

THE TWO SACRAMENTS OF VOCATION

1. CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE - *Divine Bridegroom and spotless Bride*

(The Catechism of the Catholic Church 1601-1666)

Introduction

Marriage is the most intimate and the deepest way that a human being can give himself or herself to another. Marriage has three key characteristics that mark it as a unique form of friendship. It is *exclusive of all others (1)*, giving first place at all times to the one that each has chosen. It is *faithful (2)* in that it admits of no condition on either side: marriage is a pre-emptive strike of love that states "I love and will continue to love you beyond any others. I do this not because *I* stand to gain by it, or only for as long as you behave as I lay down. I do this because I make this choice to love you." And finally it has the potential to be *fruitful (3)*: marriage brings a deeper and richer experience of living to those involved as joy shared is multiplied and sorrow shared is bearable, and, where this is possible, marriage is life-giving in its most dramatic sense as the love of husband and wife takes flesh in the form of their children. These three characteristics are peculiar to marriage, especially in that they are reinforced by oath: in marriage, the two parties do not enter an agreement or make a conditional contract - they swear an oath to the other. Remember; that the Latin word *sacramentum* literally means oath: they are sacred oaths by which God promises to be faithful to the covenant he makes with us - in marriage, the oath is sworn also by both husband and wife.

No other form of human relationship comes close to this degree of mutual commitment, even the deepest and longest-standing friendship. It is for this reason that the Jews, and following them, the earliest Christians came to regard the relationship between God and man as a form of marriage bond. *The Church today continues to teach, in direct line with the teachings of Sacred Scripture and the writings of the Fathers of the Church, that the wedding commitment of husband and wife directly images the depth of self-giving which God offers to His people.* Human marriage, we believe, is the divinely constructed scaled-down working-model of God's marriage with us. This marriage is not complete yet - indeed, as we shall see, it is only fully entered into in the Kingdom of Heaven.

For this reason, the Church is not content with saying that marriage is good, or that it is healthy, or even that it is psychologically necessary: marriage is all of these things, but in addition it is infinitely richer - marriage is sacred because it speaks not just about our need for human intimacy but about God and his relationship with us. So strongly does this thought run throughout the Sacred Scriptures and the constant thinking of the Church community that in time it came to be realised that marriage was not just designed by God and planted deep with human nature, but that each marriage is actively sustained by God, and particularly in a marriage between two Christians, regardless of the denomination, is explicitly used by him to demonstrate the raging fire of his love for us. We call this a sacrament. No other religion has given such a dignity to human marriage, and no other Christian denomination has, from its foundation seen marriage in such an exalted light. Indeed, the Catholic Church is the only Christian body to teach in its most solemn official statements that marriage is a sacrament - at the Reformation this was explicitly rejected by all the reforming parties because it was not explicitly stated to be a sacrament in the Scriptures. In contrast, the Catholic Church holds up marriage as a sacred demonstration of the faithfulness of God's unconditional love for his people.

*"The vocation to marriage is written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator. Marriage is not a purely human institution despite the many variations it may have undergone through the centuries in different cultures, social structures, and spiritual attitudes."
(C.C.C. 1603)*

1. Marriage and the Sacred Scriptures

Marriage as we know it now may seem to be unrecognisable in the Old Testament. Not only did many of the Old Testament characters have several wives, but also even the great role models, the Patriarchs, were bigamous (such as Jacob, married to both Leah and Rachel) and even polygamous (David, said to have had over a thousand wives). Nor was this seen to be wrong at the time - this realisation came at a later stage. Perhaps more shocking, alongside their wives came a whole host of slave girls who were treated as chattels: when Abraham suspects that Sarah, his wife, will have no children, she gives him her slave Hagar through whom Abraham fathers Ishmael. Nor even is marriage presented as lifelong and binding but contractual and capable of being dissolved - Moses gives the people of Israel in the desert a standardised procedure by which wives can be put aside should the need arise. If Sacred Scripture permits this behaviour, why do we regard it today as unacceptable? Put simply, because Christ has shown us that these customs undermine the dignity of marriage and of those who have given themselves through marriage to another. Christ is almost brutally clear in the Gospels about this particular custom of institutionalised divorce. Moses permitted divorce in the desert not because divorce was always designed by God to be a part of marriage but because the Jews were so "unteachable" (Mt. 19:7): the writ of divorce was an emergency measure for a people growing painfully towards greater understanding of God and themselves and whose husbands were too prone to arbitrary domination of their wives (cf. Catechism 1610). Christ concludes his judgement on the permissive nature of Moses' instructions with the observation "*but it was not so from the beginning.*" (Mt. 19:8). Marriage as envisaged by God did not incorporate these customs, and mankind has struggled to be freed from them, only

