

What is marriage, and what does the Catholic Church teach about marriage? Those were the questions behind the headlines last week which suggested that Pope Francis was considering a modification of Catholic teaching on marriage. But of course that is impossible, and the headlines were simply click bait and perhaps the expression of a wistful wish by some that the Catholic Church would simply surrender to the Sexual Revolution and give up its insistence on what the world considers a hopelessly outdated way of thinking about human sexuality, the nature of marriage, and the ordering of family life. But since the Church is the witness to the Eternal Word of God, no surrender will ever happen, and to see what the Church understands marriage to be, we look not to headlines but to the supernatural gift of divine revelation in Holy Scripture and the Apostolic Tradition.

Marriage is described in the nuptial blessing at weddings as “the one blessing not forfeited by original sin nor washed away in the flood.” This is a reference to the union of Adam and Eve which survived man’s fall from grace, and although marriage, like all else in human life, was gravely disfigured by sin, it remained a permanent gift to the human race. This is what our tradition calls the natural bond of marriage, and it is the first of three meanings of marriage we will examine today.

The natural bond of marriage is formed only between one man and one woman, and it exists for two primary purposes: first, the survival of the human race through the gift of children and second, the union of the two spouses as a unique form of friendship in which each supplies what the other lacks. And in the inseparable union of the two who become one flesh based on their bodily complementarity, they both find comfort, companionship, and assistance to survive and flourish even through the difficulties of life, such as sickness, poverty, and old age.

This natural bond of marriage exists for people of every religion and no religion, and it is a universal human reality which is expressed in many different forms according to culture and custom but it precedes all civil government and is not created by any human law. The natural bond of marriage is, like all things human, tainted by original sin with the tendency to selfishness which separates us from God, from other people, and from our own true selves. And if husbands and wives in the natural bond of marriage are unfaithful to their spouses, then they subject that bond to extreme stress and can even destroy mutual trust by the injustice of giving to someone else what they promised to give only to their spouse.

The Lord Jesus acknowledged this tendency to break the bond of marriage as something recognized even by Moses when he allowed the children of Israel to

divorce because of the hardness of their hearts, our hearts, but then Christ corrected Moses by insisting that this was not part of God's plan from the beginning. Jesus explained his teaching to the Pharisees by quoting from the Book of Genesis and reminding them of the essential purposes of the natural bond of marriage rooted in male and female human nature, a nature wounded by sin but capable of being restored by grace. This teaching of Jesus was regarded as a hard saying by those who first heard him explain it, as it is regarded still by those who struggle to live that teaching.

Of course, the Lord Jesus knew completely the consequences of our fall from grace, but in his teaching on the indissolubility of marriage, Christ was preparing the Church to understand that he raised the natural bond of marriage to the dignity of a sacrament, one of the seven sacred mysteries of the New Covenant by which his disciples live the life of grace, the life of the new creation. And so we come to the second of the three meanings of marriage we will consider today. First is the natural bond of marriage, and second is the sacramental covenant of marriage.

The Lord Jesus worked the first of his signs or miracles at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee, and thus he revealed his glory and began his journey to Jerusalem and the hour of his suffering, death, and Resurrection. In lifting the water of natural human love into the wine of supernatural grace, Christ restored the original dignity of the natural bond of marriage and pointed ahead to the consummation of God's kingdom which is described by Holy Scripture as the eternal wedding feast of the Lamb. And so the nuptial blessing at weddings proclaims that God "consecrated the bond of marriage by so great a mystery that in the wedding covenant (he) foreshadowed the Sacrament of Christ and his Church."

When the Catholic Church speaks of marriage to Christ's disciples, it is of this second meaning of marriage that she teaches: the sacramental covenant of Holy Matrimony that once truly begun cannot be broken by anyone or anything except death. The Church teaches that when a baptized man and a baptized woman who are both free to marry give themselves to each other in the solemn covenant of Holy Matrimony, they bring into being by their free consent and the consummation of their love the lifelong bond that God intends marriage to be, both before and after the fall, and which in Christ is a sacrament of the New Covenant.

Sadly, as we know all too well, many marriages even between Christians fail and end in civil divorce, after which one or both spouses may ask the Church to examine their marriage and determine whether or not it was a true sacrament of Christ. It is possible for several reasons that the sacramental covenant did not begin

with the exchange of consent as was thought, but this cannot be not known with clarity until after the civil divorce and a thorough review by the Church. So, what is commonly though misleadingly called an annulment, is not the Church declaring that the marriage bond has been broken; it is, rather, the Church declaring that the sacramental bond never began. Accordingly, only the civil contract of marriage existed, and that was ended by a civil court's decree of divorce. But even if a civil divorce has been granted, the lifelong bond of the sacrament is presumed to remain until and unless it can be demonstrated to the Church that it never existed. Which brings us to the third meaning of marriage.

