

THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE: THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION AND MARRIAGE

God calls most men and women to the married vocation. This is a great honor and an immense challenge. To fulfill this marvelous calling we need Christ's help; we need his Spirit's power.

Marriage: God's Great Plan

First, we must be convinced that God is the author of marriage and family life. Many people today consider marriage solely in terms of biology, sociology or culture. When marriage and family life are viewed in a merely naturalistic manner, they lose all reference to God and are no longer rooted in absolute values or founded upon divinely ordained truths. One result is that premarital sex, trial marriage, and cohabitation are commonplace today. Adultery, divorce, and remarriage are treated casually. "Pre-nuptial contracts" are becoming a popular way to take out economic insurance against a likely future divorce. Some go so far as to support homosexual 'marriages.' While this may be the prevailing "wisdom" of the world, we must look to the Bible, the Christian tradition, and the teaching of the Church to discover God's plan for marriage and family life.

Marriage between a man and a woman is at the heart of God's design for creation. In the first creation story we find man and woman as the crown of God's good creation. "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our own image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:26-27). Moreover, God "blessed" them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Gen 1:28). Here God revealed that marriage, sexuality, and family life are not meant to be just biological and evolutionary phenomenon, but are integral to his purposes, part of his plan for the human race created in his own image and likeness.

The second creation story is more graphic. It depicts God forming man out of clay and breathing into him the breath of life (cf. Gen 2:7). When God placed the man in the Garden of Eden, he took note that "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner" (Gen 2:18). We are told very graphically how God formed woman from Adam's rib. Upon seeing her, Adam declared "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called woman, for out of man this one was taken" (Gen 2:23). Woman is man's designated helper, but this in no way undermines her dignity. Having been formed from Adam's rib, she, by design, is close to his heart and, as Adam himself acknowledged, she shares his very own nature. In God's plan, man and woman are complementary. "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen 2:24).

Sin, Repentance and the Restoration of Married Life

When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, preferring to be gods unto themselves, they devastated their life together as a married couple. No longer were they faithful and loyal. The effects of their sin have contaminated every marriage and family. Their own family bears witness to this truth. Cain killed his brother Abel (cf. Gen 4). Do we see what transpired because of sin? Marriage and family life, the centerpiece of God's work, became fragmented and broken.

The evil of the Fall should not blind us to God's love. He immediately promised a Savior (cf. Gen 3:15). This greatwork of redemption was accomplished in Christ Jesus. Our marriages and families can be healed and rejuvenated only if we participate in this new life. Pope John Paul II has stated: "the Church is deeply convinced that only by the acceptance of the Gospel are the hopes that man legitimately places in marriage and in the family capable of being fulfilled" (Role of Christian Family in the Modern World, n. 3).

When a Christian couple enters marriage, they do so in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection. Through faith and baptism, they participate in a new life in Christ, in the covenant which was founded on the shedding of his blood. Thus, when a Christian couple stands before the altar, in company with the priest and witnesses, they are presenting themselves to God in union with Christ, as members of his body. They are saying to God: "We have been cleansed of our sin. As holy members of your Son's body, temples of the Holy Spirit, we approach your throne. As sharers in his covenant, we commit ourselves to one another, with you, Father, as our divine witness, to live together and to become one in heart, mind, and body."

The unbreakable covenant between a Christian husband and wife is possible only because they participate in Jesus' everlasting covenant. As partakers of the Holy Spirit, they can confidently commit themselves to one another, knowing that no sin can destroy the mutual promises.

Willed by God in the very act of creation, marriage and the family are interiorly ordained to fulfillment in Christ and have need of his graces in order to be healed from the wounds of sin and restored to their "beginning," that is, to the full understanding and the full realization of God's plan (Role of the Christian Family, n. 3).

Only if we are clear about the greatness of God's call in marriage and family life will we see the importance of our responsibilities, the way sin undermines these, and how the Sacrament of Reconciliation can restore familial relationships. We need not fear. Rather we should rejoice that Jesus has thought us worthy of so marvelous a calling as husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. We can find great strength in his saving presence, power and life.

Called to Be Holy

The Second Vatican Council has emphasized that "all in the Church... are called to holiness" (Constitution on the Church, n. 39). Christian marriages are an essential means used by God to sanctify the members of Christian families.

"The sacrament of marriage is the specific source and original means of sanctification for Christian married couples and families" (Role of the Christian Family, n. 56). As married couples, we are to examine our lives in light of the responsibilities we have to God's call to holiness. These responsibilities are fourfold in nature: 1) to God; 2) to our spouse; 3) to our children; 4) to society at large. By rooting out sin and through the healing and empowering effects of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we will be able to attain the holiness to which we are called.

