
Presentation Two

Estimated Reading Time: approx. 45-75 minutes

Covenantal Theology and the Properties of Marriage

PRESENTATION GOALS

- ☞ History expresses an understanding of family based upon the relationship of man and woman that presumes fidelity and has the rearing of children as central to its purpose.
- ☞ The goal of this talk is to explore the meaning of contract, covenant, and the sacramental bond that is forged when two Christians are united to each other in Christ.
- ☞ To help couples understand the properties of marriage.

Many college students take a basic class in Anthropology. Professors expose their students to unusual cultures of which they have never heard, or that will amaze or even startle them. Few cultures can seem as unusual as that of the Yanomamo, a pre-Columbian native people living in primitive conditions in the forests of Brazil. Members of this culture practice rituals such as the blowing of hallucinogenic drugs through long tubes into each other's nostrils and the posturing for dominance by inflicting hard slaps across the chest. They are about as different from us who live in the United States as one could imagine. Yet they also have relationships between men and women that they consider marriage.

Language is an interesting thing. It is a form of communication, but communication can fail when the same word or phrase means different things to different people. For example, the expression, "à la mode," means "fashionable" in England, but in North America it is how people ask for ice cream on a piece of pie; North Americans think of a "bonnet" as a ladies' headcovering, but in England this is the hood of a car. We can experience similar difficulties with cognates. Cognates are words that share a common root and are thus recognizable from one language to another. The word "mechanism" in English is *mecanismo* in Spanish. However, sometimes we can get lulled into presuming words are cognates when they are not. Someone using *discutir* in Spanish is not describing a "discussion" but an

“argument.” Then there is the famous example of the student saying she was *embarazada* in Spanish, who really turned red after learning that the word means not “embarrassed” but “pregnant.”

For Catholics, “marriage” is a technical term with a particular religious meaning. It can seem as if it has a secular cognate, and there are indeed many similarities; however, the differences are great enough where some might think it best that two distinct words be used. The reason we do not push for a different word is that we do not see “marriage” solely as a religious term. And so, while “marriage” means different things to different people, and among the world’s cultures we find some variety in the relationships that bear this name, there is enough commonality to allow us to strive to serve all cultures by shining a light onto elements that support the universal dignity of this vocation.

The concept of natural law is one embraced in Catholic theology, understanding that God created the universe in such a way that a certain moral code is embedded into his creation, a code that is discernable through the use of human reason, which God also created. Our minds may be a bit clouded as a result of the Fall; however, some knowledge is available to us all, regardless of religion. Revelation makes the moral code even clearer, but certain acts — murder and robbery, for example — are known to be wrong even by those who have never heard of the Ten Commandments or the teachings of Christ. The Holy Spirit has guided our understanding of the natural law regarding marriage, making it clear that it is a lifelong, faithful relationship between one man and one woman where an openness to children exists.

CONTRACT AND COVENANT

Consider this example: a parish leases a couple of its buildings to other organizations who make use of space that it does not need at the moment. The income generated by the lease helps support the parish’s ministry. The written lease, prepared and reviewed by attorneys, is similar in many ways to civil marriage. Romanticize however you like; a civil marriage is a form of *contract*. There is an economic and societal value for stability and felicity in human relationships, but the government does not care beyond supporting what it perceives to be the common good of society.

Civil marriage allows for:

- ☞ An orderly transfer of wealth and property in case of death.
- ☞ The transfer of custody of children who are minors.
- ☞ Allows for certain other decision-making rights if the other is incapacitated and not able to decide on his or her own.
- ☞ Establishes a framework for economic support and property rights.

Governments have found that establishing and regulating laws relating to marriage benefits society. The leases we have for our buildings, like marriage laws, spell out in detail the rights and responsibilities of the parties involved. They articulate the obligations and enjoyments that are expected. The duration of the agreement is also spelled out. If there is a problem, a “parachute clause” may be included that establishes the terms allowing one or the other to abandon the agreement and dissolve the relationship of landlord/ tenant.

Certain understandings of “marriage” have much in common with this lease arrangement. If marriage is viewed as a contract, one can analyze how each party has or has not lived up to the obligations of the contract and deduce whether or not there is reason to continue with it. If marriage is viewed as a contract, one can reasonably enter into it with the assumption that if x, y, or z should occur, dissolving the marriage is an acceptable recourse.