realising through time the fuller significance of the mystery of marriage. Bearing in mind that man's practice has not always conformed to the plan of God from the beginning, nevertheless, the Sacred Scriptures give us enough to see how Christ's view of marriage draws directly from the teachings, if not the practice, of marriage in the Old Testament.

A. Marriage foreshadowed in Genesis

For the Jews, the concept of one man binding himself uniquely to one woman is presented as being our original state, before the Fall: in Genesis 2, Adam's disappointment in finding an equal in the totality of God's creation is beautifully ended with his exclamation on seeing Eve: *"Here at last is bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh"* (Gen. 2:23). Adam accepts Eve because she is already part of him, unlike any other creature: *"This is to be called woman for this was taken from man"* (Gen. 2:23), and it is as a comment on this relationship that the writer then adds, inspired by the Holy Spirit, *"This is why a man leaves his father and mother and joins himself to his wife, and they become one body"* (Gen. 2:24). For the writer, every subsequent uniting of husband and wife is based on the reaction of Adam to Eve - Adam knows that Eve was created from him (Gen. 2:21-22) and knows that therefore they are already one body. In other words, each human marriage makes of two people a union of one body - an observation that presupposes indivisibility. Two people working in harmony can be separated and divided, but two people who become one body are impossible to separate. This is Christ's own interpretation of Sacred Scripture (which is after all, his own communication with mankind): talking to the Pharisees about marriage, Christ explains:

"Have you not read that the Creator from the beginning made them male and female, and that he said 'This is why a man must leave father and mother, and cling to his wife, and the two become one body'? They are no longer two, therefore, but one body. So then, what God has united, man must not divide." (Mt. 19:4-6)

For Christ, then, and for the Church, what Adam says about Eve sets the standard for all human marriages: two separate people bind themselves to each other so closely that they become one new distinct body. Of course, there is no suggestion that Adam and Eve ever went through a formal wedding service - only that our modern weddings are the way that we today renew amongst couples who love each other the same degree of loving unity which characterised Adam and Eve's love before their fall. That unity is not destroyed by sin, when Adam and Eve eat the fruit, but it is damaged, as each tries to shift the blame on to another. BUT marriage, which stresses opening oneself to another, mutual aid, self-giving etc., helps to remedy the harm done by that sin (division, self-absorption, single-minded pursuit of personal pleasure etc.) C.C.C. 1605, 1609.

B. Marriage as it develops in the Old Testament

Rather than go through every instance of marriage in the Old Testament, it is worth noting a couple of incidents which betray an underlying attitude towards marriage as something more than just social or biological. It is worth noting, for instance, that even during the time when polygamy was the general and accepted practice, there is

an assumed understanding that one of those many wives had not simply a pre-eminence over the others, but was almost more fully the wife of her husband than any other. See Abraham: God promised him countless descendents (as many as the stars of heaven etc.) through Sarah his wife. When Abraham despairs of this promise being fulfilled because Sarah is beyond childbearing age at 90, he attempts to fulfil the promise himself through Hagar, Sarah's slave. For God this is unacceptable - the child conceived is not the child of the Covenant, because Sarah is not his mother. So, Hagar and her son Ishmael are driven out (*Gen. 21:8-21*), and the promise of the Covenant is inherited by Abraham's son through Sarah, Isaac. To make the point, Ishmael is almost forgotten from now on: when Abraham is told to offer Isaac in sacrifice to God, God speaks of Isaac as "*your son, your only son*" (*Gen. 22:2*) - only in the sense that Ishmael is not really his son since Sarah is not his mother, so he doesn't count.

