goes so far as to describe the gift of children as the crown of marriage. (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 48)

**Christian marriage is a cause of the Church**

Four of the sacraments "cause" the Church to form and grow as a society of people: Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist and Holy Orders. The first three, the sacraments of Christian Initiation, make Christians, and Orders makes the ministers who serve and lead the Christian community. But Marriage too may be understood as a sacrament that "causes" the Church. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* along with Orders, Marriage is presented as one of the two "sacraments at the service of communion". Marriage establishes a special community or communion of persons – the Christian family.

The Second Vatican Council describes this community or communion of persons as the *domestic church* (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 11) Pope John Paul II underlined this truth (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 49). Understanding that the family is a "mini-church" comes from our Jewish heritage of domestic religious practices and, to a lesser extent, from family-based religion among the pre-Christian pagans in the world of the Roman Empire. The family is a place where children learn to pray and are educated in the faith – at least this is our ideal. Nurturing and inspiring the domestic church to be a home for prayer and formation is central to all Catholic family movements today. The family is the "basic community" in the Church.

Since the family is the domestic church, it follows that marriage should be accounted as a *secondary*

**Questions for discussion**

1. In what ways does the sacrament strengthen Christian marriage?
2. Why is "covenant" a better way to describe marriage than "contract"?
3. What are the implications of marriage being a "vocation"?
4. Do most people have a deep sense of the importance of God's role in marriage?
5. What are some of the reasons why so many marriages break up?

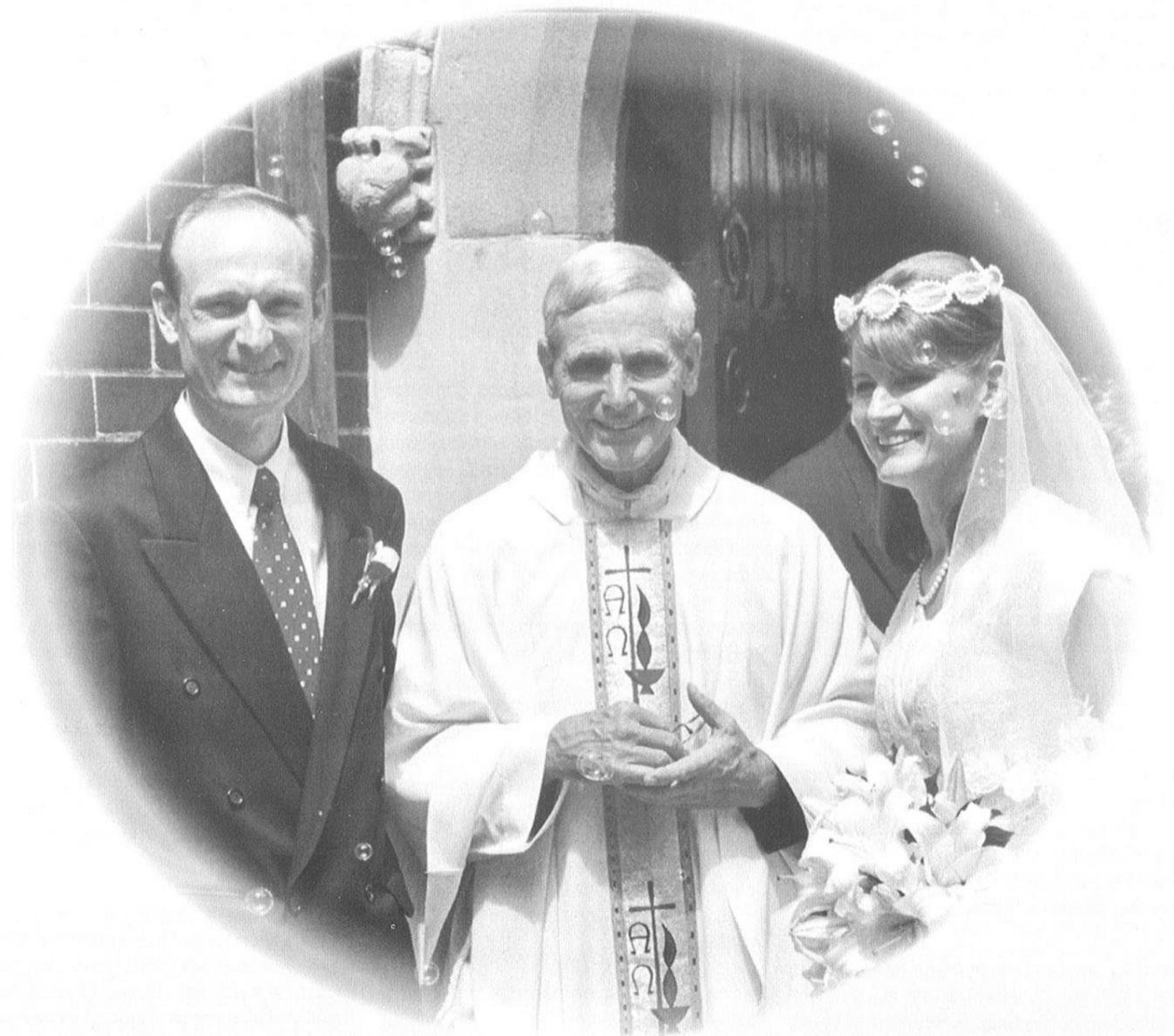
cause of the Church. Marriage sets up the basic "community of life and love" that constitutes the Church as a society in a family form. This may be summarised as follows: marriage causes the family but a sacramental marriage causes the domestic Church.