This is *not* the case in Christian marriage. Christian marriage is not a contract but a covenant. A covenant does not establish a *deal*, but rather a *sacred bond* into which each party enters with the firm intention to share in the free, total, faithful, and fruitful love of God. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “Marriage is based on the consent of the two parties, that is, on their will to give themselves, each to the other, mutually and definitively, in order to live a covenant of faithful and fruitful love.”⁵⁶ *Covenant* is a term we probably learned in our religious education classes as children, and indicates a particular kind of relationship, a relationship that looks to God himself as its model.

Where can we find examples of God’s covenant? In the Scriptures such examples abound. Review these passages from the Old Testament to get a feel for it:

Adam (Gn 1 – 3)

The original covenant between God and humanity took place after human beings were created. The relationship was established with God extending his utmost graciousness and proscribing certain limits for man, which were breached. When man broke the covenant, God punished but did not withdraw.

Noah, after the Flood (Gn 8: 20 — 9 : 17)

God gives to Noah and his descendants the promise that he will never again destroy all living things, as he did with the Flood. He sets the rainbow as the sign of his covenant, and instructs Noah and the living creatures that survived the flood to be fertile and multiply.

Abraham (Gn 17: 1 – 18)

God makes an everlasting pact with Abraham, promising to be his God and making him exceedingly fertile; telling him that he will become the father of a host of nations. (This is also where circumcision enters the picture, a “covenant in the flesh” as the human response to God’s graciousness.)

Moses (Ex 19 ff.)

God renewed his special relationship with the descendants of Abraham after Moses led them out of their bondage in Egypt. The Ten Commandments given to Moses were housed in the Ark of the Covenant. These Commandments summarize the expectations of the human response to God’s offer: “If you hearken to my voice and keep My covenant, you shall be My special possession, dearer to Me than all other people.”

David (2 Sm 7: 12 – 17)

After God told David to refrain from building a house for the Ark of the Covenant, he renewed his covenant: “I have been with you wherever you went, and I have destroyed all your enemies before you. . . . I will fix a place for my people Israel. . . . The Lord also reveals to you that He will establish a house for you. And when your time comes and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your heir after you, sprung from your loins, and I will make his kingdom firm. . . . I will not withdraw my favor from him. . . . Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me.”

Hosea (Hos 2: 16, 17c – 18, 21 – 22)

This book is an extended meditation on forgiveness and reconciliation in the face of unfaithfulness. The prophet’s experience with his wife is seen as a metaphor for God’s experience with Israel. The tenderness expressed despite the infidelity is quite touching. “Thus

says the Lord: I will allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart. She shall respond there as in the days of her youth, when she came up from the land of Egypt. On that day, says the Lord, She shall call me 'My husband,' and never again 'My baal.' I will espouse you to me forever: I will espouse you in right and in justice, in love and in mercy; I will espouse you in fidelity, and you shall know the Lord."

The Old Testament is filled with stories in which God's human partners did not fulfill their end of the covenant. However, despite infidelity, indifference, lack of follow-through, lack of attention to the relationship, poor behavior. . . . *God never gave up on Israel*. God makes covenants with humanity out of sheer love and expects nothing less than fidelity in return. Isaiah uses marital language, when he exclaims simply, "*The Bridegroom rejoices in his bride!*" (Is 62: 5).

N. B. It is essential to be unambiguous about the fact, clearly articulated in the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate*,⁵⁷ that God remains faithful to his covenant with Israel, and that the Jewish people somehow remain intimately connected to God within the Mystery of Salvation. "However, neither this document nor any other authoritative Church document has ever taught that the Jewish people already possess their own salvific covenant with God and therefore should not be presented with the Gospel and invited to expressly enter the Church. The Scriptures, the Fathers, and the Magisterium consistently testify that the Good News of Jesus Christ and His Church is for all men — Jew and Gentile alike. In *Lumen Gentium* (1964), the Church affirmed that God "chose the people of Israel as a people" and "set up a covenant" with them, instructing them and making them holy. However, "all these things . . . were done by way of preparation and a figure of that new and perfect covenant" instituted by and ratified in Christ (no. 9)."⁵⁸