The other key example is King David: his wives were many, including Michal, daughter of King Saul (*1 Samuel 18:27*), and his children, especially his sons, were even more numerous - Amnon, Chileab, Absalom, Adonijah, Shephatiah, Ithream (*2 Samuel 3:2-5*). He marries an unknown number of wives, and takes concubines after his coronation in Jerusalem and 11 more sons are listed (*2 Samuel 5:11-16*). However, primacy of place and the highest honour is given to Bathsheba - her son, Solomon, inherits the Davidic promise, Solomon is anointed sole King (*1 Kings 1:39*) when he was not the favourite at court or with the people. When he is King, Solomon treats Bathsheba with greater honour than he receives, standing when she enters his audiences, bowing before her and placing her in the position of power at his right side (*1 Kings 2:13-20*). If they were married more than once, there was certainly the well-understood assumption that one of the wives was infinitely superior to the others and that only through her could the promised son be born to the anointed of God - any other children he had by other wives or concubines, even if they should be born first, would not preside over the Covenant his father presided over because he was not fully joined to her.

Other texts are more generalised. What comes through is not so much what is said as what is taken for granted and assumed. The book of Ruth, for instance, describes the dedication of a Moabitess girl, Ruth, who is married to one of the sons of Elimelech, an Israelite. When Ruth's husband, her brother-in-law and her father-in-law all die, Elimelech's widow, Naomi is left unprotected and alone. Because of the marriage Ruth had enjoyed with Naomi's son, Chilion, Ruth determines to stay with Naomi to look after her - "*Wherever you go, I will go, wherever you live, I will live. Your people shall be my people and your God, my God*", she says (*Ruth 1:16*). Her kindness is rewarded when Boaz, a kinsman of Elimelech, 'adopts' Naomi into his household and marries Ruth. The whole (short) book revolves around understanding marriage as a serious commitment of love and rejects absolutely any mercenary exploitation of marriage as a technique through which to gain land or power. It implies a whole system of mutual obligation stemming from marriage - the duty owed by kinsmen to protect vulnerable women - and the only bond which connects them is that of marriage within the clan: because A marries B and then dies, C (who is A's brother) should marry B out of a sense of duty to his brother, so that she is protected.

- C.C.C. 1611

Perhaps the high point is reached in the book of the Prophet **Hosea**. In this book, God uses marriage directly to show Hosea the nature of his relationship with Israel. God commands Hosea to marry Gomer, a notorious prostitute, who has no notion of fidelity whatsoever. Hosea finally agrees, as does Gomer whose life changes not one iota. As Hosea laments the desolation he feels seeing Gomer's adultery God explains that the depth of anguish he feels when Israel wanders off after false gods is no less intense. The parallelism is deliberate: for the first time, a direct link is drawn between the marriage of man to woman and the 'marriage' that has been made between God and his people through *the Covenant*. *Sin is from now on often described as Israel's adultery (see Hosea 4:12 - talking of worshipping idols made of wood, God comments "a spirit of harlotry has led them astray")*. God's bride has become a harlot - this is a constant theme in Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Isaiah. Israel is likened to a young woman, brought up by a doting lover who marries her but to whom she is unwilling to be faithful: the underlying message at all times is that whereas Israel betrays the marriage Covenant she has entered into with God, he will never take that as sufficient grounds to 'divorce' her, even though that would be a justifiable reaction. God is always faithful – and this is never more evident than when man refuses to be. Yet we miss the point if we read Hosea as a guilt-trip: the prophet is certainly deeply critical of the people of Israel, and God does demand a change in their behaviour - but to Hosea, and therefore to us, what makes Israel's sinful actions so awful is the fact that they are committed in violation of a bond as intimate as that existing between a husband and wife, and God longs for the day when Israel will live in righteousness and holiness (i.e., the Commandments) - "*On that day', says the Lord, 'you will call me, 'My Husband'.*" (Hosea 2:16)