Pope John Paul II called on families to evangelise other families (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 51-54). By family prayer, reception of the sacraments, catechesis or education in faith, celebration of special moments in life, sharing in times of sorrow and loss, illness and suffering, all this crowned by the charity of the family serving others in the community, especially the poor and marginalised, the Christian family lives the *agape* of Jesus the Bridegroom of the Church (cf. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* 55-64). Amidst these possibilities, the sacrament of marriage teaches us that virtuous and strong family life depends, not only on our human efforts, but on the abundant grace of our God who is for ever faithful.

FURTHER READING: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1601-1666

Mgr. Peter Elliott EV, PP, is the Parish Priest of East Malvern and Episcopal Vicar for Religious Education in the Archdiocese of Melbourne. He is a Permanent Fellow of the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family, Melbourne, and previously was an Official of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for the Family. He is the author of *What God Has Joined, the Sacramentality of Marriage*, St Paul Publications 1990.

*The Beauty of Christian Marriage*



Published six times a year, INFORM is available from:  
Catholic Adult Education Centre, Sydney Locked Bag 888  
Silverwater DC NSW 1811  
Tel: (02) 9643 3660 Fax: (02) 9643 3669 Email: info@caec.com.au  
Published with ecclesiastical approval. ©2004, Catholic Adult Education Centre, Sydney.  
EDITOR: Father John Flader LAYOUT & PRINT: InPress (02) 9791 0412



INFORM - 60c per copy (minimum order: 10 copies per issue) Single subscription \$10 per year within Australia 6 issues annually or with Alternatives (Newsletter of the Catholic Adult Education Centre) \$15 per year. Single copy of every backissue of INFORM still in print - \$40 per set.

## In the beginning: God is the Author of Marriage

When we think about it, the author of a book has the whole book unfolding in her mind as she works away writing on a computer. This helps us understand why the Second Vatican Council taught that God is the "Author" of marriage (*Gaudium et Spes*, 46). Marriage was always in the mind of God. Marriage was always an essential part of God's unfolding plan for human beings, for persons created to reflect his own image and likeness. God wrote marriage into our human nature.

In the Bible, this is clearly set out in the Book of Genesis. The stories of creation tell us that God created marriage when he created human beings as male and female (Genesis chapters 1 and 2). This is why Jesus Christ pointed back to the Genesis story of the creation of man and woman when he was asked about marriage and divorce: "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one'? So they are no longer two but one." (Matthew 19:4-6)

## Marriage is natural

Marriage as part of creation reminds us that it is a *natural* institution. Marriage is not something set up by the government, even if it is regulated by civil law. Marriage existed long before there were governments in our sense of the word. Civil or secular marriage regulated by law is a relatively modern invention.

Moreover, even in its natural forms, a marriage is a *religious* occasion. We only have to look at traditional societies to find that marriage is a family matter celebrated as a religious event, involving the wider tribal "family" of gods, spirits, ancestors. It is a sacred rite of passage for individuals and the tribe, linking individuals and families within the tribe. Marriage signifies much more than a heterosexual relationship for child bearing, so it is ritualised, celebrated as a public event, and the relationship and community established by marriage are treated with respect and protected by moral principles, laws and customs.

In forms and customs, marriage differs around the world, but the essentials are always there – publicly recognised male-female bonding, based in biology, for the purpose of the nurture of young humans. Whatever theories may be proposed as to its origins, marriage is a natural institution always found at the basis of human society in all cultures.