THE NEW AND EVERLASTING COVENANT IN JESUS CHRIST

In the New Testament, the covenantal relationship between God and humanity is literally fleshed-out. The theology undergirding the Incarnation and the Salvation won for us by Christ's Passion, Death, and Resurrection is, ultimately, a *covenantal* theology. Consider the following passages:

Wedding at Cana (Jn 2: 1 – 11)

Jesus' first miracle in St. John's Gospel takes place in the context of a wedding banquet, something many commentators see as significant. When Jesus turns water into wine, he takes something very ordinary (water) and turns it into something extraordinary (wine). He does the same thing through sacramental marriage, taking a very ordinary human relationship and catapulting it to the heavens through his participation in it.

St. Paul's instruction to husbands and wives (Eph 5: 21 – 32)

The sacrifice of husband for the good of his wife is connected with Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross for the love of his people (which is renewed each time the Sacrifice of the Mass is offered).

The Eucharist is the enactment of the covenantal relationship, as Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross is renewed for us. Listen to the words of institution: "This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the *new and everlasting covenant*." We heard in the first presentation about how God's plan was to unite all of humanity to himself in Christ. In Jesus, God expanded his covenant with Israel to include the entire human race. This actually took place through his Death and Resurrection (remember that Old Testament covenants often involved blood).

In this famous passage, Paul uses the analogy of husband and wife, comparing it to Christ's relationship with the Church. Marriage is the icon of God's relationship with his people. *Monotheism* is reflected in *monogamy*.

Who chooses whom? (Jn 15: 16)

Jesus says, "It was not *you* who chose me, but *I* who chose you — and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain." The renewal of the covenant, the institution of the *new* covenant, is initiated by Christ.

The wedding day of the lamb (Rev 19)

In the victory song, a voice from the throne announces the wedding day of the lamb, and the Bride/Bridegroom imagery is presented as the culmination of the defeat of evil and the banquet that celebrates God's triumph.

At the end of Revelation, we read, "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' Let the hearer say, 'Come.'"⁵⁹

We find particularly fertile language drawing us into the mystery of the relationship established between Christ and his Church. Several passages in the Scriptures, including some involving Jesus' direct teaching, invoke this image as a way of understanding how God wishes to relate to us, and how Jesus serves as the Mediator of this relationship. Jesus is the Bridegroom and the Church (*a mystical reality made up of those who believe and have been baptized*) is the bride. Heaven is called a marriage banquet. The feminine and masculine language employed is not mere coincidence or a reflection of cultural propriety.

No longer two, but one flesh (Mk 10)

One of the most popular Gospels chosen for weddings: "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what *God* has joined together, no human being must separate" (cf. Gn 1: 27; 2: 24). Notice how God is the active agent. A couple participates, but it is God who does the joining.

If engaged couples prayerfully read through the sample Scripture readings suggested for the Rite of Marriage, they will get a healthy dose of scriptural theology related to marriage as covenant.

BRIDEGROOM AND BRIDE AS THE PRIMARY EXPRESSION OF THE COVENANT

Some may ask: "Why does the Catholic Church get so worked up about marriage issues?" From the above, you can see that marriage is a central metaphor used to describe how we are joined to God. We are careful in the way we talk about our understanding of marriage, because we are careful in the way we understand how we are drawn into the life of God. If we get our theology of marriage wrong, it threatens to distort our theology of salvation.

The Prayer of the Church

Consider the words spoken by the priest as he prepares to begin the Eucharistic Prayer at a wedding Mass. The Preface is the prayer that directly leads into the singing of the *Sanctus* (Holy, Holy), and summarizes in compact form the profound theology of Christian marriage:

It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, / always and everywhere to give you thanks,
/ Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God.

For you willed that the human race, / created by the gift of your goodness, / should be raised
to such high dignity / that in the union of husband and wife / you might bestow a true image
of your love.

For those you created out of charity / you call to the law of charity without ceasing / and grant
them a share in your eternal charity.

And so, the Sacrament of holy Matrimony, / as the abiding sign of your own love, / consecrates
the love of man and woman, / through Christ our Lord.

