



What is
MARRIAGE?
Why do we need it?

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MARRIAGE

WHY DO WE NEED IT?

Many people today still value marriage and hope for what they feel marriage offers. However, they feel less sure about the importance of marriage for the wider society. In part, this may be because our sense of the communal has become increasingly subordinated to the personal. The things we choose, want and desire as individuals are often given precedence over the needs and desires of family and community. As a consequence we struggle to retain a common, social vision of what marriage is all about. Marriage as an institution with real and essential characteristics is less apparent to us and the notion of marriage as something which is changeable - capable of being customised to suit particular tastes and preferences - has become more widespread. To appreciate the true meaning of marriage we should look at marriage from two perspectives. Marriage is both an institution and a living human reality. It also has natural, contractual and sacramental dimensions which enrich us both as persons and as a society.¹ The particular emphasis attached to each of these dimensions has varied over time but their essential relevance has remained.

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MARRIAGE

AS A NATURAL ORDER

Marriage is not a typical human need as one might perceive essential needs like food and shelter. But there is something about marriage that authentically meets, orders and fulfils our basic human tendencies and desires. Sacred Scripture clearly describes how our desire for intimacy is realised in a particular way through the coming together of two complementary beings where “two become one flesh” (Mt 19:5). This natural order of exclusive spousal commitment and its capacity to generate new life has always been more vital even than the state for overall social wellbeing. The Greek philosopher Aristotle, noted how “*man is by nature more inclined to live as a couple than to associate politically, since the family is something that precedes and is more necessary than the state*”.

Marriage is naturally oriented to the bringing forth of new life through loving, procreative acts between spouses. It is the only manner by which children are created that entirely respects them as persons. Marriage also benefits children because of the inherent natural value of its nurturing capacity. As St Thomas Aquinas remarked, through marriage a father becomes joined to the mother-infant relation in a way which ensures adequate care and nurture of a child during their time of dependency when they require the material and educational labours of both of their parents for a sustained period.ⁱⁱ The complementary, reciprocal relationship which exists between a man and a woman in marriage also provides sons and daughters with an opportunity for appropriate developmental role modelling by parents who created them out of love and who continue to nurture and care for them. Fathering and mothering are both valuable experiences but they are distinctly different in what they contribute to the wellbeing and healthy development of children.

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Aristotle



MARRIAGE

AS A CONTRACT

In earlier times, marriage was often arranged via extended families or clans and even today, a dowry or bride price is not uncommon in some cultures. However, in Christian teaching the contractual aspect of marriage has been based on mutual consent. The Church taught that the free and mutual consent of spouses was essential for marriage because marriage was not a contractual exchange of goods but a covenant of persons. Marriages certainly provide an important social ‘glue’ for the bringing together of different families and the welding of societies. But it is ultimately the desire of a man and a woman to freely commit to an exclusive, permanent relationship which is open to new life that has provided the basis of marriage since medieval times. Marriage called spouses to devote themselves to one another for life and forbid any unwarranted breach of their marital and parental obligations. A person could not simply ‘walk away’ from marriage as it was regarded by the community as a contract of significance both for the state and for the persons involved. Consistent with this contractual perspective, Western Christendom developed a canon of law to protect and regulate marriage.ⁱⁱⁱ This protected the cornerstone of marriage – the couple’s freely given consent - and proscribed various behaviours such as contraception and infidelity, which were recognised as undermining of marriage. In more recent times the interest in marriage education in Australia^{iv} is founded in the understanding of marriage as an important social good worthy of state support.

‘...it is ultimately the desire of a man and a woman to freely commit to an exclusive, permanent relationship open to new life that has provided the basis of the marriage contract...’



MARRIAGE

AS A SACRAMENT

In the Catholic Church marriage when properly contracted and consummated among Christians, is regarded as a Sacrament. The loving union of one man and one woman for life in marriage gives us a glimpse of that fathomless love that Christ has for His Church. Husbands and wives are called to live their lives in a manner which symbolises the eternal union which Christ has with each of us. In this way spouses become a source of sanctifying grace for both themselves as a couple and for the wider Church community. The two purposes of marriage reflect the ‘why’ of marriage: “*Marriage and family are ordered to the good of the spouses and to the procreation and education of children*”.^v Through marriage spouses are called to become ‘one flesh’, to live their lives for one another and to welcome and nurture children as the fruit of their mutual love. Christian marriage is a sacrament and source of grace. It reflects that exclusive, faithful, enduring and fruitful love that Christ revealed through His covenant with humanity. Marriage is a sign of Christ’s presence and signifies the participation of spouses in a great and wonderful mystery. The Apostle Paul makes this clear when he says: “*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her that he might sanctify her... For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one. This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church*”.^{vi} (Eph 5:25-26, 31-32).