## Jesus taught that marriage is monogamous, indissoluble and faithful

Marriage obviously existed before Jesus Christ walked this earth. It was highly valued in Israel. But the tradition of Moses allowed for divorce. Jesus taught a stricter and higher vision of marriage. Going back to his words quoted above, he added, "So they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder." (Matthew 19:6)

The teaching of Jesus Christ can be summed up as follows:

- Christian marriage is *monogamous* – there is no place for polygamy here, only for an exclusive union between one man and one woman.
- Christian marriage is *indissoluble* – not even the Pope can break the bond of a validly celebrated and consummated marriage.
- Christian marriage is a call to be faithful to one another, to *life-long fidelity*.

**Marriage is a natural institution always found at the basis of human society.**

The first Christians knew that Jesus Christ had given them a new way of marriage. It was called "marriage in the Lord", a way of life for those who have been born again in the waters of Baptism. They recognised that their marriages were different from those of the pagans living around them. Marriage "in the Lord" was more binding, demanding and challenging, and above all it was a holy sign of divine love, a call to selfless love modeled on Jesus' self-giving love for his People, the Church.

This new quality of marriage is explained by St Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians, addressed to a community of converts from paganism. Paul says that married Christians share in the Great Mystery of Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom, who loves his Bride, the Church, so much that he gives himself up for her in sacrificial love on the cross. The Church in turn responds by joyfully submitting to Christ, loving, honouring and respecting him. (cf. Ephesians 5:25-29)

Paul was thinking of marriage based in a covenant relationship, the sacred binding agreement between God and his People. This New Covenant between Jesus Christ and the new Israel, the Church, is reflected in Christian marriage. Because Christian marriage is a sign of Christians' sharing in this Great Mystery, and

because it gives grace, the Church teaches that marriage is a *sacrament*.

## Jesus Christ made marriage a sacrament of his New Covenant

Seven sacraments are celebrated in the Catholic Church. They are listed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1210: Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders and Matrimony, or as we usually call it today, Marriage.

A "sacrament" is a visible sign and action that gives us grace. A sacrament is not just symbolic. Something really happens in every sacrament. A sacrament is a time of change because this is a chosen moment when God shares divine life with us, a moment when we are empowered in a supernatural way. This is why a sacrament is a *means of grace*. Because of our human weakness and sin, we need the healing, saving and empowering grace of the sacraments – and this applies to marriage.

However, even in Catholic descriptions of marriage it is not uncommon to come across statements such as "and marriage is *also* a sacrament". But Jesus did not "add" the sacrament to the existing institution of marriage. He transformed marriage from within by transforming people through Baptism. When two baptised people marry "in the Lord", their marriage in itself is a *sacrament of the New Law*.

## Marriage is a vocation

When we use the word "vocation" we tend to think of someone becoming a religious sister, brother or priest. But sacraments show us that this word has a more basic meaning. In Baptism and Confirmation God calls us, empowers us and sends us into the world to be Christians. Our first vocation to a Christian way of life is based on Baptism. The other vocations within the community of the Church build on this basic one. Marriage itself is a vocation. When they marry "in the Lord" Christians respond to a call from God. Therefore they should believe that God has a plan for them in the process of finding, choosing and wedding the right partner.

Understood as a vocation for life, entering marriage needs to be taken seriously. A woman spends years preparing to become a nun, passing through various stages of formation and decision. A man studies in a seminary for six or seven years before he is ordained a priest. But some couples want to rush into marriage in a matter of weeks and even get offended when the priest sends them on a marriage preparation course. Yet marriage is just as much a vocation as religious life or priesthood.

Entering marriage calls for preparation, thoughtful reflection and prayer.

Because it is meant to be a life-long commitment, the call to marriage can be understood through reflecting on some simple questions: "Do I understand what Christian marriage is and do I truly intend to enter into it? Is this the person God intends me to marry? Am I the person God has provided for my partner?"

**The words of consent are words of faith, words of trust, words of openness to the future.**

## God gives the couple grace

Christian marriage is first and foremost a call to celebrate a sacrament and then to live that sacrament day by day. In this "great sacrament" God strengthens, supports and enriches a couple for married life and family life. What does God offer two baptised people as they celebrate the sacrament by giving themselves to each other in marriage?