MARRIAGE VOWS

Very rarely in life are we called upon to utter a vow. A *vow* is a *sacred promise made before God*, sworn in such a way that we put our personal salvation on the line as part of the process. We are committing to something, not just as an agreement, but as a way of deepening our relationship with the Lord through our commitment. We trust that since God is God, he will give us the grace we need to complete our part of the agreement. And if we fail, we trust that he will not abandon us, but will help us to regroup and move forward.

Christians who marry are not joined by passing emotions or infatuation (even if these played a role in courtship as it developed). They are joined by God himself in an unbreakable bond, a covenant of love, through the firm and irrevocable act of their own consent. (Consider the words of the priest, spoken after the couple has pronounced their vows: “Therefore let no one separate what God has joined.” God is the active agent in joining the couple, who participate in effecting the Sacrament through their mutual and free consent.)

For the baptized, the marriage bond is sealed by the Holy Spirit, and (once consummated) becomes absolutely indissoluble. Since it is God who seals, not the husband and wife, then the husband and wife cannot dissolve the bond, even if by mutual consent. This is what takes Christian marriage beyond what we experience in contractual agreements.

Consider the very words of the marriage vows:

I, _____, take you, _____, to be my wife (husband).
I promise to be faithful to you, / in good times and in bad, / in sickness and in health, /
to love you and to honor you / all the days of my life.⁶⁰

Such a simple promise is packed with intensity. No one either has or ever will make this kind of commitment to you (other than God himself). Therefore, since marriage is the mirror of God’s love for us, the closest we will ever come to understanding what God’s love for us is like, is by understanding/ experiencing the Christian marriage relationship.

Take a five minute break and make note of two things you learned so far.

PROPERTIES OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

1. Fruitful: Openness to Children

Before the couple speaks the vows of marriage to one another, their intentions are first established. The couple is asked if they will “accept children lovingly from God and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church.” A relationship that mirrors God’s relationship with us must be fruitful, must look beyond itself. The self-sacrifice and unselfish giving that are associated with parenting connect the married couple with Christ’s unselfish pouring out of himself for us on the Cross.

“Children are the incarnation of married love; the material overflowing of two becoming one. Love is always life-giving, always open to the other, always expansive. Those who love find no greater joy than to extend love to others. Children are the natural expression of the love of the spouses — the visible sign of the fruitfulness of self-emptying — and a means of ever deepening joy in marriage.”⁶¹ This will be discussed in greater detail in presentations Seven through Ten.

2. Forever: Indissolubility

Also, before pronouncing their vows, the couple is asked: “Will you love and honor each other as husband and wife for the rest of your lives?” For most couples, this is a feature of marriage that motivates them. If your health is good, you will be together forty, fifty, even sixty years! It is wondrous to give yourself to another for life, and to experience another giving him- or herself over to you, as an expression of absolute faith and trust. Couples who have lived to celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversary set a beautiful example, and cannot help but inspire those who know them.

☞ How do they do it? Any couple that makes it this far will be clear on one thing: *it takes work*. Marriage (or any meaningful relationship, for that matter) can never be put on auto-pilot. We all know couples whose marriage seems an empty shell. In most cases, lack of attention to the relationship got them to this point. Different couples choose different ways to “keep it fresh,” but they must keep it fresh if they are to flourish. People grow and change as they get older, and married couples must grow and change *together*. I always encourage young married couples to have frank conversations with older couples they know and trust, asking their advice and hearing about what has worked to help them to thrive. Older couples are honored to be asked these questions and, while they may feel uncomfortable having their marriage put up on a pedestal (they are certainly aware of the weaknesses in their relationship, even if it is basically healthy), they will open up to those they feel are truly hoping to learn from them.

☞ Countless marriages fade because too much attention is paid to the children. Children are God’s blessing and help to hold a family together. Parents are invested in the life and development of their children, and this helps to cement their relationship. They have a common “project,” a little one into whom they can pour their love and energy. Children bring joy to life, and the stewardship of children that are entrusted to parents is a serious responsibility. *But sometimes this comes at the cost of the relationship*. Some couples even think it is *virtuous* to put their relationship on the sidelines so that they can focus on their children. Here is a maxim that deserves to be posted on every couple’s bathroom mirror: The greatest gift parents can give their child is to love their spouse. Time away from the children focused on nurturing the couple’s relationship will come back to benefit the children many times over. Guilt about this must be swatted away. Otherwise you may wake up twenty-five years later and realize you do not even know the person sleeping next to you.

