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3 Marriage:

4 Love and Life in the Divine Plan

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6 A Pastoral Letter of the
7 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
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INTRODUCTION

THE BLESSING AND GIFT OF MARRIAGE

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens. (Eph 1:3)*

Among the many blessings that God has showered upon us in Christ is the blessing of marriage, a gift bestowed by the Creator from the beginning of the world. His hand has inscribed the vocation to marriage in the very nature of man and woman.

Father, by your plan man and woman are united,
and married life has been established
as the one blessing that was not forfeited by original sin
or washed away by the flood.¹

Original Sin introduced evil and disorder into the world. As a consequence of the break with God, this first sin ruptured the original communion between man and woman. Nonetheless, the original blessing of marriage was never revoked.

Jesus Christ has not only restored the original blessing in its fullness but elevated it by making marriage between baptized Christians a sacramental sign of his own love for the Church—as we hear proclaimed in the wedding liturgy:

Father, to reveal the plan of your love,
you made the union of husband and wife

¹ Nuptial Blessing, *Rite of Marriage A*, no. 33, in *The Rites of the Catholic Church* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1976). All subsequent texts from the Rite of Marriage refer to this edition.

45 an image of the covenant between you and your people.

46 In the fulfillment of this sacrament,

47 the marriage of Christian man and woman

48 is a sign of the marriage between Christ and the Church.²

49 While marriage is a special blessing for Christians because of the grace of Christ,

50 marriage is also a natural blessing and gift for everyone in all times and cultures. It is a source of

51 blessing to the couple, to their families, and to society, and includes the wondrous gift of co-

52 creating human life. Indeed, as Pope John Paul II never tired of reminding us, the future of

53 humanity depends on marriage and the family.³ It is just such a conviction that has led us, the

54 Catholic bishops of the United States, to write this pastoral letter.

55 We rejoice that so many couples are living in fidelity to their marital commitment. We

56 thank them for proclaiming in their daily lives the beauty, goodness, and truth of marriage. In

57 countless ways, both ordinary and heroic, through good times and bad, they bear witness to the

58 gift and blessing they have received from the hand of their Creator. We are grateful, too, for all

59 those who work with young people and engaged couples to establish good marriages, who help

60 married couples to grow in love and strengthen their union, and who help those in crisis to

61 resolve their problems and bring healing to their lives.

62 At the same time we are troubled by the fact that far too many people do not understand

63 what it means to say that marriage—both as a natural institution and a Christian sacrament—is a

64 blessing and gift from God. We observe, for example, that young people esteem marriage as an

65 ideal but can be reluctant to make the actual commitment necessary to enter and sustain it. Some

² Nuptial Blessing, *Rite of Marriage B*, no. 120.

³ See Pope John Paul II, *On the Family (Familiaris Consortio [FC])* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 1982), no. 75: "The future of the world and of the church passes through the family." See also FC, no. 86.

66 choose instead to live in cohabiting relationships that may or may not lead to marriage and can
67 be detrimental to the well-being of their children and themselves.

68 In addition, the incidence of divorce remains high. The social sanctions and legal barriers
69 to ending one's marriage have all but disappeared, and the negative effects of divorce on
70 children, families, and the community have become more apparent in recent decades.

71 We are alarmed that a couple's responsibility to serve life by being open to children is
72 being denied and abandoned more frequently today. Reflecting losses in the understanding of the
73 purposes of marriage and belief in their value, couples more readily treat as separate choices the
74 decision to get married and the decision to have children. This indicates a mentality in which
75 children are not seen as integral to a marriage but are seen as an afterthought. When children are
76 viewed in this way, there can be damaging consequences not only for them but also for the
77 marriage itself.

78 We note a disturbing trend today to view marriage as a mostly private matter, an
79 individualistic project not related to the common good but oriented mostly to achieving personal
80 satisfaction.

81 Finally, we bishops feel compelled to speak out against all attempts to redefine marriage
82 so that it would no longer be exclusively the union of a man and a woman as God established
83 and blessed it.

84 The opportunities and urgencies of the present moment are many and varied. Nearly
85 thirty years ago, Pope John Paul II summoned the Church to meet a challenge that has become
86 even more important today:

87 At a moment of history in which the family is the object of numerous forces that seek to
88 destroy it or in some way to deform it, and aware that the well-being of society and her

own good are intimately tied to the good of the family,—the church perceives in a more urgent and compelling way her mission of proclaiming to all people the plan of God for marriage and the family, ensuring their full vitality and human and Christian development, and thus contributing to the renewal of society and of the people of God.⁴

The task of proclamation to which the Holy Father refers is one that we bishops exercise with him today as teachers and pastors, specifically in this pastoral letter. We address the pastoral letter first and foremost to the Catholic faithful in the United States. In a spirit of witness and service we also offer our message to all men and women in the hope of inspiring them to embrace this teaching.

We intend this pastoral letter to be a theological and doctrinal foundation. It can be a resource to help and encourage all those who are moving toward marriage, who are journeying in married life, and who are accompanying and assisting those who are called to the vocation of marriage.

Our pastoral letter presents those beliefs and teachings of the Catholic Church—informed by human reason and enlightened by Divine Revelation—that summarize and express God's plan for marriage. This divine plan, like the gift of marriage itself, is something we receive, not something we construct or change to fit our purposes. It is a firm foundation, a truthful guide, a trustworthy light for the way.

For all who seek to find *meaning in* their marriage will do so when they are open to accepting the transcendent *meaning of* marriage according to God's plan. Of this quest for meaning and truth, Pope Benedict XVI writes:

⁴ FC, no. 3.

110 All people feel the interior impulse to love authentically: love and truth never abandon
111 them completely, because these are the vocation planted by God in the heart and mind of
112 every human person. The search for love and truth is purified and liberated by Jesus
113 Christ from the impoverishment that our humanity brings to it, and he reveals to us in all
114 its fullness the initiative of love and the plan for true life that God has prepared for us.⁵

115 Our pastoral letter is an invitation to discover, or perhaps rediscover, the blessing given
116 when God first established marriage as a natural institution and when Christ restored and
117 elevated it as a sacramental sign of salvation.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Charity in Truth (Caritas in Veritate)* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2009), no. 1.

PART ONE

MARRIAGE IN THE ORDER OF CREATION

The Natural Institution of Marriage

What Is Marriage?

Marriage is a lifelong partnership of the whole of life, of mutual and exclusive fidelity, established by mutual consent between a man and a woman, and ordered towards the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring.⁶ As the Second Vatican Council reminds us, marriage is not a purely human institution: “the intimate partnership of life and the love which constitutes the married state has been established by the creator and endowed by him with its own proper laws. . . . For God himself is the author of marriage.”⁷ Moreover, God has endowed marriage with certain essential attributes, without which marriage cannot exist as he intends.

The Church has taught through the ages that marriage is an exclusive relationship between one man and one woman. This union, once validly entered and consummated, gives rise to an indissoluble bond that cannot be dissolved by the spouses.⁸ Marriage thus created is a faithful, privileged sphere of intimacy between the spouses that lasts until death.

Conjugal love, the love proper to marriage, is present in the commitment to the complete and total gift of self between husband and wife. Conjugal love establishes a unique communion

⁶ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd ed.) (CCC) (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–USCCB, 2000), no. 1601; *Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition: New English Translation (Codex Iuris Canonici [CIC])* (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1998), cc. 1055.1, 1056-1057; *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches: New English Translation (Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium [CCEO])*, c. 776 §§1, 3, and c. 817.