From this point on, the Old Testament bursts with nuptial imagery as the standard way of describing God's relationship with Israel. God is so close to his chosen people that they are married – they have become one body and therefore cannot be separated - even with the adultery of Israel in sin. To this unconditional extent, God is committed to Israel. The image therefore is one of hope and salvation - God will not allow himself to be alienated from his people, nor his plans for their glorification to be frustrated. Isaiah repeats God's promise to make Israel great again after their exile, with these words:

"The nations shall see your vindication, ... and you shall be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord ... You shall no longer be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no longer be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a virgin, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."
(Isaiah 62:2-5)

The key is at the end. The best way to demonstrate visibly the joy God feels for his people is to liken it to the joy of the newly married. Human marriage, as the lesser working-model of this relationship has now become a tool through which man can understand the absolute love of God for his people: marriage is sacred.

C. Marriage in the New Testament

The understanding of the Israelites concerning marriage was so advanced that little needs to be added by Christ and the Apostles. Indeed, what Christ has to say concerning marriage is generally to reaffirm the teachings contained in the Old Testament such as the divine origin of marriage (*Mt. 19:5*), the indissolubility of marriage (*Mt. 19:6*), the absolute unacceptability of adultery as a violation of trust (*Mt. 15:19, Mk. 7:21, Lk. 18:11*).

C.1: Christ as THE Bridegroom.

As well as confirming the ageless teachings of the Old Testament, Christ takes the meaning of marriage to a deeper level of meaning. The first public appearance of Christ, and the one at which he performs the first of only seven great "signs" in St. John's Gospel, is at a wedding, at Cana in Galilee (*Jn. 2:1-11*). The Church has always seen this as significant. In his presence, Christ is not simply giving the explicit benediction of God on the practice of human marriage - this, of course has been given since the foundation of the world (*Gen. 2:24*). His presence is also a declaration of who he is: Israel is waiting for her bridegroom, the one spoken of by Hosea, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and the others. They think of him as 'Messiah' - the anointed or chosen one: the chosen what? Prophet & King are too distant: the Sacred Scriptures point to God sealing or even consummating his relationship with his people as bridegroom. John the Baptist talks of Christ as the heavenly Bridegroom who has come to take his bride, the chosen people (*Jn. 3:28-29*). Christ even refers to himself as the bridegroom on several occasions: he explains that his disciples do not fast because you never fast while the bridegroom is still present (*Mt. 9:15, Mk. 2:19, Lk. 5:34*). It should be little wonder that Christ's first public appearance should occur in the context of a wedding: the true bridegroom has arrived, and his bride, the people he has chosen as his own, never realise.

"The Church attaches great importance to Jesus' presence at the wedding at Cana. She sees in it the confirmation of the goodness of marriage and the proclamation that henceforth marriage will be an efficacious sign of Christ's presence." C.C.C. 1613

Christ returns to nuptial imagery frequently in his teaching, giving the highest honour to marriage. It is the favoured image he uses to describe the Kingdom of Heaven. His return at an unexpected hour to claim his bride (the Church) is likened to the arrival of a bridegroom (*Mt. 25:1-13*), the Kingdom is like a marriage feast to which the invited guests refuse to come, so the poor take their place (*Mt. 22:1-14*). With this in mind, the wedding feast at Cana is an appropriate place for Christ to present his credentials as the awaited Bridegroom.