- God empowers the couple by binding them together for life. We call this the *sacramental bond* of marriage. Once a couple have consummated their marriage, this bond is *indissoluble* or unbreakable, as Jesus taught: "What God has joined let no-one put asunder."
- God offers them the grace to be faithful to one another, to live in an exclusive relationship. This is the grace of *fidelity*.
- God offers the couple the grace to be "one", to live in *unity*, in a harmony of hearts and wills, to be one body, one flesh, expressed above all in the union of mutual sexual self-giving.
- God offers the couple the grace to give themselves to one another, a *self-giving love* modeled on the sacrificial love of Jesus for his Bride the Church.
- God offers the couple the *grace to be open to new life*, to accept children and form a family, building up and renewing the Church and human society.

## The baptised couple are the ministers of the sacrament of marriage

We often hear statements like: "Father Leo married Helen and Tony." But this is not true! The priest did not marry them. Helen and Tony married one another. As two baptised people, they were the ministers of the sacrament of marriage when they made their "vows", or mutual consent. When they stood before the altar, Father Leo was there as

the Church's official witness, together with some other witnesses. He added a special nuptial blessing and, in the case of Helen and Tony, the first food they received as husband and wife was the Eucharist, because they chose to enter their marriage during Nuptial Mass. But the sacramental moment was their free, mutual consent.

When an inter-Church marriage (or "mixed marriage") is celebrated between a Catholic and a baptised member of another Christian denomination, this is just as much a sacrament as a marriage between two Catholics. And when two non-Catholic Christians marry according to their own traditions, this too is a sacrament. Baptism is the source of Christian marriage for *all* Christians.

## The couple enter marriage through a mutual consent

When the sacrament of marriage is celebrated, the couple freely give their mutual consent, using words like this:

*"I Helen take you Tony for my lawful husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part."*

Reflect on these beautiful words. The words of consent are words of faith, words of trust, words of openness to the future. They mean, "No matter what happens, I give myself to you, for ever!" These words express an *unconditional* intention to enter into marriage. As they say these words, a man and woman intend to enter a new binding relationship, through a contract they make before God and their families and friends. But marriage is more than a legal contract and it is much more than one moment of time.

## Christian marriage is a covenant relationship

The Bishops at the Second Vatican Council chose the biblical word "covenant" to describe Christian marriage (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 48). "Covenant" is a richer and more personal word than "contract". It sets marriage within the New Covenant and the Great Mystery of Christ and his Bride the Church. A covenant is *more binding* than a contract because it reminds us that God comes directly into the bonding of man and woman. God is the third Party, the great Witness to Christian marriage. Covenant tells us that indissolubility, unity and fidelity are essential to marriage. The term "covenant" is also ecumenically useful and has been welcomed by other Christians. It sounds less legalistic, and more personal and pastoral, than "contract", although

this term is still useful in Canon Law.

Covenant may best describe marriage as a "lived sacrament", that is, marriage as a way of life, lived by husband and wife day by day, year by year. A covenant sets out how both parties are meant to live according to certain conditions. The Old Testament linked the great Covenant between God and Israel with marriage. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophets presented marriage as a symbol of God's patient and faithful covenant relationship with his people. If God is always patient and faithful, are not married people called to this same patient fidelity? It may be useful to read the prophets on this theme.

- Hosea marries and remains faithful to the wayward Gomer, a symbol of Israel's breach of the covenant (cf. Hosea 1:2-3; 4:1-6; 6:3 and 13:4).
- Ezekiel presents a harsher message of fidelity and infidelity (Ezekiel 16:8).
- Jeremiah extends this language (cf. Jeremiah 3:20, Lamentations 1 and 2). The story of our salvation is like a matrimonial drama.
- Isaiah seems more positive and hopeful (cf. Isaiah 49:18, 52:1-2). Israel is the chosen servant girl, gently wooed and wedded by a gracious king.

**The gift of love is also a gift of life. Through the sexual language of the human body the couple is called to be open to new life, to the procreation of children.**

Isaiah's text reminds us that a covenant was not necessarily a contract between equals. A covenant had the quality of grace, a gift bestowed by a greater person on a lesser person. While husband and wife are equals in their mutual covenant, God, the greater third Party, is offering them grace, to make their mutual commitment, to share their lives together as one, to persevere in married life, to form a family, to "give way" to one another, even to suffer if need be.

## The nuptial meaning of the body

Sexuality is a normal part of married life. Created by God, sexuality is natural and good. It can be misused and abused, like any gift. But in marriage it finds its real personal meaning. In the self-giving union of two bodies becoming "one flesh", the married couple come to understand the mystery of being a woman and being a man. This mystery was written into their very bodies because they were made for one another, made for marriage.