⁷ Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes [GS])*, no. 48, in *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996). All subsequent citations of Vatican II documents refer to this edition.

⁸ CIC, cc. 1056, 1134, 1141; CCEO, cc. 776 §3, 853.

138 of persons through the relationship of mutual self-giving and receiving between husband and
139 wife, a relationship by which “a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the
140 two of them become one body [flesh]” (Gn 2:24).

141 The Second Vatican Council speaks about conjugal love in words of great beauty:

142 The Lord, wishing to bestow special gifts of grace and divine love on married love, has
143 restored, perfected, and elevated it. A love like that, bringing together the human and the
144 divine, leads the partners to a free and mutual self-giving, experienced in tenderness and
145 action, and permeating their entire lives; this love is actually developed and increased by
146 its generous exercise.⁹

147 As Part Two of this pastoral letter will examine, in conjugal love one can see something
148 of how Christ loves his Church (Eph 5:25).

149 **Male-Female Complementarity Is Essential to Marriage**

150 *God created man in his image,*
151 *in the divine image he created him;*
152 *male and female he created them. (Gn 1:27)*

153 The two creation stories in the book of Genesis communicate two important truths about
154 the identity of man and woman and the relationship between them. In the first account, God
155 creates both male and female at the same time and in the divine image. This act completes
156 creation, and God judges it to be “very good” (Gn 1:31). In this way, Sacred Scripture affirms
157 the fundamental equality and dignity of man and woman as persons created in God’s image.

⁹ GS, no. 49.

158 The second creation account emphasizes that both sexes are necessary for God's plan.
159 Having created Adam, God says, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gn 2:18). So God
160 creates a helpmate who is suitable for him or matching him. "Helpmate" (*ezer*) is a word
161 reserved in the Bible not for inferiors but most often for God himself, who is Israel's "helper."
162 Indeed, after God creates all of the animals and brings them to Adam to name, it becomes clear
163 that none of them is "the suitable partner for the man" (Gn 2:20).

164 Then God puts Adam under a deep sleep and, using one of his ribs, builds up a woman
165 for him as a suitable partner or helpmate. When he sees the woman, Adam cries out in wondrous
166 joy:

167 This one, at last, is bone of my bones
168 and flesh of my flesh;
169 This one shall be called "woman" [*ishah*],
170 for out of "her man" [*ish*] this one has been taken. (Gn 2:23)

171 Adam and Eve were literally made for each other. Man and woman have been made to
172 come together in the union of marriage. The text of Genesis continues: "That is why a man
173 leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body
174 [flesh]" (Gn 2:24).

175 Marriage, this clinging together of husband and wife as one flesh, is based on the fact that
176 man and woman are both different and the same. They are different as male and female, but the
177 same as human persons who are uniquely suited to be partners or helpmates for each other. The
178 difference between man and woman, however, cannot be restricted to their bodies, as if the body
179 could be separated from the rest of the human person. The human person is a union of body and
180 soul as a single being. Man and woman are two different ways of being a human person.

181 While man and woman are different, their differences serve to relate them to each other.
182 They are not different in a parallel way, as two lines that never meet. Man and woman do not
183 have separate destinies. They are related to each other precisely in their differences.

184 The differences between male and female are complementary. Male and female are
185 distinct, bodily ways of being human, that is, of being open to God and to one another—two
186 distinct yet harmonizing ways of responding to the vocation to love.

187 While human persons are more than biological organisms, the roots of marriage can be
188 seen in the biological fact that a man and a woman can come together as male and female in a
189 union that has the potential for bringing forth another human person. This kind of union fills the
190 need for the continuation of the human race. Since human beings exist at more than a biological
191 level, however, this union has further personal and spiritual dimensions. Marriage does not exist
192 merely for the reproduction of another member of the species, but for the creation of a
193 communion of persons.

194 To form a communion of persons is the vocation of everyone. As Pope John Paul II
195 teaches, all human persons are created in the image of God, who is a communion of love of three
196 persons, and thus all are called to live in a communion of self-giving love: “to say that man is
197 created in the image and likeness of God means that man is called to exist ‘for’ others, to become
198 a gift.”¹⁰

199 Marriage, however, is a unique communion of persons. In their intimate union as male
200 and female, the spouses are called to exist for each other. Just as Genesis describes Eve as a
201 helper for Adam, we can see that in marriage, a husband and wife are meant to help each other,
202 through self-giving. “In the ‘unity of the two,’ man and woman are called from the beginning not

¹⁰ Pope John Paul II, *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women (Mulieris Dignitatem [MD])* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1998), no. 7.

203 only to exist 'side by side' or 'together,' but they are also called *to exist mutually 'one for the*
204 *other.*"¹¹

205 This communion of persons has the potential to bring forth human life and thus to
206 produce the family, which is itself another kind of communion of persons and which is the origin
207 and foundation of all human society. It is precisely the difference between man and woman that
208 makes possible this unique communion of persons, the unique partnership of life and love that is
209 marriage. A man and woman united in marriage as husband and wife serve as a symbol of both
210 life and love in a way that no other relationship of human persons can.

211 **The Two Ends or Purposes of Marriage**

212 Marriage has two fundamental ends or purposes towards which it is oriented, namely, the
213 good of the spouses as well as the procreation and education of children. Thus, the Church
214 teaches that marriage is both unitive and procreative/educative, and that it is inseparably both.

215 **Unitive**

216 Pope John Paul II's theology of the body speaks of the human body as having a spousal
217 significance. This means that the human body by its very nature signifies that we humans are
218 directed to relationship—that we are to seek union with others. For it is only in relationship that
219 we achieve a true wholeness, as a communion of persons. Before Eve was created, Adam was
220 alone. His joy upon perceiving Eve indicated that with Eve he achieved the "original unity" that
221 human nature seeks. God clearly made human beings to love and to be loved, to be in
222 relationships wherein the act of giving oneself and receiving the other becomes complete.

¹¹ MD, no. 7.

223 In this context, the word “original” means not only that these experiences go back to the
224 dawn of human history but, more importantly, that they are key to understanding our most basic
225 human experiences. The experience of Adam and Eve speaks powerfully to our search not only
226 to understand ourselves but also to love and be loved, to be in a relationship of love with a
227 person of the opposite sex.

228 God established marriage so that man and woman could participate in his love and thus
229 selflessly give themselves to each other in love. A man and a woman who by their act of consent
230 are no longer two but one flesh (see Mt 19:6ff.) render mutual help and service to each other
231 through an intimate union of their persons and of their actions.¹²

232 “My lover belongs to me and I to him” (Song 2:16; see Song 6:3). With all the dignity
233 and simplicity of poetry, the Bride in the Song of Songs sings of the unitive meaning of married
234 love.

235 “You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride. . . . How beautiful is your love!”
236 (Song 4:9-10). So responds the Bridegroom of the Song, overcome with the wonder of conjugal
237 love that is extended to him by the Bride.¹³ This is the love that is strong as death (see Song
238 8:6b).

239 Just as beautifully, Tobiah prays with his wife, Sarah, on their wedding night, awestruck
240 at the mercy of the God of their fathers, that is, the God of the covenant, in bringing them
241 together in a union of true conjugal love:

242 Blessed are you, O God of our fathers;
243 praised be your name forever and ever.
244 Let the heavens and all your creation praise you forever.