- ☞ Many couples make it a point never to go to bed angry with each other. Disputes arise in every relationship, and many require some length of time before they are resolved. Anger, however, can be managed, especially once the first wave of the emotion subsides and our rational side can be engaged. Just because disagreement occurs it does not mean that anger must accompany it. If anger appears, it must be released (by an act of the will, if necessary) for the sake of the marriage. Choose your words carefully, so as not to inflict unnecessary damage. The phrase, “familiarity breeds contempt,” sometimes manifests itself in a marriage relationship, and couples need to maintain their guard against lashing out in ways that score points but leaves devastation and creates deeper wounds that require further healing.
- ☞ There are to be no winners and losers in a dispute involving married persons. Flexibility and the art of compromise must be learned. Seeking win-win resolutions to conflict is an essential component of healthy marriages.
- ☞ The physical side of marriage is one of its great blessings. Individuals each have their own level of desire for physical touch and affection, and the frequency of conjugal relations is something that ebbs and flows throughout the course of married life. People thrive when they are treated with healthy doses of physical affection, and many wither when physical touch is withheld.
- ☞ Counseling is sometimes called for even in the healthiest of marriage relationships. Some couples fear it, thinking that it is the first step to divorce, or they are too proud to admit that they need help in sorting out their differences. Counseling is not a sign of failure, but a sign of health in a marriage. Summoning the courage to confront issues that get in the way of happiness and joy in the relationship is worth every bit of the embarrassment it may cost. In marriage counseling, the couple is the client (not one or the other, husband or wife), and a good marriage counselor works to improve the health of the relationship. Sometimes individual counseling in addition to this is also beneficial. But take this to heart: Get counseling as soon as one person desires it. (If one of you says you need it, then you need it! This is not an issue open for discussion.)

There are many books on the market that couples can peruse for ideas on how to support and nourish their marriage. What a couple chooses to do is probably less important than keeping the issue in front of them — never taking their relationship for granted, always looking for ways in which they can grow in their love for each other.

People are living longer these days, and this can certainly add to both the joy and the difficulty in marriage’s lifelong commitment. God’s relationship with us is permanent, and since marriage reflects that relationship, marriage is a permanent state as well. The lifelong aspect of marriage is essential to the Catholic understanding of the Sacrament. Indisputably, it is even ideal for merely secular marriages.

A word on marriage annulments: The divorce rate among Catholics is, sadly, as high as in the general population. Granted, it shrinks among those who practice their faith, who pray, who attend Mass weekly, and who do not use artificial birth control. But sometimes even the best intentions and the hardest work result in a failed marriage. Sometimes it becomes clear down the road that one of the essential properties of marriage required for it to be valid was lacking at the start. If this can be determined via thorough investigation, the Church is in the position to issue a judgment that the marriage was never properly established in a permanent, binding way. This is not an “out,” but a compassionate response for couples whose marriage was defective in a way that prevented it from sacramental completion.

3. Faithful: Exclusive

The Sacred Scripture passage that many couples choose for their wedding ceremony is a marvelous blueprint for loving.

Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails (1 Cor 13:4 – 8).

These words of St. Paul are worth daily meditation not only for their insight into the true shape of love but for strengthening our wills to follow this way of love. The love that he describes flourishes in faithful, stable relationships. This applies, first and foremost, to a marriage. It is true also for the entire family. When a woman and a man vow to be true in good times and in bad they are confirming a decision to love one another. But, as married couples have taught us, this decision to love is one we have to make over and over again, when it feels good and when it does not. It is a decision to look for, act on, and pray for the good of the people we say we love. It is a pledge of fidelity.

Our world today needs living witnesses to fidelity. These are the most convincing signs of the love that Christ has for every human being. Couples who are living faithful lives of mutual love and support — though not without difficulties — have the gratitude of the whole Church. Newly-married couples, when you find yourselves in a crisis, do not conclude that divorce is inevitable. All of us — family members, friends, communities of faith — should feel responsible for helping you to recognize that divorce is not inevitable and is certainly not your only option. An enduring marriage is more than simply endurance. It is a process of growth into an intimate friendship and a deepening peace.