The legal reality of marriage recognized by civil law exists in nearly every society, and that recognition confers legal rights and duties on the spouses. For much of history in the West, the civil legal reality of marriage conformed directly to the religious meaning of marriage, which for Catholics meant the sacramental covenant of matrimony. But during the Reformation, one of the central claims of the first Protestants was there are not seven sacraments. Instead, there are only three or two or none, depending on which Reformation doctrine one followed.

In the end, no branch of the Reformation acknowledged marriage as a sacrament, and thus the concept of the natural bond of marriage returned to center stage. Moreover, marriage came to be understood as something regulated by the state rather than celebrated by the Church, and in John Calvin's Geneva, no marriage performed in a church was acknowledged as legal until witnessed by a magistrate. From that time to this, the third meaning of marriage, the civil contract, has moved more and more to the center of our thinking about marriage, even on the part of many Catholics.

It is this civil contract of marriage that has been redefined in recent years, first by no fault divorce laws and more recently by legal recognition of same sex relationships. And we note those who turn to legal marriage when the natural and sacramental bond are not possible are still seeking comfort, companionship, and assistance to survive and flourish through the joys and sorrows of life. So now the civil contract of marriage is widely understood as the public recognition by the government of a private sexual friendship entered into by any consenting adults for their own reasons, irrespective of their gender and of all their past relationships. In this way, civil marriage now signifies something different from both the natural bond of marriage and the sacramental covenant of marriage, and this means that we now use one word to speak confusingly and confusedly of three different realities: natural marriage, sacramental marriage, and legal marriage.

Of the three kinds of marriage, Catholic Christians are bound by their Baptism to celebrate only the sacrament of Holy Matrimony, and if they marry outside the Church for any reason, then by that fact they place themselves in a condition of impeded communion with the Church and cannot ordinarily receive any other sacraments except in danger of death. This is because of the unity and integrity of the sacramental economy in which each of the seven sacred mysteries must exist in harmony with all of the others and be celebrated only according to the truth of the Gospel, and if Catholics enter a marriage outside of the Church, then whatever their intentions may be, their public state of life is at odds with the rest of the sacramental and evangelical life of the Church.

Questions are raised from time to time - as happened last week with Pope Francis - about how, if at all, the Catholic Church can make peace with the new legal understandings of marriage that differ from the sacramental covenant of Holy Matrimony. And the answer is always the same: the Church is the steward, not the master, of the Gospel and of the sacraments, and so it is beyond the Church's power and authority to add, change, or delete anything revealed by God.

My own suggestion for more than a decade has been that the Church should not attempt to compel those who do not share our faith to live according to our understanding of marriage and that ministers of the Catholic Church should not function anywhere on earth as magistrates of the state or witnesses for the civil legal effects of marriage. If Catholics want to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Matrimony and live as husband and wife in God's covenant, they should come to the Church, and if they want the state to acknowledge them as legal life partners, they should see a judge. I believe that such a step back by the Church from all involvement in the civil legal standing of marriage would clarify both for Catholics and for all others the differences among marriage understood as a natural bond, as a civil contract, and as a sacramental covenant.

In some countries this distinction between sacred ministers witnessing a wedding in a church and a magistrate witnessing a marriage in civil law is already required by local governments, and in those cases the Church has no choice but to permit this separation. So far in the United States, that is not the case, as it is not yet so in many other countries. But whatever legal arrangements may now exist or come to be in the future, the eternal truth of the Gospel remains the same always and everywhere, and the true nature of sacramental marriage is revealed in the Gospel.

Our Savior is the pursuing Bridegroom, and he seeks only one bride. As Saint Paul has it in his Letter to the Ephesians: "For this reason a man shall leave father and

mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the Church.” And that is why only one baptized man and one baptized woman who are both free to marry are capable of creating the sacred covenant of sacramental marriage. Any other combination of persons is something other than what the Gospel means by the sacrament of marriage, and for the Church to teach this truth is not a cruel exclusion of those who desire something else, it is simply the Church being a faithful witness to the revealed Word of God.

Of course, other constructions of legal marriage do now exist in civil law, and not a few Catholics decide to avail themselves of those other civil arrangements, thus placing themselves in impeded communion with the Church even while remaining beloved members of Christ’s Body by virtue of their Baptism. But those other understandings of marriage do not change the nature of the sacrament of Holy Matrimony revealed by the one who is the same yesterday, today, and forever: the Lord Jesus Christ.

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