¹² See GS, no. 48.

¹³ See Pope John Paul II, General Audience, May 30, 1984.

245 You made Adam and you gave him his wife Eve
246 to be his help and support;
247 and from these two the human race descended.
248 You said, "It is not good for the man to be alone;
249 let us make him a partner like himself."
250 Now, Lord, you know that I take this wife of mine
251 not because of lust,
252 but for a noble purpose.
253 Call down your mercy on me and on her,
254 and allow us to live together to a happy old age. (Tb 8:5-7)

255 The love that is as strong as death is the love that prays and praises, caught up into divine
256 love.¹⁴

257 **Procreative and Educative**

258 It is the nature of love to overflow, to be life-giving. Thus, it is no surprise that marriage
259 is ordained not only to growing in love but to transmitting life: "by its very nature the institution
260 of marriage and married love [is] ordered to the procreation and education of the offspring and it
261 is in them that it finds its crowning glory."¹⁵

262 Married love itself is ordered to the procreation and education of children, for, after all,
263 the first command given to Adam and Eve is "be fertile and multiply" (Gn 1:28). Tobiah's
264 prayer, even as it asks for a happy and lifelong union, remembers that the human race descended
265 from Adam and Eve. His prayer for happiness certainly includes, even if implicitly, a prayer for

¹⁴ See GS, no. 48: "Authentic married love is caught up into divine love."

¹⁵ GS, no. 48; see CCC, no. 1652.

266 offspring. God indeed sends the couple seven sons (Tb 14:3) and long life (Tb 14:14). Again, in
267 the words of the Second Vatican Council:

268 Children are the supreme gift of marriage. . . . Without intending to underestimate the
269 other ends of marriage, it must be said that true married love and the family life which
270 flows from it have this end in view: that the spouses would cooperate generously with the
271 love of the Creator and Savior, who through them will in due time increase and enrich his
272 family.¹⁶

273 Children are a gift in a myriad of ways. They bring joy even in the midst of heartaches;
274 they give added direction to the lives of their parents. Children, who are the fruit of love and
275 meaningful commitment, are a cause of love and meaning.

276 It is true that some marriages will not result in procreation due to infertility, even though
277 the couple is capable of the natural act by which procreation takes place. Indeed, this situation
278 often comes as a surprise and can be a source of deep disappointment, anxiety, and even great
279 suffering for a husband and wife. When such tragedy affects a marriage, a couple may be
280 tempted to think that their union is not complete or truly blessed. This is not true. The marital
281 union of a man and a woman is a distinctive communion of persons. By its very nature, marriage
282 is both love-giving and life-giving. An infertile couple continues to manifest both of these
283 attributes when their hearts remain open to the needs of others, including adopted and foster
284 children.

285 Even when their child-bearing years have passed, a couple should continue to be life-
286 giving. They can do this by staying involved in the lives of young people, and especially their
287 grandchildren, as spiritual mentors, teachers, and wisdom figures. They can also continue to be

¹⁶ GS, no. 50; see CCC, no. 1652.

288 generative in a broader sense by exercising care for those who are needy, disabled, or pushed to
289 the margins of society, and by their support for or participation in works of charity and justice.

290 **How Are the Two Ends of Marriage Related?**

291 The Church speaks of an inseparable connection between the two ends of marriage: the
292 good of the spouses themselves as well as the procreation and education of children. The
293 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that “these two meanings or values of marriage cannot be
294 separated without altering the couple’s spiritual life and compromising the goods of marriage
295 and the future of the family.”¹⁷ This inseparability arises from the very nature of conjugal love, a
296 love that “stands under the twofold obligation of fidelity and fecundity.”¹⁸

297 Conjugal love expresses the unitive meaning of marriage in such a way as to show how
298 this meaning is ordered toward the equally obvious procreative and educative meaning. The
299 unitive meaning is distorted if the procreative and educative meaning is deliberately disowned.
300 Conjugal love is then diminished, for, by its nature, it is “faithful and exclusive . . . until death.
301 Finally, this love is fecund. It is not confined wholly to the loving interchange of husband and
302 wife; it also contrives to go beyond this to bring new life into being,” as Pope Paul VI says.¹⁹
303 Without its ordering toward the procreative and educative, the unitive meaning of marriage is
304 undermined.

305 The opposite is also true. The procreative meaning of marriage is degraded without the
306 unitive. If someone were to view his or her spouse simply as a way of producing offspring, with

¹⁷ CCC, no. 2363.

¹⁸ CCC, no. 2363.

¹⁹ Pope Paul VI, *On the Regulation of Birth (Humanae Vitae [HV])*, no. 9,
www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html.

307 no loving attentiveness to the spouse's own good or fulfillment, this would offend against the
308 human value of the procreative meaning.

309 The procreative meaning of marriage involves not only the conception of children, but
310 also their upbringing and education, including spiritual formation in the life of love. This
311 formation can take place only within a human community formed in love. The loving
312 communion of the spouses is the primary context in which children are both conceived and
313 brought up in love.

314 The unitive and the procreative/educative purposes are meant to be inseparable. In this
315 way, the procreative/educative requires the unitive, just as the unitive is ordered to the
316 procreative/educative. These are two connected meanings of the same reality.

317 We can better understand this intrinsic connection if we consider the fact that procreation
318 is a participation in the ongoing creative activity of God. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*
319 states that God's creative power is not a power of force or manipulation, but a power of love.²⁰ It
320 is a power of self-gift. God is eternally happy in himself because he is a loving communion of
321 three persons. He is self-sufficient and needs nothing else to be happy. Yet he wills to share his
322 life and happiness with creatures who would have no existence were it not for this creative self-
323 gift. Participating in the creative work of God means participating in the self-emptying or self-
324 giving love of God, the rendering of one's whole being into a gift. If procreation is a true
325 participation in the creative activity of God, it is a work that is inseparable from self-gift.

326 In the case of marriage, the principal and original self-gift is the unitive, mutual self-gift
327 of the spouses to each other. In their marriage promises, the spouses pledge love and fidelity for
328 as long as they live. The transmission of life is a sublime, concrete realization of this radical self-
329 gift between a man and a woman. The mutual, married love of man and woman "becomes an

²⁰ CCC, no. 2363.

330 image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man[kind],”²¹ because as mutual
331 self-gift, it is at the same time creative self-gift. The unitive and the procreative meanings of
332 marriage are joined because they are two aspects of the same self-giving.

333 **Fundamental Challenges to the Nature and Purposes of Marriage**

334 We recognize that couples face many challenges to building and sustaining a strong
335 marriage. Conditions in contemporary society do not always support marriage. For example,
336 many couples struggle to balance home and work responsibilities; others bear serious economic
337 and social burdens.

338 Some challenges, however, are fundamental in the sense that they are directed to the very
339 meaning and purposes of marriage. Here we want to discuss four such challenges: contraception,
340 same-sex unions, divorce, and cohabitation.

341 **1. Contraception**

342 Just as there are two inseparable meanings of marriage as a whole, the same is true of the
343 act most symbolic and expressive of the marriage as a whole, namely, the act of sexual
344 intercourse. Church teaching speaks of an “inseparable connection, established by God, which
345 man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative
346 significance which are both inherent to the marriage act.”²²

347 Sometimes one hears it said that as long as the marriage as a whole is open to children,
348 each individual act of intercourse need not be. In fact, however, a marriage is only as open to
349 procreation as each act of intercourse is, because the whole marriage is present and signified in
350 each marital act. Each marital act signifies the original and enduring marital covenant between

²¹ CCC, no. 1604.

