

A Pastoral Letter on
MARRIAGE
and the **FAMILY**



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Following the command and example of Jesus Christ, the Catholic Church proclaims that by (God's) plan man and woman are united, and married life is established as the one blessing not forfeited by original sin nor washed away in the flood. (Nuptial Blessing from Marriage Ceremony) The very life of God is manifested in marriage, for He has made the union of man and woman so holy a mystery that it symbolizes the marriage of Christ and His Church.

In such powerful language the Church thus announces God's intention that marriage play a crucial role in His plan for human happiness. It has been the strong and constant teaching of the Catholic Church that the family is the foundation of all human society and the irreplaceable institution for the education and formation of children.

Even as we rejoice in the beauty and dignity of marriage, however, we must also acknowledge that we live in a society in which marriage is misunderstood and even denigrated. Vows have been frequently broken. The gift of life has been rejected. Cohabitation before marriage has clouded the intrinsic connection between marriage vows and physical sexual union, thus undermining the character of marital fidelity and the virtue of chastity. Divorce has caused great damage to human relationships and especially to the emotional and spiritual health of children, as they so frequently experience the painful absence of a parent from their lives.

The purpose of this pastoral letter is not specifically to discuss such problems and difficulties, although the Church understands the urgent needs which result from them and, thankfully, already has a number of programs which address them. Rather, in this letter, I wish to focus on those means by which our Church can provide a truly useful and Catholic program of preparation for marriage. Such programs need to prepare men and women for their God-given vocation by helping them recognize their call to holiness, understand the dignity of the sacrament they will receive, and make the necessary commitment that will allow their marriage to be faithful and fruitful.

From the beginning, God intended the union of husband and wife characterized by mutual fidelity, lifelong commitment, and openness to the transmission of life to be the sign on earth of His love of His people. This nuptial symbolism pervades Sacred Scripture. The marriage of man and woman reflects the very nature of the Trinitarian God by Whose love the world was created and is sustained. Fulfilling the demands of Christian marriage in joyful



fidelity gives witness to the essential goodness of God's creation and invites participation in the creative plan of God. Marriage and family life are not only the foundation of human society but also one of the surest means of preaching the Gospel and evangelizing the world. Thus, husbands, wives, and their children share more fully in this mystery of salvation.

The preparation for a fruitful sacramental marriage begins early in life. Children daily experience the relationship between their parents; the love, care, and consideration that husbands and wives display for each other; and the way in which they welcome and nurture children. These experiences leave a lasting impression on the consciousness of those children and affect their attitudes toward marriage and family life. Gradually, as the children mature, they are provided with a careful catechesis regarding the nature of marriage, the mystery of human sexuality, the inherent value of human life, and the practice of virtue. The manner in which both Jesus and St. Paul speak about marriage and celibacy in tandem suggest that the virtue of chastity is the context in which both states of life are best understood, for it is in purity of heart that we shall see God. This general, family-oriented preparation will flourish in an atmosphere of fidelity to the life of Christ and His commands, in which prayer and spiritual sacrifice are central.

In addition to the general preparation for marriage and family life just described, a couple also needs to participate in an intense, very personal preparation during the 12 months immediately prior to the actual celebration of the sacrament. Therefore, we turn now to a consideration of certain elements which form the core of an authentic preparation for Catholic marriage. Many existing programs for marriage preparation instruct couples in the realities of financial planning, interpersonal communication, career expectations, and other sociological aspects of marriage. To enable them to accomplish this work in the most effective fashion, these programs enlist the help of experienced married couples who generously offer their time and wisdom to encourage younger men and women preparing to marry. Such elements undoubtedly make a valuable contribution to a couple's preparation for marriage and should continue to be included. It is of far greater importance, however, that preparation place particular emphasis on the specifically religious and sacramental elements involved in the beautiful vocation of marriage.

If couples understand the nature of a vow, in both its religious and personal meaning, and grasp the nature of the sacraments rooted in the sacrificial death



and resurrection of Jesus Christ, they will more readily approach marriage as a lifelong commitment to the service of spouse, children, and family. This is a commitment that entails no small measure of sacrifice even as it brings fulfillment.

