
WITNESSES OF GOD'S LOVE (4)



After reflecting on the gifts of the Spirit in Christian marriage, may we continue to discover anew the beauty and grandeur of this sacrament!

THE SACRAMENT OF MATRIMONY

In the eyes of the Catholic Church marriage is of prime importance because Christ elevated it to the dignity of a sacrament. Even if love between a man and a woman is imperfect, it is always called to manifest in a tangible way what Jesus revealed abundantly: the irrevocable love of God that is forever linked to our humanity. Married couples share in this mystery. They become its living signs. The sacrament of matrimony is a sign of the union between Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:31-32). As the icon of God's love, the sacrament of matrimony is also the icon of human dignity and greatness. The key image of creation is reflected in the richness of the masculine and feminine dimensions of the heterosexual couple. The fact that human beings are created female and male, in God's image, and that procreative power flows from their union are two fundamental aspects of marriage. The social and conjugal unit – by its binding love, by its inherent ability to bear children, and by the social responsibility of father and mother to care for their children – not only enriches society but is its very cornerstone. For Christians, marriage marks a new page in the sacred story that began at baptism. It is a new moment of salvation history when the couple, forming a community of life and love, becomes a sign of Christ's love for his Church. The marriage bond is thus a covenant to be lived, an unconditional promise between two people that also involves the community.

MUTUAL SANCTIFICATION

In his Apostolic Exhortation on the Family, Pope John Paul II states that the sacrament of matrimony is the specific source and original means of sanctification for Christian married couples and families. It takes up again and makes specific the sanctifying grace of baptism. By virtue of the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, conjugal love is purified and made holy. This love the Lord made worthy of special gifts, healing, perfecting, and exalting gifts of grace and charity. The gift of Jesus Christ is not exhausted in the actual celebration of the sacrament of matrimony, but rather accompanies the married couple throughout their lives. This fact is explicitly recalled by the Second Vatican Council when it says that Jesus Christ abides with them so that, just as he loved the Church and handed himself over on her behalf, the spouses may love each other with perpetual fidelity through mutual self-bestowal. For this reason, Christian spouses have a special sacrament by which they are fortified and receive a kind of consecration in the duties and dignity of their state. By virtue of this sacrament, as spouses fulfill their conjugal and family obligations, they are penetrated with the Spirit of Christ who fills their whole lives with faith, hope, and charity. Thus they increasingly advance towards their own perfection as well as towards their mutual sanctification, and hence contribute jointly to the glory of God.

VOCATION TO HOLINESS

Pope John Paul II continues his teaching by saying that Christian spouses and parents are included in the universal call to holiness. For them, this call is specified by the sacrament they have celebrated and is carried out concretely in the realities proper to their conjugal and family life. This gives rise to the grace and requirement of an authentic and profound conjugal and family spirituality that draws its inspiration from the themes of creation, covenant, cross, resurrection, and sacramental sign. Christian marriage, like the other sacraments, whose purpose is to sanctify people, to build up the Body of Christ, and finally, to give worship to God, is in itself a liturgical action glorifying God in Jesus Christ and in the Church. By celebrating it, Christian spouses profess their gratitude to God for the sublime gift bestowed on them of being able to live in their married and family lives the very love of God and that of the Lord Jesus for his bride, the Church.

UNITY AND INDISSOLUBILITY OF MARRIAGE

The love of spouses requires of its very nature the unity and indissolubility of the spouses' community of persons, which embraces their entire life: "so they are no longer two, but one flesh" (Mt. 19:6). They are called to grow continually in their communion through day-to-day fidelity to their marriage promise of total mutual self-giving. Conjugal love requires the inviolable fidelity of the spouses. This is a consequence of the gift of themselves which they make to each other. Love seeks to be definitive, it cannot be an arrangement "until further notice". The intimate union of marriage as a mutual giving of two persons, and the good of the children, demand total fidelity from the spouses and require an unbreakable bond between them. The deepest reason is found in the fidelity of God to his covenant, in that of Christ to his Church. Through the sacrament of matrimony the spouses are enabled to represent this fidelity and witness to it. Through the sacrament, the indissolubility of marriage receives a new and deeper meaning, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches. It can seem difficult, even impossible, to bind oneself for life to another human being. This makes it all the more important to proclaim the Good News that God loves us with a definitive and irrevocable love, that married couples share in this love, that it supports and sustains them, and that by their own faithfulness they can be witnesses to God's faithful love. Spouses who with God's grace give this witness, often in very difficult conditions, deserve the gratitude and support of the ecclesial community.

TESTIMONY: GIVING WITHOUT COUNTING THE COST

We became children of God at baptism, at birth and, therefore, disciples of Christ Jesus. This was the outstanding point of departure of our lives. Through the years, God has been an ever-attentive Father to us. His Son has never ceased to guide us in our life projects, and the Holy Spirit enlightens us with his wisdom and gifts. We are very much involved in life while trusting in the unconditional love of God and our beloved Mother Mary. In this way we have the tools necessary to help our brothers and sisters when needed. We humans form the mystical Body of Christ. We cannot leave our brothers and sisters in ignorance when we feel that we can help them. It would not be fair for us to keep for ourselves what life has given us. If we believe that we have received in abundance, we must also pay in kind. This is what being disciples of Christ means to us. "Giving without counting the cost, joining in the struggle without fear of being hurt, working without seeking rest, spending oneself without expecting any other reward than knowing that we are doing the will of God." This is our commitment as a couple, and it is in us to stay.

– Isabelle and Lionel

+ François Thibodeau

+ François Thibodeau, C.J.M.
Bishop of Edmundston

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