²² HV, no. 12; CCC, no. 2366.

husband and wife. That is what makes intercourse a marital act as opposed to something less. Engaging in marital intercourse is speaking the “language of the body,” as Pope John Paul II calls it—a language of personal communion in complete and mutual self-donation.²³

The spouses’ mutual promise of lifelong love and fidelity provides this act with the clarity of an explicitly stated intention that enables the language of the body to be spoken. It is the spouses’ intention to cling together lifelong, as one flesh, in a completely mutual self-gift that gives the language of the body its voice. In each marital act, this intention is signified or spoken. Each marital act signifies the grateful openness to all of God’s gifts. When the act signifies this grateful openness, one gives oneself completely, without shame (see Gn 2:25).

Deliberately intervening, by the use of contraceptive practices, to close off an act of intercourse to the possibility of procreation is a way of trying to separate the unitive meaning of marriage from the procreative and educative meaning. This is an intrinsically evil action. It makes the act of intercourse signify, or speak, something less than the unreserved self-gift intended in the marriage promises. The language of the body that is meant to express self-gift becomes mixed with another message, a contrary message: that of the refusal to give oneself entirely. And so the unitive meaning of that language is falsified.²⁴

“By using contraception,” married couples “may think that they are avoiding problems or easing tensions, that they are exerting control over their lives.”²⁵ At the same time, they may think that they are doing nothing harmful to their marriages. In reality, when the unitive meaning of marriage is deliberately separated from the procreative and educative meaning, many negative consequences ensue. Some of these consequences are personal, and others are social. The union of male and female is reduced to a means of gratifying whatever one desires, and so conjugal

²³ See, for example, Pope John Paul II, General Audiences, January 5 and 26, 1983.

²⁴ See FC, no. 32; see also CCC, no. 2370.

²⁵ USCCB, *Married Love and the Gift of Life* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006), 17.

373 love is diminished. The procreative capacity of male and female is dehumanized, reduced to a
374 kind of internal biological technology that one masters and controls just like any other
375 technology. Pope Paul VI warns against treating the sexual faculties as simply one more
376 technology to control:

377 to experience the gift of married love while respecting the laws of conception is to
378 acknowledge that one is not the master of the sources of life but rather the minister of the
379 design established by the Creator. Just as man does not have unlimited dominion over his
380 body in general, so also, and with more particular reason, he has no such dominion over
381 his specifically sexual faculties, for these are concerned by their very nature with the
382 generation of life, of which God is the source.²⁶

383 The procreative capacity of man and woman should not be treated as just another means
384 of technology, like *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) or cloning. When that happens, human life itself is
385 degraded because it becomes, more and more, something produced or manufactured in various
386 ways, ways that will only multiply as science advances. Children begin to seem less and less as
387 gifts received in a personal communion of mutual self-giving, and increasingly as a lifestyle
388 choice, a commodity to which all consumers are entitled. There is a true issue of the dignity of
389 human life at stake here. In this context, the warning of Pope Paul VI seems prophetic in
390 retrospect:

391 In preserving intact the whole moral law of marriage, the Church is convinced that she is
392 contributing to the creation of a truly human civilization. She urges man not to betray his

²⁶ HV, no. 13.

393 personal responsibilities by putting all his faith in technical expedients. In this way she
394 defends the dignity of husband and wife. . . . [and with it] "man's essential dignity."²⁷

395 Finally, living according to God's design for love and life does not mean that married
396 couples cannot plan their families. The principle of responsible parenthood describes the way
397 spouses can work with God's gift of fertility. Rooted in "the objective moral order which was
398 established by God," spouses can "recognize their own duties towards God, themselves, their
399 families and human society" as they decide when to try to achieve a pregnancy or conclude that
400 there are sufficient moral reasons to try to postpone one.²⁸ Today, the Church is particularly
401 blessed that viable methods of natural family planning are available to support responsible
402 parenthood.

403 Natural family planning (NFP) methods represent authentic family planning. They can be
404 used both to achieve and to postpone a pregnancy. NFP makes use of periodic abstinence from
405 sexual intercourse based upon the observation of the woman's natural signs of fertility, in order
406 to space births or to limit the number of children when there is a serious reason to do so. NFP
407 methods require that couples learn, accept, and live with the wonders of how God made them.
408 This is significantly different from contraception.

409 Openness to procreation in the marital act involves "acknowledg[ing] that one is not the
410 master of the sources of life."²⁹ Using the technology of contraception is an attempt at such
411 mastery. By contrast, couples using methods of NFP do nothing to alter the conjugal act. Rather,
412 they abstain from conjugal relations during the portion of the woman's menstrual cycle when
413 conception is most likely. This is an attitude of respect and wonder in the face of human life,

²⁷ HV, nos. 18 and 23, quoting Pope John XXIII, *On Christianity and Social Progress (Mater et Magistra)*, 1961.

²⁸ HV, no. 10.

²⁹ HV, no. 13.

414 which is sacred. It is an attitude of respect and wonder in the face of the full personhood of the
415 spouse, and it fosters the true intimacy that only such respect can bring.

416 As Pope John Paul II observes, any couple who tries to live out this openness to
417 procreation will find that it requires a sacrificial love.³⁰ At certain difficult times in life, the
418 procreative meaning of marriage may seem to be at odds with the unitive meaning. Though this
419 can in fact never be the case, preserving unity may in some cases require a considerable sacrifice
420 by couples. They should take heart from St. Paul's assurance that God will not test us beyond
421 what we can endure: "God is faithful and will not let you be tried beyond your strength; but with
422 the trial he will also provide a way out, so that you may be able to bear it" (1 Cor 10:13).

423 **2. Same-Sex Unions**

424 One of the most troubling developments in contemporary culture is the proposition that
425 persons of the same sex can "marry." This proposal redefines the nature of marriage and the
426 family and, as a result, harms both the intrinsic dignity of every human person and the common
427 good of society.

428 Marriage is a unique union, a relationship different from all others. It is the permanent
429 bond between one man and one woman whose two-in-one-flesh communion of persons is an
430 indispensable good at the heart of every family and every society. Same-sex unions are incapable
431 of realizing this specific communion of persons. Therefore, redefining marriage to include such
432 relationships empties the term of its meaning, for it excludes the essential complementarity
433 between man and woman, treating sexual difference as if it were irrelevant to what marriage is.

434 Male-female complementarity is intrinsic to marriage. It is naturally ordered toward
435 authentic union and the generation of new life. Children are meant to be the gift of the permanent

³⁰ See FC, no. 3.

and exclusive union of a husband and a wife. A child is meant to have a mother and a father. The true nature of marriage, lived in openness to life, is a witness to the precious gift of the child and to the unique roles of a mother and father. Same-sex unions are incapable of such a witness. Consequently, making them equivalent to marriage disregards the very nature of marriage.³¹

When marriage is redefined so as to include or be made analogous with same-sex partnerships, society is effectively stating that the permanent union of husband and wife, the unique pattern of spousal and familial love, and the generation of new life are now only of relative importance rather than being fundamental to the existence and well-being of society as a whole.

