

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:
Why Get Married at all? Why Get Married in the Church?

In my apostolate, I often encounter questions about marriage. "Why do I have to get married in the Church? Why get married at all?" Indeed, more and more young couples now view marriage as optional, and rates of marriage are in decline worldwide. The Catholic Church, however, has always taught that marriage is an essential human institution, the only authentic context for the transmission of life and for "handing on the blueprint for human existence." Why is this?

Consider a couple living together and bearing children together *without* marrying. How do their lives differ from those of a married couple? What does marriage bring to the table? The answer is that marriage involves a solemn promise of lifelong fidelity and a clear acceptance of the responsibility for the transmission of life. Couples who do not marry have not made that solemn promise nor have they fully accepted the responsibilities connected with the transmission of life.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that it is this element of promise that "makes the marriage." (CCC 1626, 1627) It is not simply the experience of "loving each other," cohabitation, or childbearing that makes a marriage. Rather, making this solemn promise allows each party to rely upon the other, to make plans for oneself and one's children that include the help and support - the total, lifelong commitment - of the other party involved in the transmission of life.

Men and women who come together both incur an obligation to the life that may (and probably will) result. Children are helpless and vulnerable for a long time. They require not only food and shelter, but love, instruction, and moral and spiritual example. This includes the example of true love, what makes us most authentically human, the complete gift of self to another. Merely sending an alimony check does not come close to fulfilling the lifelong needs of the human person.

When you marry, you give something up. You give up your freedom, your right to self-determination. You signal your willingness to undergo suffering for the good of your spouse and your children. *That is what love is: the willingness to make sacrifices for the good of another.* This is why it is utterly vacuous to say, "We love each other. Why should we not just live together?" In such a situation, the one thing absolutely lacking is true, sacrificial love. Instead, you have two people willing to live together for as long as it is pleasurable or convenient, with no promise of commitment, no possibility of permanently relying upon the other. It is the opposite of marriage, not its moral equivalent.

Why get married in the Church?

It is this element of sacrifice, the total self-donation, that makes marriage the perfect symbol of Christ and the Church. And for Christians, Christ has also made a promise of grace. God comes alongside the marrying couple and supplies His help for the sometimes arduous demands of living out their promise. This is what makes marriage a sacrament. There is both a symbol and a promise of grace. And as a sacrament, marriage falls under the authority of the Church. It is her duty to determine when a valid marriage exists, and to support and regulate the institution.

The Second Vatican Council also taught that Christian marriage is the source and ground of the family as a "domestic Church." Family is the first school of the faith for children. Christian children must therefore understand that their family is essentially connected to the Church, to the life of faith and grace. This comes through the sacrament of marriage.

Marriage is also an essentially social institution. It pertains not just to the private good of the spouses, but to the transmission and sustenance of the whole social order. Society has an interest in supporting *and enforcing* the promise of marriage. As such, it is important that there be public witnesses to the promise of marriage.

Pope Benedict recently spoke to the marriage crisis in his Christmas address to the Roman Curia. In moving terms, he related that marriage is not only for the wellbeing of children or the social order. It also provides something essential to the individual who pledges himself to the institution:

Man's refusal to make any commitment . . . means that man remains closed in on himself and keeps his "I" ultimately for himself, without really rising above it. Yet only in self-giving does man find himself, and only by opening himself to the other, to others, to children, to the family, only by letting himself be changed through suffering, does he discover the breadth of his humanity. When such commitment is repudiated, the key figures of human existence likewise vanish: father, mother, child – essential elements of the experience of being human are lost. (*Address to the Roman Curia*, December 2012)

Men and woman will continue to come together. Children will continue to be born. But will there be love? Will there be men and women willing to sacrifice themselves and offer their lives for the good of the other, and the children who result? Or will they treat the other as a temporary occasion for personal satisfaction, and children as unwanted burdens or, worse, as pawns in a game of sexual politics? The Church teaches that a society without marriage will be a vicious world. Through marriage, however, man can find the deepest spiritual realities, the *ultimately* satisfying experience of humanity.