An Examination of Conscience for Married Persons

Responsibilities to God:

Have I gone to Mass every Sunday? Have I participated at Mass or have I day dreamed or been present with a blank mind?

Have I prayed every day (15-20 minutes)?

Have I read the Bible? Have I studied the truths of our faith and allowed them to become more part of the way I think and act? Have I read any spiritual books or religious literature?

Have I told God that I want to love him with my whole heart, mind and strength? Do I hold any resentments toward God?

Have I recognized my need for Jesus and his salvation? Have I asked the Holy Spirit to empower me to live the Christian life, to be a proper husband/wife and parent?

Have I been financially generous to the Church? Have I participated in parish or religious activities?

Have I held resentments toward the Church or Church authorities? Have I forgiven them?

Responsibilities to my spouse:

Have I cared for my spouse? Have I been generous with my time? Have I been affectionate and loving? Have I told my spouse that I love him or her?

Have I been concerned about the spiritual well-being of my spouse?

Have I listened to my spouse? Have I paid attention to his other concerns, worries, and problems? Have I sought these out?

Have I allowed resentments and bitterness toward my spouse to take root in my mind? Have I nurtured these? Have I forgiven my spouse for the wrongs he or she has committed against me?

Have I allowed misunderstanding, miscommunication or accidents to cause anger and mistrust? Have I nurtured critical and negative thoughts about my spouse?

Have I manipulated my spouse in order to get my own way?

Have I tried to bully or overpower my spouse?

Have I spoken sharply or sarcastically to my spouse? Have I spoken in a demeaning or negative way? Have I injured my spouse through taunting and negative teasing? Have I called my spouse harsh names or used language that is not respectful?

Have I physically abused my spouse?

Have I gossiped about my spouse?

Have I undermined the authority and dignity of my spouse through disrespect and rebelliousness?

Have I been moody and sullen?

Have I bickered with my spouse out of stubbornness and selfishness?

Have I lied or been deceitful to my spouse?

Have I misused sexuality? Have I used sexual relations solely for my own selfish pleasure? Have I been too demanding in my desire for sexual fulfillment? Have I been loving and physically affectionate in my sexual relations or have I used sexual relations in a way that would be demeaning or disrespectful to my spouse? Have I refused sexual relations out of laziness, revenge or manipulation?

Have I refused to conceive children out of selfishness or material greed? Have I used artificial means of contraception?

Have I had an abortion or encouraged others to have one?

Have I masturbated?

Have I flirted or fostered improper relationships with someone else, either in my mind or through words and actions?

Have I used pornography: books, magazines or movies?

Have I committed adultery?

Have I misused alcohol or drugs?

Have I been financially responsible?

Responsibilities to children:

Have I cared for the spiritual needs of my children? Have I been a shepherd and guardian as God has appointed me? Have I tried to foster a Christian family where Jesus is Lord? Have I taught my children the Gospel and the commandments of God?

Have I prayed with them?

Have I been persistent and courageous in my training and teaching? Have I disciplined them when necessary? Have I been lazy and apathetic?

Have I talked with them to find out their problems, concerns and fears? Have I been affectionate toward them? Have I hugged them and told them that I love them? Have I played or recreated with them?

Have I been impatient and frustrated with them? Have I corrected them out of love in order to teach them what is right and good? Have I treated them with respect? Have I spoken to them in a sarcastic or demeaning way?

Have I held resentments against them? Have I forgiven them?

Have I been of one heart and mind with my spouse in the upbringing of the children? Or have I allowed disagreements and dissension to disrupt the training, educating and disciplining of our children?

Have I undermined the role of authority in the eyes of my children by speaking negatively against God, the Church, my spouse or others who hold legitimate authority over them?

Have I been a good Christian witness to my children in what I say and do? Or do I demand one standard for them and another for myself?

Have I been properly generous with my children regarding money and physical and material well-being? Have I been miserly? Have I been extravagant, thus spoiling them?

Responsibilities to society:

Have I been a Christian witness to those with whom I work or associate? Have I spoken to anyone about the Gospel and how important it is to believe in Jesus?

Have I held resentments and anger against those with whom I work, relatives or friends? Have I forgiven them?

Have I been unethical in my business dealings? Have I stolen or lied?

Have I allowed the Gospel to influence my political and social opinions?

Have I had a proper Christian concern for the poor and needy?

Have I paid my taxes?

Have I fostered or nurtured hatred toward my "political" enemies, either local, national or international?

Have I been prejudiced toward others because of race, color, religion or social status?

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