Today, advocacy for the legal recognition of various same-sex relationships is often equated with non-discrimination, fairness, equality, and civil rights. However, it is not unjust to oppose legal recognition of same-sex unions, because marriage and same-sex unions are essentially different realities. "The denial of the social and legal status of marriage to forms of cohabitation that are not and cannot be marital is not opposed to justice; on the contrary, justice requires it."³² To promote and protect marriage as the union of one man and one woman is itself a matter of justice. In fact, it would be a grave injustice if the state ignored the unique and proper place of husbands and wives, the place of mothers and fathers, and the rights of the child.

At the same time, the Church teaches that homosexual persons are to "be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity."³³ She also encourages chaste friendships. "Chastity is

³¹ See USCCB, *Between Man and Woman: Questions and Answers About Marriage and Same-Sex Unions* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003).

³² Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons* (2003), no. 8, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20030731_homosexual-unions_en.html

³³ CCC, no. 2358.

expressed notably in *friendship with one's neighbor*. Whether it develops between persons of the same or opposite sex, friendship represents a great good for all.”³⁴

While basic human rights must be afforded to all people, this can and should be done without sacrificing the bedrock of society that is marriage and the family and without violating the religious liberty of persons and institutions.

The legal recognition of same-sex unions poses a multifaceted threat to the very fabric of society, striking at the source from which society and culture come and which they are meant to serve. Such recognition affects all people, married and non-married: not only at the fundamental levels of the good of the spouses, the good of children, the intrinsic dignity of every human person, and the common good, but also at the levels of education, cultural imagination and influence, and religious freedom.

3. Divorce

By its very nature, marriage is meant to be a lifelong union. Fidelity until death is what couples aspire to and what they promise to each other. Divorce, therefore, “claims to break the contract, to which the spouses freely consented, to live with each other till death.”³⁵ Moreover, Jesus himself teaches that divorce does not accord with the order of nature as intended by the Creator (see Mt 19:3-9).

Conflict, quarrels, and misunderstandings can be found in all marriages. They reflect the impact of Original Sin, which “disrupted the original communion of man and woman.”³⁶ They also reflect modern stresses upon marriage: the conflict between work and home, economic hardships, and social expectations.

³⁴ CCC, no. 2347.

³⁵ CCC, no. 2384.

³⁶ USCCB, *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006), 287.

476 Nevertheless, God's plan for marriage persists, and he continues to offer mercy and
477 healing grace. We bishops urge couples in crisis to turn to the Lord for help. We also encourage
478 them to make use of the many resources, including programs and ministries offered by the
479 Church, that can help to save marriages, even those in serious difficulty.

480 In some cases, divorce may be the only solution to a morally unacceptable situation. A
481 specific example is a home where the safety of a spouse and children is at risk. As the Catholic
482 bishops of the United States, we reiterate what we said in our pastoral message on domestic
483 violence, *When I Call for Help*: "no person is expected to stay in an abusive marriage."³⁷ We
484 want to assure people who are caught in the tragedy of an abusive marriage that the Church is
485 committed to offering them support and assistance.

486 We understand the pain of those for whom divorce seemed the only recourse. We urge
487 them to make frequent use of the sacraments, especially the Sacraments of Holy Eucharist and of
488 Penance and Reconciliation. We also offer encouragement to those who have divorced and
489 remarried civilly. Although the Church does not consider the second marriage valid, she hopes
490 that people in this situation will participate in parish life and attend the Sunday Eucharist, even
491 though they cannot ordinarily receive Holy Communion.

492 We encourage divorced persons who wish to marry in the Catholic Church to seek
493 counsel about the options that exist to remedy their situation, including the suitability of a
494 declaration of nullity. Such a declaration is a finding by a church tribunal, or court, that no valid
495 marriage bond was formed because the requirements for valid consent were not met at the time
496 of the wedding. If a declaration of nullity is granted, and there are no other restrictions, both
497 parties are free to marry in the Catholic Church. Although the purpose of this canonical process

³⁷ USCCB, *When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2002), 11.

498 is to determine whether or not a marriage bond truly existed, nonetheless, the process can often
499 result in healing and closure to a painful part of one's past.

500 **4. Living Together Without Marriage**

501 Today many couples are living together in a sexual relationship without the benefit of
502 marriage. Many cohabiting couples believe that their desire for each other justifies the sexual
503 relationship. This belief reflects a misunderstanding of the natural purpose of human sexuality,
504 which can only be realized in the permanent commitment of marriage. Sexual intercourse is
505 meant to express the total and unrestricted gift of self that takes place in married love. To have
506 sexual intercourse outside the covenant of marriage is gravely immoral because it communicates
507 physically the gift of oneself to another when, at the same time, one is not willing or able to
508 make a total and permanent commitment.

509 Couples offer various reasons for cohabiting, ranging from economics to convenience.
510 Frequently, they have accepted the widespread societal belief that premarital cohabitation is a
511 prudent way to determine whether they are truly compatible. They believe they need a trial
512 period before proceeding to the lifelong commitment of marriage.

513 Social science research, however, finds that cohabitation has no positive effects on a
514 marriage.³⁸ In some cases, cohabitation can in fact harm a couple's chances for a stable marriage.
515 More importantly, though, cohabitation is intrinsically evil and thus always diminishes the
516 capacity for love.

517 Clearly, there is no substitute for the binding lifelong commitment of marriage. Only the
518 public and legal commitment of marriage expresses the complete gift of self that is the basis of

³⁸ See David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "Should We Live Together?" (2002),
marriage.rutgers.edu/publicat.htm.

519 marriage.³⁹ To refuse the full commitment of marriage expresses something distinctly less than
520 the unconditional trust required of complete self-giving.⁴⁰ At the heart of cohabitation lies a
521 reluctance or refusal to make a public, permanent commitment.

522 Cohabitation can also have a negative impact on children. Many cohabiting couples bring
523 children into the relationship, or children result from the relationship. The unstable nature of
524 cohabitation puts these children at risk. With regard to the good of the children, a stable marriage
525 between the parents is "the most human and humanizing context for welcoming children, the
526 context which most readily provides emotional security and guarantees greater unity and
527 continuity in the process of social integration and education."⁴¹ The findings of the social
528 sciences confirm that the best environment for raising children is a stable home provided by the
529 marriage of their parents.⁴²

530 The importance of marriage for children and for the upbringing of the next generation
531 highlights the importance of marriage for all of society. Marriage is not merely a private
532 institution. It is the foundation for the family, where children learn the values and virtues that
533 will make good Christians as well as good citizens. In particular, parents train their children to be
534 free and responsible persons who understand that "every person is worthy of love, and that there
535 is a basic, universal brotherhood which embraces every human being."⁴³

536 Just as families render an invaluable service to society, society has a reciprocal obligation
537 to protect and support families. The Second Vatican Council affirms that the well-being of

³⁹ See Pontifical Council for the Family, *Family, Marriage, and "De Facto" Unions* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2001), no. 25.

⁴⁰ See *Family, Marriage, and "De Facto" Unions*, no. 25.

⁴¹ *Family, Marriage, and "De Facto" Unions*, no. 26.

⁴² See Institute for American Values, "Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-Six Conclusions from the Social Sciences," www.americanvalues.org/html/r-wmm.html.

⁴³ Pope Benedict XVI, Address at the prayer vigil for the Fifth World Meeting of Families in Valencia, Spain, July 8, 2006, www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/july/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060708_incontro-festivo_en.html.