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Catechism of Catholic Church 2201



MARRIAGE



COMPETING ETHICS AND UNDERSTANDINGS

For many today while a marriage is initially founded on feelings it is given particular shape through the communication of expectation and negotiation. For those who hold such a view marriage becomes more about striking a good marital bargain with their spouse.^{vi} How spouses should respond if all their hopes and dreams are not fulfilled on a regular basis is rarely discussed, at least not in any great depth. It seems accepted that if either party in such a marriage is not being adequately fulfilled or satisfied they are entitled to cease the relationship and move on. The contract is no longer of mutual benefit and can be declared void. Here it is important to distinguish such situations from those marital separations which are very painful experiences, particularly where one spouse has been left behind essentially through no fault of their own making.

An alternative ethic is founded in 'desiring the good of the other' and always treating one's spouse as an 'end' – as someone worthy of respect because they are a person - and never as a means to something else. This alternative ethic says *"I will be with you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health; I will love you and honour you all the days of my life"*. Such a relationship is based on an understanding of marriage as a sacred covenant rather than as a commercial contract. Marriage as a covenant calls us to live our lives in a manner that promotes the genuine flourishing of our husband or wife and of our children, as the fruit of mutual spousal love. Marriage comes to be understood as something which is a part of an eternal and transcendent reality: *"The covenant between the spouses is integrated into God's covenant with man: authentic married love is caught up into divine love"*.^{vii}

'I will be with you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health; I will love you and honour you all the days of my life...'



MARRIAGE



ATTEMPTS TO REDEFINE MARRIAGE

Marriage is personal but it is not a private institution. Marriage has a public face and serves the public good. It requires a public commitment between one man and one woman to live together, to have marital relations only with each other, to mutually support one another and to jointly raise any children of their union. The nature of marital acts between spouses reveals both their complementary sexual difference and their orientation as a couple to the creation of new life. Even couples who are unable to have children give witness by their marital acts, to the inherent life-giving orientation to procreation which exists within marriage. Those who seek to redefine marriage to include same-sex relationships are working either intentionally or not, to fundamentally undermine marriage. Allowing same sex couples to 'marry' would dramatically alter our perception of marriage. It would no longer be regarded as a child-centred institution founded in a natural orientation to procreation. Instead it would be seen as something centred primarily on adult desires and emotional ties. This would diminish the significance of marriage and remove any proper basis for state involvement since governments have no real business in the wholesale regulation of the emotional ties of citizens.

Marriage between a man and a woman is a reflection of a timeless truth; that men and women are different but complementary and that through the very design of their bodies they are made for one another. Their sexual union is the only form of love-making that can also result in new life. As such the reservation of marriage to persons of opposite sex is an entirely fair and appropriate distinction. *"Friendships between people of the same sex cannot be marriages because they lack both the sexual complementarity and the orientation to new life which are essential marks of marriage...When the Church and the state reserve marriage to heterosexual couples and privilege marriage in various ways so as to support marriages and families, no unjust discrimination is intended or results"*.^{viii}

'Friendships between people of the same sex cannot be marriages because they lack both the sexual complementarity and the orientation to new life which are essential marks of marriage...'

- i) Browning, D. 'What is marriage? An exploration' in The Book of Marriage, ed D. Mack and D. Blankenhorn, 2001.
- ii) St Thomas Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, bk III, ii, ch 122.
- iii) J. Witte jnr, From Sacrament to Contract, Marriage, Religion and Law in the Western Tradition, 1997.
- iv) To have and to hold, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, 1998.
- v) Catechism of the Catholic Church, n 2201.
- vi) Browning, D. op cit.
- vii) Catechism of the Catholic Church, n 1639.
- viii) cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Regarding Proposals to give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons, 2003.