So we urge all couples: renew your commitment regularly, seek enrichment often, and ask for pastoral and professional help when needed. To live faithfully in a marriage requires humility, trust, compromise, communication, and a sense of humor. It is a give-and-take experience, involving hurt and forgiveness, failure and sacrifice. The very same thing is true of fidelity in other family relationships. Your faithful love in a marriage and family is tested by change. It can also be strengthened and brought to maturity through change. The challenge is to remain open to the Lord's gracious, healing presence and to see change as an opportunity for growth.⁶²

A few things to keep in mind:

- ☞ Be clear in your communication with each other about your own needs and desires for physical intimacy. Marriage gives couples a kind of “right” to each other’s body, but that right is not to be exercised against the will of the other. *No means no*. At the same time, to refuse the advances of your spouse requires a good reason, and you should both work to be as responsive to each other as possible. Not everyone is on the same cycle or rhythm, but together you can achieve a physical harmony that will provide a wonderful way for you to express your love for one another. One of the benefits cited by couples who practice Natural Family Planning is that moving away from an “any time, any place” mentality deepens their respect for each other, and intensifies the awe and wonder accompanying the conjugal act.

- ☞ Avoid pornography. Period.

See the article “Pornography: What’s the Problem?” found in the Appendix.

Within marriage, addiction to pornography can destroy intimacy. Eventually, the husband or wife who views pornography can lose the ability to relate on a personal and intimate level with the real

person of his or her spouse. Being accustomed to “satisfaction on demand,” he or she may no longer be able to participate in an authentic sexual relationship that involves communication and spiritual intimacy. Men or women who view pornography can become used to the “perfect” bodies they see in porn and begin to view their spouse as unattractive in comparison. A person who views porn will likely also develop an unhealthy view of sexuality, and a spouse may be unwilling to do the things demanded of them. Consequently, the spouse’s refusal may sometimes result in rape or sexual abuse. How can spouses not feel rejected and betrayed when their marriage partner seeks fulfillment from the images of strangers rather than from the human being who loves them? (Mark J. Houck, “Pornography: What’s the Problem?”)

- ☞ Be honest with yourself regarding the way television shows and movies can take you to an unhealthy place, and then avoid those that lead you into sin.
- ☞ Carefully find a friend or two you can trust, with whom you can have open and frank discussions, to help keep you honest about situations that might lead to trouble. Secrets are the friend of infidelity. Conversation helps us to avoid playing games. Discerning our motivations can be difficult. Having friends as sounding boards is wise. (*You can serve the same role for them.*)
- ☞ Make regular examinations of conscience; make sacramental Confession a regular practice.
- ☞ Watch/monitor your thoughts and keep a check on your fantasy life regarding sex.
- ☞ Be vigilant and use common sense when in situations that might tempt you. Watch your use of alcohol, especially when in social settings where your spouse is not present with you.
- ☞ Maintain a vigorous prayer life. The channels of grace can get clogged, and regular prayer helps keep the flow moving.
- ☞ If jealousy plays a troublesome role in your marriage relationship, seek professional help to seek resolution.

We are all spiritually wired for fidelity, even if our physical nature, which is wounded and fallen due to Original Sin, seems to call out for variety in sexual partners. Infidelity in marriage is a result of Original Sin and its consequences, namely, concupiscence, which is the natural tendency in persons to seek pleasures that are evil.

This presents a struggle between the flesh and the spirit. There are two opposing forces: one that is carnal and the other that is spiritual. The carnal force must be controlled by the spiritual so that the person is not brought to destruction but rather to the fullness of life in God. Infidelity is most likely to happen when a person is spiritually dead and desires only the things of the flesh rather than of the spirit which is life-giving.

Faithfulness means you are *exclusively* bonded in the most intimate way. It means being emotionally faithful as well as physically faithful. This does not mean that we do not have other important, or even essential, relationships in our lives. In fact, you cannot demand that your marriage relationship provide for all of your relationship needs — that is too much to expect, and is a recipe for disaster. But your marriage is your primary relationship. Energy spent protecting this sanctuary is well worth the effort.