538 society is closely tied to healthy marriages and families.⁴⁴ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*
539 explains:

540 The family is the *original cell of social life*. It is the natural society in which husband and
541 wife are called to give themselves in love and in the gift of life. Authority, stability, and a
542 life of relationships within the family constitute the foundations for freedom, security,
543 and fraternity within society.⁴⁵

544

⁴⁴ See GS, no. 47.

⁴⁵ CCC, no. 2207.

PART TWO

MARRIAGE IN THE ORDER OF THE NEW CREATION

The Sacrament of Matrimony

In Part One, we discussed why and how the natural institution of marriage is a gift and blessing. Now, in Part Two, we will consider what it means to say that this natural institution has been raised by Christ to the dignity of a sacrament for Christians.

Married Life Affected by Original Sin

While marriage has remained the good gift that God created it to be, and so has not been a blessing forfeited because of the Fall, Original Sin has had grave consequences for married life. Because men and women became wounded by sin, marriage has become distorted. In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,

As a break with God, the first sin had for its first consequence the rupture of the original communion between man and woman. Their relations were distorted by mutual recriminations; their mutual attraction, the Creator's own gift, changed into a relationship of domination and lust; and the beautiful vocation of man and woman to be fruitful, multiply, and subdue the earth was burdened by the pain of childbirth and the toil of work.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ CCC, no. 1607, alluding to Gn 1:28, 2:22, 3:12, and 3:16-19.

Marriage Restored in Christ

Through Baptism, men and women are transformed, by the power of the Holy Spirit, into a new creation in Christ.⁴⁷ This new life in the Holy Spirit heals men and women from sin and elevates them to share in God's very own divine life. It is within this new Christian context that Jesus has raised marriage between the baptized to the dignity of a sacrament.⁴⁸ He heals marriage and restores it to its original purity of permanent self-giving in one flesh (see Mt 19:6).

In restoring to marriage its original meaning and beauty, Jesus proclaims what the Creator meant marriage to be "in the beginning." He does so because marriage will be made into the visible embodiment of his love for the Church. In his espousal of the Church as his Bride, he fulfills and elevates marriage. He reveals his own love "to the end" (Jn 13:1) as the purest and deepest love, the perfection of all love. In doing this he reveals the deepest meaning of all marital love: self-giving love modeled on God's inner life and love.

In marriage a man and a woman are united with each other, and the two become one flesh, so that they each love the other as they love themselves and cherish each other's bodies as their own. This union is an image of the relationship between Christ and the Church:

He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one hates his own flesh but rather nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.

"For this reason a man shall leave [his] father and [his] mother
and be joined to his wife,

⁴⁷ See CIC, c. 849; CCEO, c. 675 §1.

⁴⁸ See CIC, c. 1055 §1; CCEO, c. 776 §2. A valid marriage between any two validly baptized Christians, whether Catholic or not, is a sacrament. This includes marriages between a Catholic and a non-Catholic Christian, whether Orthodox or Protestant, although certain canonical requirements must be fulfilled for these marriages to be valid. A marriage between a Christian and an unbaptized person is still valid as a natural marriage, but is not a sacrament. Here, too, for a Catholic to enter such a marriage validly, certain canonical requirements must be fulfilled.

581 and the two shall become one flesh.”

582 This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church. (Eph 5:28-32)

583 The Church Fathers expressed this truth when they described the relationship between
584 Adam and Eve as a “type,” or mysterious foreshadowing, of the relationship between Christ and
585 the Church. The kind of relationship of love that is foreshadowed in the relationship between
586 Adam and Eve is fulfilled in the relationship between Christ and his Church.

587 The Sacrament of Matrimony renews the natural institution of marriage and elevates it so
588 that it shares in a love larger than itself. Marriage, then, is nothing less than a participation in the
589 covenant between Christ and the Church. In the words of the Second Vatican Council,

590 Spouses, therefore, are fortified and, as it were, consecrated for the duties and dignity of
591 their state by [this] special sacrament; fulfilling their conjugal and family role by virtue of
592 this sacrament, spouses are penetrated with the spirit of Christ and their whole life is
593 suffused by faith, hope and charity; thus they increasingly further their own perfection
594 and their mutual sanctification, and together they render glory to God.⁴⁹

595 Because the call of Adam and Eve to become one flesh is fulfilled in the creation of the
596 Church as Christ’s Bride, one can only see the depth of the meaning of marriage in relation to
597 Christ and his love for the Church as his Bride. Marriage is a call to give oneself to one’s spouse
598 as fully as Christ gave himself to the Church. The natural meaning of marriage as an exchange of
599 self-giving is not replaced, but fulfilled and raised to a higher level.

⁴⁹ GS, no. 48.

Christian Marriage as a Sacrament

Marriage is one of the Church's "mysteries," or sacraments. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it this way: "Christian marriage . . . becomes an efficacious sign, the sacrament of the covenant of Christ and the Church."⁵⁰ An "efficacious sign" is one that does not merely symbolize or signify something, but actually makes present what it signifies. Marriage signifies and makes present to baptized spouses the love of Christ by which he formed the Church as his spouse: "just as of old God encountered his people in a covenant of love and fidelity, so our Savior, the spouse of the church, now encounters Christian spouses through the sacrament of marriage."⁵¹

By using the image of the relationship between bridegroom and bride to explain the relationship between Christ and the Church, the Scriptures are appealing to a natural human relationship that is already well known. All of us know something about the depth, the intimacy, and the beauty of the gift of self that occurs in the marriage of husband and wife. The Scriptures also show us, however, that Christ's love for the Church surpasses natural human love. Christ's love for the Church is a love of complete self-giving. This love is most completely expressed by his death on the Cross. Christian marriage aspires not only to natural human love, but to Christ's love for the Church:

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, that he might present to himself the church in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Eph 5:25-27)

⁵⁰ CCC, no. 1617.

⁵¹ GS, no. 48.

621 Christian spouses are called to this imitation of Christ, an imitation that is only possible
622 because, in the Sacrament of Matrimony, the couple receives a participation in his love. As a
623 sacrament, marriage signifies—and in signifying makes present in the couple—Christ’s total
624 self-gift of love. Their mutual gift of self, conferred in their promises of fidelity and love *to the*
625 *end*, becomes a participation in the *love to the end* by which Christ gave himself to the Church as
626 to a Spouse (see Jn 13:1).

627 The Latin Catholic Church teaches that, in their exchange of promises of loving and
628 perpetual fidelity before the Church, the baptized spouses validly confer upon each other the
629 Sacrament of Matrimony. The Eastern Catholic Churches teach that, in addition to the exchange
630 of these promises between the baptized spouses, the blessing of the priest is required for
631 validity.⁵²

632 The Holy Spirit, through their exchange of promises, binds the spouses together in a bond
633 of love and fidelity unto death. Their marriage covenant becomes a participation in the
634 unbreakable covenant between Christ the Bridegroom and his Bride, the Church. The same love
635 that defines the Church now defines the communion between the two spouses: “authentic
636 married love is caught up into divine love and is directed and enriched by the redemptive power
637 of Christ and the salvific action of the church.”⁵³

638 When Christian couples receive the grace of the Sacrament of Matrimony,
639 Christ dwells with them, gives them the strength to take up their crosses and so follow
640 him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another’s

⁵² See CCC, no. 1623; CIC, cc. 1055, 1057, 1058; CCEO, cc. 817, 828.
⁵³ GS, no. 48.