- *C.C.C. 1612*

C.2: St. Paul

St. Paul gives no systematic treatment of marriage, but he does use marriage to demonstrate his point in a way that suggests that the meaning of marriage was so

widely understood then that it needed little further explanation. Nevertheless, in 2 particular passages, St. Paul develops and clarifies our view of marriage:

- *1 Corinthians 7*: admitting that as a celibate, he is predisposed towards celibacy, Paul is often thought to advocate marriage simply as a safety valve for those less controlled than he, to prevent them falling into fornication. The impression is that marriage is a second-best. Yet, when he does treat of marriage in itself, he doesn't say it is just "acceptable", or "only for the desperate" or "useful only to stop you falling foul of your passions" - he actually says that through marriage, the couple are *consecrated*. (*1 Cor 7:14*) That is a technical term: to be consecrated means to be set apart by God's own choice, to be raised in honour above your previous state and marked for particular service (which is usually public). At its simplest, consecration means turning something that is not of itself holy into something possessing holiness. To St. Paul, in marriage, the couple consecrate each other - God uses one to give his love to the other, so that each becomes a means of grace and therefore salvation. In other words, in a marriage God uses a human being to transform the spouse into an image of himself, through which he saves both. An analogy might be consecration at Mass, where God uses a human being (the priest) to transform bread and wine into his own presence so that he may save both giver and receiver. So much for marriage being simply to stop people from sinning!
- *Ephesians 5:21-32*: a passage hated by many because wives are told to be obedient to their husbands! What is overlooked is that husbands are told to love their wives as completely as Christ loves the Church - that means to sacrifice themselves for their wives, even to the shedding of their blood!! What is important about this passage is the parallelism St. Paul sees between marriage and Christ's relationship with us. Husbands, wives and children are exhorted to certain ways of behaving on the grounds that this behaviour reflects Christ's relationship with the Church. Reading the passage, the impression given is that to St. Paul, marriage is designed in God's plan of salvation to be the deliberate mirror of Christ's love affair with his people (the Church). Our human marriages must be living, physical incarnations of the love between God and the Church, so that we can say that marriage is where God acts out before our eyes, using human actors, a scaled-down miniature version of the relationship of love he already has with us. It is worth remembering that to St. Paul, this parallel is no human accident but the deliberate plan of God: for that reason, he describes it as "*a great mystery*" (*Eph 5:32*). In Greek, the word for mystery is *mysterion* - in Latin, the same word is *sacramentum*. We have simply anglicised the same word in calling marriage a sacrament.

To summarise: for St. Paul, marriage is the visible way which God has designed to demonstrate to us the magnitude of his invisible love for us. It is a symbol of that love, is created and sustained by that same love, and makes that love actually present in the world in a visible way. This is the classical nature of a sacrament. And it is pure St. Paul. It took the Catholic Church around 1400 years to realise, meditate on and grasp the implications of this teaching: when it had, there was no more confusion - marriage within the Church was sacramental, and always had been, even if the Church

in previous generations hadn't realised it. Only this conclusion could make any sense of St. Paul's clear teaching that through the marriage, the couple would be *consecrated* (1 Cor 7), and become living icons of the love of Christ for the Church (Eph).

"Since God created him man and woman, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man." C.C.C. 1604

C.3: The Apocalypse

The final book of the Sacred Scriptures carries the nuptial imagery of salvation to a climactic conclusion: all the prophecies concerning the coming wedding of God to his people are fulfilled at the end of time. St. Paul speaks of Christ cleansing the Church, his bride, so that she might be presented to him *"in splendour, without spot or wrinkle, ... that she might be holy and without blemish"* (Eph. 5:26-27). This work of cleansing has begun on earth through the sacraments, through the Word of God etc., but will only reach fulfilment when all things are consummated at the end of time. So, when he comes to describe the consummation of salvation when all God's promises are fulfilled, St. John returns to the imagery of the marriage. Even the word 'apocalypse', meaning 'the revealing' is a term adopted from the Jewish marriage rite: after the wedding ceremony, the newly-married husband and wife are led through the streets to their home and are led by the guests to the bridal chamber for the final part of the marriage rite, the unveiling. Having given themselves totally to each other in marriage, the couple give themselves totally to each other in private - this, in Greek, was called the "Apocalypsis" - the total revealing. The book of the apocalypse is the final part of God's marriage to his people when God reveals himself totally to his bride. It is no wonder, therefore, that this book brims with marital imagery: when evil is destroyed finally (Rev. 18) and the Church is vindicated, the great host of heaven cries out