Each couple should clearly realize the fundamental unity of marriage and family life and be prepared to welcome children as the supreme gift of marriage. In marriage, a couple is ordained to the teaching and moral formation of children. Within the domestic Church of the family, the husband and wife awaken their children to the reality of their human dignity and eternal destiny. How important, then, it is that the couple preparing for marriage possess a firm knowledge of their faith and bear witness to their intent to practice that faith in their marriage and family life. This preparation will flourish in an atmosphere nurtured by the weekly celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, and by the frequent reception of the sacrament of Penance, through which persons learn that forgiveness which is so vital to human relationships.

A marriage program would not be complete if it did not promote the proper understanding of the human person, made in the image of God, and called to eternal life. It is important that couples seeking to marry understand that they fulfill their vocation in bodily as well as spiritual ways. The practice of virtues, particularly chastity, forms a necessary prerequisite to an enduring and faithful marriage. A firm grasp of the Church's teaching on human sexuality is essential, as is the understanding that marriage is the preeminent way by which the baptismal vocation to holiness is lived out. Every marriage program also ought to introduce couples to Natural Family Planning. Natural Family Planning honors the Catholic teaching on the indissoluble link between life and love, provides a way by which husbands and wives come to understand each other more intimately, and offers an escape from the contraceptive mentality that threatens to corrupt marriages and all interpersonal relationships.

Though it does not properly fall under the heading of marriage preparation, I also wish to note briefly the great need for post-wedding help for young couples, especially within the first years of marriage. Such topics as the movement from personal to familial spirituality, the art of communication, the development of a healthy and chaste sexual expression, the preparation for the



arrival of children, and a variety of practical adjustments as the two become one are all of concern. Newly married couples are challenged to live a deeply spiritual commitment in the midst of a social and political atmosphere in which human life is threatened by abortion, violence, and a general disregard for the inherent value of the human person. Particularly as they begin their new life together, these couples need our support, our encouragement, and our assistance.

As I conclude this reflection, I also want to offer a word of encouragement to those Catholics who are living in a difficult marriage or are enduring the distress of a broken marital relationship. Our Lord was no stranger to suffering, nor was He distant from those in confusion and pain. I want to assure anyone with marital difficulties of the Church's continued desire to offer you the solace of Christ, to work with you to resolve your difficulties, and ease your distress. There are a number of programs available to assist those in troubled marriages or those who are separated and divorced. They should never feel separated from the community of the Church, even though the emotional burden that they carry may be heavy.

In this pastoral letter, I have shared with you some key ideas intended to assist men and women entering into marriage to do so with knowledge, commitment, maturity, confidence, and joy. In such marriages, husbands and wives will answer their call to holiness and fulfill their baptismal vocation to transform the world according to the pattern of Christ. In such marriages, a culture of life will prevail, in which children are welcomed generously and given an environment in which they can grow in the knowledge and love of God. Through such marriages, we will all be blessed, since they will provide a clear and shining sign of the love and fidelity of Jesus Christ for His people.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Harry J. Flynn". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Most Reverend Harry J. Flynn
Archbishop of Saint Paul and Minneapolis

PASTORAL RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to help ensure that all those preparing for marriage understand the great dignity of their vocation, I am calling upon all parish-based and Archdiocesan marriage courses to address the following elements:

- I. A clear understanding and vision of the sacramental nature of Christian marriage, including, but not limited to:
 - ✠ A Christian understanding of the human person
 - ✠ A redemption of man and woman in Christ
 - ✠ How marriage is a reflection of Christ's love for the Church
 - ✠ A practical understanding of the Canonical promises – fidelity, permanence, openness to life
- II. A clear understanding of the Church's teaching on human sexuality, including:
 - ✠ Instruction on NFP – at least two introductory classes
 - ✠ Understanding of the morality of various reproductive technologies
- III. Marriage preparation will begin at least one year and not less than six months prior to the wedding date. A minimum of five sessions with a priest, deacon or other qualified person or couple. This should include a Marriage Inventory and subsequent discussions of the results.
- IV. Encourage parishes and current marriage preparation providers to develop ongoing programs and support for newly married couples especially in the first three years. This may include a series of classes or parish day of reflection.

Finally, all of these pastoral recommendations will only be fruitful to the extent that a couple develops their own relationship with the person of Christ through prayer, forgiveness, and service.



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