641 burdens, to “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ,” and to love one
642 another with supernatural, tender, and fruitful love.⁵⁴

643 By the power of the Holy Spirit, spouses become willing to do the acts and courtesies of
644 love toward each other, regardless of the feelings of the moment. They are formed by the self-
645 giving love of Christ for his Church as his Bride, and so they are enabled to perform acts of self-
646 giving love, to the benefit of themselves, their families, and the whole Church.

647 The imitation of the love of Christ for the Church also calls for a healing of the
648 relationship between man and woman. This should not be a one-sided subjection of the wife to
649 the husband, but rather a mutual subjection of husband and wife. St. Paul did indeed speak in a
650 way that, according to Pope John Paul II, was “profoundly rooted in the customs and religious
651 tradition of the time”: “wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord” (Eph 5:22).
652 The Holy Father explains, however, that this saying must “be understood and carried out in a
653 new way,” that is, in light of what St. Paul said immediately before: “be subordinate to one
654 another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21). He emphasizes that this is something new, “an
655 innovation of the Gospel,” that has challenged and will continue to challenge the succeeding
656 generations after St. Paul.⁵⁵

657 **Marriage as a Reflection of the Life of the Trinity**

658 Throughout history God has shown us his selfless love. In espousing himself to the
659 Church in sacrificial, life-giving love, Christ reveals the Father’s love in the power of the Holy
660 Spirit. He shows us the inner life of the Holy Trinity, a communion of persons, Father, Son, and

⁵⁴ CCC, no. 1642.

⁵⁵ See MD, no. 24.

661 Holy Spirit. The Church herself is a communion of persons that shares in God's Trinitarian life
662 and love.

663 The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It
664 is the mystery of God in himself. It is therefore the source of all the other mysteries of
665 faith, the light that enlightens them. It is the most fundamental and essential teaching in
666 the "hierarchy of the truths of faith."⁵⁶

667 Through the Sacrament of Matrimony, married love not only is modeled on Trinitarian
668 love but also participates in it. Like all sacraments, Matrimony draws believers more deeply into
669 the Trinitarian life of God. It was not until the Father sent his Son into the world as man, and the
670 subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that the full identity of God as a Trinity of Persons was
671 revealed. This Revelation not only allowed humankind to come to a definitive knowledge of
672 God—since the mystery of the Trinity is the source of all the other mysteries, the revelation of
673 this mystery sheds light on all the rest. This includes both the mystery that human beings are
674 created in the image and likeness of God and the mystery that is marriage and family life.

675 As we learn from the mystery of the Trinity, to be in the image and likeness of God is not
676 simply to have intelligence and free will, but also to live in a communion of love. From all
677 eternity the Father begets his Son in the love of the Spirit. In the begetting of the Son, the Father
678 gives himself entirely over to the Son in the love of the Holy Spirit. The Son, having been
679 begotten of the Father, perfectly returns that love by giving himself entirely over to the Father in
680 the same Spirit of love. It is because he is begotten of the Father, and loves the Father in the
681 same Spirit, that he is called Son. The Holy Spirit is then acknowledged as the mutual love of the

⁵⁶ CCC, no. 234.

682 Father for his Son and of the Son for his Father. This is why the Spirit is known as the gift of
683 love.

684 Here one can see that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit give themselves entirely to
685 one another in a life-giving exchange of love. Thus, the Trinity is a loving and life-giving
686 communion of equal Persons. The one God is the loving inter-relationship of the Father, the Son,
687 and the Holy Spirit.

688 To be created in the image and likeness of God means, therefore, that human beings
689 reflect not the life of a solitary deity, but the communal life of the Trinity. Human beings were
690 created not to live solitary lives, but to live in communion with God and with one another, a
691 communion that is both life-giving and loving. "The divine image is present in every man. It
692 shines forth in the communion of persons, in the likeness of the unity of the divine persons
693 among themselves."⁵⁷

694 On a basic level this is witnessed in the social nature of human beings. We live in
695 societies for the mutual benefit of all. "All men are called to the same end: God himself. There is
696 a certain resemblance between the unity of the divine persons and the fraternity that men are to
697 establish among themselves in truth and love. Love of neighbor is inseparable from love of
698 God."⁵⁸ In the smaller community of the married couple and their family, the image of the
699 Trinity can be seen even more clearly. Here are two ways to see the Trinitarian image in
700 marriage in family life.

701 First, like the Persons of the Trinity, marriage is a communion of love between co-equal
702 persons, beginning with that between husband and wife and then extending to all the members of

⁵⁷ CCC, no. 1702.

⁵⁸ CCC, no. 1878.

703 the family. Pope John Paul II teaches, "The family, which is founded and given life by love, is a
704 community of persons: of husband and wife, of parents and children, of relatives."⁵⁹

705 This communion of life-giving love is witnessed within the life of the family, where
706 parents and children, brothers and sisters, grandparents and relatives are called to live in loving
707 harmony with one another and to provide mutual support to one another. The *Catechism of the*
708 *Catholic Church* says that "the Christian family is a communion of persons, a sign and image of
709 the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit."⁶⁰

710 These relations among the persons in communion simultaneously distinguish them from
711 one another and unite them to one another. For example, the Father is only the Father in relation
712 to the Son and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, just as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are
713 distinctly who they are only in relation to one another, so a man and a woman are distinctly who
714 they are as husband and wife only in relation to one another. At the same time, just as the
715 relations among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit unite the three persons as one God, so the inter-
716 relationship of the husband and wife make them one as a married couple.

717 The Trinitarian image in marriage in family life can be seen in a second way. Just as the
718 Trinity of persons is a life-giving communion of love both in relationship to one another and to
719 the whole of creation, so a married couple shares in this life-giving communion of love by
720 together procreating children in the conjugal act of love. For St. Thomas Aquinas, while angels
721 are, strictly speaking, higher than human beings by nature, the ability to procreate in love makes
722 human beings, at least in one way, more in the image and likeness of God than the angels, who

⁵⁹ FC, no. 18.

⁶⁰ CCC, no. 2205.

723 are unable to procreate. In human beings one finds “a certain imitation of God, consisting in the
724 fact that man proceeds from man, as God proceeds from God.”⁶¹

725 **The Family as Domestic Church**

726 The Christian family is a communion of persons, a sign and image of the communion of
727 the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. In the procreation and education of children it
728 reflects the Father’s work of creation. It is called to partake of the prayer and sacrifice of
729 Christ. Daily prayer and the reading of the Word of God strengthen it in charity. The
730 Christian family has an evangelizing and missionary task.⁶²

731 Although the Son of God was conceived in the womb of Mary and so became man by the
732 power of the Holy Spirit, he was nonetheless born into a genuine human family. While Mary was
733 his true mother, Joseph, as her husband, was the father of Jesus in the eyes of the law. It is within
734 the context of this family, along with all of his aunts, uncles, and cousins, that Jesus would spend
735 the majority of his life here on earth. It would be in living with Mary and Joseph that Jesus
736 would learn to pray to his heavenly Father, to read and study the Scriptures, and in general to live
737 as a devout Jewish man. With his family Jesus would attend the local synagogue and make the
738 annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover. By being obedient to Mary and Joseph, “Jesus
739 advanced [in] wisdom and age and favor before God and man” (Lk 2:52). It is within the context
740 of his family that Jesus would come to know as man the will of his heavenly Father, who had
741 sent him into the world to be its Savior and Redeemer. In contemplating the Jewish family of

⁶¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 93, art. 3, in *Fathers of the English Dominican Province* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947).