*"Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give Him the glory, for **the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; it was granted to her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure.**" (Rev. 19:7-8).*

Then the angel, explaining all this to St. John says *"Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage feast of the Lamb"* (Rev 19:9) - because those invited are the Church, and they are the bride of the Lamb, so no wonder they are blessed. As if this is not clear, St. John then describes who the bride is –

"And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them." (Rev. 21:2-3) "Then one of the seven angels spoke to me, saying, "Come. I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." And in the Spirit he carried me away to a great high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal." (Rev. 21:9-11)

The meaning is clear: of all marriages, this is the mother of marriages! For a husband there is Christ, the spotless sacrificial Lamb who died for love of his intended, and for a bride there stands she who was described in times past as a prostitute but who is now made radiant with the brightness of God - a holy people, countless in number (*Rev. 7:9*), a people of whom one day we will be full members who have forfeited all right to stand there, but who are made worthy simply because the love of the Lamb is so intense that it burns away all that is unworthy of it. We are deliberately reminded of this wedding to God which we are all invited to as brides when we hear at Mass "*Blessed are those who are called to his supper*" - this is the Lamb's wedding supper, which is prefigured at the Mass, when the Lamb gives himself to us, and the wedding itself is symbolically acted out before us in the marriages of man to woman in our midst.

2. Marriage and the Church

The teaching of Sacred Scripture is clear: the Church is called to a relationship with Christ that is as exclusive, committed and fruitful as the human marital relationships we see around us.

1. **UNITY:** As we see married couples work together to settle differences and face trials together, we should be drawn back to the reality of which this is a sign: our determination to cleave to Christ with determination and trust when persecution or trial comes our way because we are called to be as faithful to him as we expect him to be to us as our Heavenly Bridegroom. *C.C.C. 1614-1616, 1640, 1644-1645.*
2. **FIDELITY:** As we watch married couples give themselves exclusively to the one to whom they are covenanted, we recall Christ's single-minded devotion to his people, for whom he sacrificed himself, and we are made aware that the same faithfulness to God through Christ is asked of us in this nuptial relationship. *C.C.C. 1646-1651.*
3. **FRUITFULNESS:** the visible fruit of a marriage, in children, emphasises the life-giving nature of marital self-giving. Our lives are enhanced, not diminished when we give ourselves in love to another, and this new life can be so real and physical that in nine months we give him/her a name. The same is true of our relationship with Christ: he gave his life for us literally on the cross and because of that we can live life at a richer level. If we offer ourselves in love to God, that relationship is reciprocated and thus the more powerful in our own lives. *C.C.C. 1652-1654*

In recent years, the Church has developed the implications of this teaching, exploring the depth of the relationship between the Covenant made by God with us for our salvation and the covenant made between human beings in marriage that reflects this. The Second Vatican Council, in the document *Gaudium et Spes* on the Church in the Modern World made this insight its focal point in its treatment of marriage.

"The Covenant between the spouses is integrated into God's Covenant with man: 'Authentic married love is caught up into divine love'." C.C.C. 1639, quoting Gaudium et Spes, 48.

3. Marriage and God

With the gift of Christ, we understand a new and deeper dimension to marriage - more than this, through the experience of marriage and family, we are shown by God how to perceive an extraordinary mystery. Christ reveals in his teaching something about God which was not known before: God is a family. God is one but not solitary - God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What unites them into perfect unity is the bond not of need or of mutual benefit but of love. In other words, they are not joined to each other because they have to be in order to survive (as we do), nor because they discover they it is in their best interests or to their advantage: they are united not because this unity makes them greater or more powerful but because they love each other. This love draws them closer and closer together so that the Father eternally begets his divine Son, constantly pouring himself out on his Son, giving him all the weight of his life, holiness and majesty. The Son, in returning his love to his Father, gives him his entire self, holding nothing back for himself. In this way two persons, Father and Son, become one - a perfect unity because of the love they have for each other. BUT, this love, which unites them, is more than just an emotion - it has form and life: the love of Father for Son and Son for Father is the person of the Holy Spirit. SO, we are saying that the two divine persons of Father and Son become one, and that this oneness is truly three as the third, the Spirit, is the love that the Father and Son hold for each other. This is what Christ reveals to us in his life and teaching. Complicated? Confusing? Above and beyond any possibility of comprehending? Yes - but actually quite within our experience. Marriage is the key to understanding the very nature of God in such a way that we don't need to be theological geniuses and great mystical saints: we just need to look and be aware. Follow this:

Marriage operates in the human world and in the human family in a way that God had planned to mirror his own nature. SO, in marriage you find two distinct and separate persons. They fall in love, declare their love to each other and, when they are ready, to the world by publicly swearing to be faithful to the other (this is marriage). We know, from Genesis and from Christ that something supernatural is happening here: the two do not enter a partnership in which they retain their independence, but just share a bank account! They are joined together so intimately and profoundly that the two become a mysterious one - God unites them so that they become "*one flesh*", an indivisible unity. Each retains their unique personality, so we are not thinking of a kind of merge (such as when you mix blue and red paint together, forming a new colour and obliterating the old colours), but somehow, at a level which is not visible to the eye but only in faith, there is a richer one-ness where before there was a form of solitary-ness (each one alone). What unites them is not obligation or mutual benefit but the choice they freely make which is generated by their love for each other. That love has no conditions: thus marriage is not for a preset number of years, or (like a contract) immediately dissolved when certain conditions are not met. It is an act of total self-giving - each one offers to the other their entire self as a gift of love. The two have become one. BUT, that one-ness is dynamic and has the potential to be fruitful. The love they have for each other, if it is the will of God, will not remain

merely the relationship between them but will become alive - in nine months it will be so alive that he/she will need a name: the love of one for the other which makes them one has now made them three. The child who is born is the enfleshment of the love that the married couple have for each other: he/she does not just represent their love for each other - in a way he/she is the incarnation of their love for each other, their mutual love actually alive and breathing. We call children the "fruit" of their parents love. What we are saying here is that marriage is more than just a helpful way of building a stable human society. It is designed by God and has a spiritual purpose as well as a sociological one. It is meant to help us grow and learn about the God who made us. It should feed our prayer and open our eyes to realities that go beyond the outward and the obvious: marriage is a kind of self-description which God has planted in our nature - by pondering on the working and mystery of marriage in the context of our Christian faith, it reveals to us in a simplified form which is accessible to every human being, regardless of intellectual ability who God himself is, in his divine nature. God is THE family, sacred and life giving. It is the family which is the Trinity that gives meaning to our concept of family. This is what St. Paul means when he says:

"I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." (Eph. 3:14-19)

Being rooted and grounded in the supernatural love which the Trinity possesses and which marriage echoes, is the only way to understand the mysteries of God, for they flow not from human logic or the reasoning of the world but from the character of the cross - self-giving love, the act of complete self-donation to the one who is loved. This is the love of the Trinity, it is the love that Christ expresses from the cross and is the only true foundation for marriage. It is the form of love we witness between Father and Son that teaches us what married love is formed to show. Marriage then is the school in which we learn *how* God loves. It is **faithful, life giving and unconditional**.

Is the Church anti-marriage?

Many people say this. They feel the Catholic Church is too hard and strict about marriage, as if we gave only grudging approval to it (but, deep down would rather we had no need of it). I think the real reason for this view is the widely held opinion today that if something is good, we should have unrestricted access to it - we should take it whenever we want it. If it is administered to us, or in any way restricted, then we complain about a nanny-state, the withdrawal of our freedom and basic rights. This opinion shows the moral bankruptcy of our culture - it also shows how contradictory we can be: after all we don't think that all good things should be instantly and universally available to each person whenever they want it. Indeed, our most valuable things, in which we invest real value, we tend to protect, preserve,

defend and restrict access to with almost fanatical zeal - for example, take our best and most beautiful paintings. The Mona Lisa of Leonardo da Vinci is on show in the Louvre: it is protected behind thick shatter-proof glass and the paying public are kept about 10 feet away from the painting by barriers and, now, a museum official whose sole responsibility is to make sure no one gets too close. We protect it because it is so valuable to us, not because we don't want people to see it!