A DIFFICULT TOPIC

Throughout the Scriptures, adultery (The Sixth Commandment: *You shall not commit adultery*) is viewed, in the strict sense, as unfaithfulness to the *marriage* vow. However, adultery is also viewed in a wider

sense when the people of Israel betrayed their agreement with God and entered into pacts or agreements with other nations or false gods. God warned them, “do not break my covenant; be faithful in all your words and actions.” Israel’s regular episodes of infidelity were a sad commentary, but also highlighted how weak we can be, even when presented with an offer that cannot possibly be surpassed.

Many marriage preparation programs make use of an inventory such as FOCCUS (an acronym for “Facilitating Ongoing Couple Communication, Understanding, and Study”). Using this tool, each person individually responds to several hundred statements, checking boxes marked either a) “I agree”, b) “I disagree,” or c) “I’m not sure.” One of the statements on the FOCCUS inventory is

“I could not under any condition remain married to my spouse if he or she were ever unfaithful to me.”

Before going any further with this, consider: what happens when we are unfaithful to God’s Commandments? Certainly there are consequences. One of God’s commands is that we love our spouse with a deep, abiding, and exclusive love. If we stray, does God take us back? Scriptures say: “If we deny him, he will deny us; but if we are unfaithful he remains faithful, for he cannot deny Himself.”⁶³ We may wake up one day, only to find ourselves in the abyss of spiritual infidelity, yet God will never abandon us. It is within the context of that assurance that we have the courage to seek Confession — we know that God will take us back, regardless of how careless or obstinate we can be.

Consider how unfaithful you have been in your relationship with God (how unfaithful we all have been). Can you imagine going to God with a contrite heart saying, “sorry,” and God turning his back? Thankfully, this is not how God deals with us. Consider the scene in the New Testament where Jesus comes across the woman found committing adultery. What was his response to those who sought to punish her with death? “Let the one among you who is without sin (who has not been unfaithful to God) be the first to throw a stone at her.”⁶⁴ Remember what they did: they all walked away. Jesus said, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She replied, “No one sir.” Then Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go, [and] from now on do not sin anymore.”⁶⁵

Trust may be broken, but it can always be restored through prayer, penance, patience, love, and, of course, a forgiving heart that knows no limits to the gift of God’s mercy. You are both in this for life. Go into marriage without even thinking about infidelity. *Avoid occasions of sin* (know each other’s friends, co-workers, MySpace and Facebook friends, avoid pornography, etc.). Don’t let your guard down.

Infidelity in marriage is more the symptom of a marriage that has problems needing attention than it is the cause of the problems. It highlights a disease that was likely already present, but perhaps not yet identified.

While perhaps sounding unfair, this is a kind of litmus test to see if you really accept the Catholic understanding of marriage, or is infidelity your parachute clause? Would physical unfaithfulness be a deal breaker? If so, then you are unprepared to enter into Christian marriage. Think of the marriage vows: “I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life.” Pray over these words! The first time you say them should not be on your wedding day, nor should that be the last time.

Closing Thought on This Issue

The discipline of priestly celibacy comes under scrutiny by some in our society, and plenty are even cynical about it. People, even *religious* people, comment that it is simply unnatural to take on the

discipline of celibacy. It is just too hard and unrealistic to expect anyone to refrain from sex, let alone from the kind of intimate, exclusive relationship that marriage offers.

It is a concern worth noting. However — and I say this a bit tongue-in-cheek — given what I see when I look around, it is monogamy that might appear to be unnatural. Even given the concepts of natural law and marriage outlined above, the success rate of priests maintaining their promise of celibacy is much higher than the success rate of marriage! To be sure, priests struggle like everyone else to be faithful to their promises, some with greater success than others. But the divorce rate for married Catholics far surpasses the rate of priests leaving the priesthood.

So what is there to say about this? In the end, priests and married persons rely on *supernatural grace* to help live their vocations. Alone, without God's help, we are likely to fail. There are just too many forces at work that threaten our values and too little societal support for them. But for those who place their lives and relationships in God's hands, living out their vocation with intention and open to the working of the Holy Spirit in doing so, there is reason to trust that we will be given what we need to make a go of it (even if the road is bumpy at times).

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