BUT it raises the question that we need to address. Why should the prophets of the Old Testament, Christ in the New, the Apostles in their letters, *indeed every book of the Sacred Scriptures without exception* deal so harshly with those who break the marital covenant between man and woman? Does this speak to us of a forgiving God? This is a commonly asked question, which is used to confuse the issue. In this day and age we equate forgiveness of a wrong committed with pretending that it wasn't wrong. But that is not forgiveness: if it really wasn't wrong then there is nothing to forgive! Real forgiveness first demands the realisation on both sides that what has happened should not have happened - it was wrong. Then, and this step is critical, having acknowledged that the action was wrong, it is forgiven and not held against us. So, God can still be forgiving even when he is insistent that what we are doing is bad.

But, people say, why should such a fuss be made about sins against marriage? Throughout the Sacred Scriptures, sins against marriage are not simply condemned as wrong - they are also used as equivalent words for sin: in effect, being a sinner is the same as being an adulterer and Christ often uses these concepts together, speaking of "*this evil and adulterous generation*" (Mt. 12:39, 16:4), "*this adulterous and sinful generation*" (Mk 8:38), and the letter to the Hebrews talks of God judging "*the immoral and the adulterous*" (Heb. 13:4). Why this almost obsessive concentration on marriage?

The Church reserves its highest condemnation for those sins that tear apart the greatest gifts God has given to us. It is because marriage is **so** sacred that the Church spends so much of her time and energy protecting it and upholding its remarkable dignity. God, who is the author of the Sacred Scriptures, is also the author of Marriage: through his teaching in the Scriptures, he has demonstrated over and over again the sublime nature of human marriage as the mirror of His relationship with us. Think of a painter who has decided to paint the most perfect image of his beloved wife. When he has finished, he has made an image only, but it is a masterpiece and beyond any other of his works, expresses the love he has for his wife. For this reason, he will ensure its protection and treatment with care not for its own sake but for the sake of the one it represents. The same is true of marriage: it is the God-constructed image of the love-relationship he has with us - and as that relationship is sacred, so the image is treated with the highest reverence so that it continues to reflect the glory with which we are held in God's eyes. When we damage the marital covenant, we slash the masterpiece painting of that painter, and we insult the artist by vandalising the beauty of his artistry. For this reason, the Church has always and still today proclaims that certain actions diminish and detract from the divine significance of marriage: bigamy contradicts fidelity within marriage, contraception and homosexual marriages contradict fertility, divorce contradicts unity. These things stop marriage from imaging God's relationship with us and so have no place in God's specially designed human demonstration of his nuptial bond with us.

In Summary:

- *"God is the author of marriage" (Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 48. C.C.C. 1603)* SO, marriage is not invented by human beings. It is a sacred thing because it was and is willed by God. We damage ourselves when we seek to de-sacralise marriage and turn it into a purely human contract for cohabitation.
- *"The entire Christian life bears the mark of the spousal love of Christ and the Church. Already baptism, the entry into the People of God, is a nuptial mystery; it is so to speak the nuptial bath that precedes the wedding feast, the Eucharist. Christian marriage in its turn becomes an efficacious sign, the Sacrament of the Covenant of Christ and the Church. Since it signifies and communicates grace, marriage between baptised persons is a true Sacrament of the New Covenant." (C.C.C. 1617).* SO - marriage is inseparable from the Church: what we do to marriage, we do in consequence to the Church. The more we celebrate and honour the gift of holy marriage within the Church, the more we are able to reflect of the true mystery of what God is doing for us. Conversely, the more we deflate marriage, accept the view that it is culturally limited, a mere product of a western male-dominated culture which should be swept away with all other forms of male chauvinism, then we are actually launching an attack on the nature of the Church itself. The truly sacramental character of marriage is the guarantee of the sacramental character of the Church.