⁶² CCC, no. 2205.

742 Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, people today can understand how this Holy Family is indeed the model
743 and source of inspiration for all Christian families.

744 From the earliest days of the Church, entire families and households found salvation in
745 Jesus. Cornelius, the first Gentile Christian, was told by an angel to send for Peter so that “all
746 your household will be saved” (Acts 11:14). Paul and Silas preached the Gospel to their former
747 jailer and his household. “Then he and all his family were baptized at once” (Acts 16:33). In
748 Corinth, “Crispus, the synagogue official, came to believe in the Lord along with his entire
749 household” (Acts 18:8). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “These families who
750 became believers were islands of Christian life in an unbelieving world.”⁶³ As the first Christian
751 families were islands of faith in their time, so Catholic families today are called to be beacons of
752 faith, “centers of living, radiant faith.”⁶⁴

753 Through the Sacrament of Matrimony, Christian couples are configured to Christ, so that
754 their love for each other is configured to his love for the Church. Because of this participation in
755 the love of Christ, the communion of persons formed by the married couple and their family is a
756 kind of microcosm of the Church. For this reason, the Second Vatican Council employs the
757 ancient expression “domestic church,” *ecclesia domestica*, to describe the nature of the Christian
758 family.⁶⁵ The family is called a “domestic church” because it is a small communion of persons
759 that both draws its sustenance from the larger communion that is the whole Body of Christ, the
760 Church, and also reflects the life of the Church so as to provide a kind of summary of it.

761 Pope John Paul II states, “The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and
762 realization of ecclesial communion, and for this reason . . . it can and should be called a *domestic*

⁶³ CCC, no. 1655.

⁶⁴ CCC, no. 1656.

⁶⁵ See Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium [LG])*, no. 11.

763 church.”⁶⁶ As the Church is a community of faith, hope, and love, so the Christian family, as the
764 domestic church, is called to be a community of faith, hope, and love. Through this faith, hope,
765 and love, Jesus, by the power of his Holy Spirit, abides within each Christian family, as he does
766 within the whole Church, and pours out the love of his Father within it. Every marriage between
767 Christians gives rise to a domestic church, though marriages between two Catholics most fully
768 reflect the life of the Church, because ordinarily only Catholic couples can fully participate in the
769 sacraments of the Church, including the Eucharist.⁶⁷

770 While all members of the family are called to live out the foundational Christian virtues,
771 fathers and mothers have a special responsibility for fostering these virtues within their children.
772 They are the first to proclaim the faith to their children. They are responsible for nurturing the
773 vocation of each child, showing by example how to live the married life, and taking special care
774 if a child might be called to priesthood or consecrated life.⁶⁸

775 Not only do parents present their children for Baptism, but, having done so, they become
776 the first evangelizers and teachers of the faith.⁶⁹ They evangelize by teaching their children to
777 pray and by praying with them. They bring their children to Mass and teach them biblical stories.
778 They show them how to obey God’s commandments and to live a Christian life of holiness.
779 Catholic schools and religious education programs can help parents to fulfill these
780 responsibilities.

781 Cooperating together, with the help of the Holy Spirit, parents nurture the virtues within
782 each of their children and within their family as a whole—charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness,
783 generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (see Gal 5:22-23). The *Catechism of the*

⁶⁶ FC, no. 21.

⁶⁷ See CIC, c. 844; Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1993), nos. 125, 131.

⁶⁸ See LG, no. 11.

⁶⁹ See CIC, cc. 226 §2, 774 §2, 793, 867 §1, 1125 °1; CCEO, cc. 618, 627, 686 §1, 814 °1.

784 *Catholic Church*, quoting the Second Vatican Council, emphasizes that the family, as a domestic
785 church, receives its strength and life by participating in the life and worship of the larger Church
786 of which it is a part:

787 It is here [within the domestic church] that the father of the family, the mother, children,
788 and all members of the family exercise the *priesthood of the baptized* in a privileged way
789 “by the reception of the sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life,
790 and self-denial and active charity” (LG, no. 10). Thus the home is the first school of
791 Christian life and “a school for human enrichment” (GS, no. 52). Here one learns
792 endurance and the joy of work, fraternal love, generous—even repeated—forgiveness,
793 and above all divine worship in prayer and the offering of one’s life.⁷⁰

794 A family matures as a domestic church as it ever more deeply immerses itself within the
795 life of the Church. This especially means that fathers and mothers, by their example and
796 teaching, help their children come to an appreciation of the need for continual conversion and
797 repentance from sin, encouraging a love for and participation in the Sacrament of Penance and
798 Reconciliation.

799 Moreover, since it is Christ’s presence within the family that truly makes it a domestic
800 church, their participation in the Eucharist, especially the Sunday Eucharist, is particularly
801 important. In the Eucharist, the family joins itself to Jesus’ sacrifice to the Father for the
802 forgiveness of sins. Furthermore, it is in receiving Holy Communion that the members of the
803 family are most fully united to the living and glorious Christ and so to one another and to their
804 brothers and sisters throughout the world. It is here, in the risen and Eucharistic Christ, that

⁷⁰ CCC, no. 1657.

805 spouses, parents, and children express and nurture most fully the love of the Father and the bond
806 of the Spirit.

807 Although Christian spouses in a mixed marriage (that is, between a Catholic and a
808 baptized person who is not Catholic) do not ordinarily share the Eucharist,⁷¹ they are called to
809 "give witness to the universality of God's love which overcomes all division."⁷²

810 These families may experience the wounds of Christian division, yet they can also
811 contribute to healing those wounds. When the two spouses live together in peace, they provide a
812 reminder to all Christians that progress toward the unity for which Christ prayed is possible.
813 Mixed marriages can, therefore, make an important contribution towards Christian unity. This is
814 especially true when spouses are faithful to their religious duties. "Their common baptism and
815 the dynamism of grace provide the spouses in these marriages with the basis and motivation for
816 expressing their unity in the sphere of moral and spiritual values."⁷³

817 Catholics sometimes enter into valid marriages with persons of other religions that do not
818 profess faith in Christ. For an interreligious marriage to be recognized by the Catholic Church
819 the couple must apply for a dispensation. Although not sacramental, these marriages can bear
820 witness to the solidarity and peaceful cooperation among religions that the Catholic Church is
821 committed to fostering.

822 It is important to recognize the religious and cultural pressures that sometimes make it
823 difficult for the Catholic party to share his or her faith with the children. The Catholic party
824 needs to take seriously the obligations imposed by faith, especially in regard to the religious
825 upbringing of children. The Church requires the Catholic party to be faithful to his or her faith
826 and to "promise to do all in his or her power" to have the children baptized and raised in the

⁷¹ See CIC, c. 844; *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, nos. 125, 131.

⁷² USCCB, *Follow the Way of Love: A Pastoral Message to Families* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1993), 11.

⁷³ FC, no. 78.

827 Catholic faith. The non-Catholic spouse is “to be informed at an appropriate time about the
828 promises which the Catholic party is to make, in such a way that it is certain that he or she is
829 truly aware of the promise and obligation of the Catholic party.”⁷⁴

830 In the United States, religiously mixed marriages have become increasingly common.
831 While recognizing that other faith communities hold marriage as a sacred institution that
832 contributes to the building of civilization, the Catholic Church also cautions that these unions
833 face particular challenges that must be met with realism and reliance on the grace of God.

834 **Marriage as a Vocation**

835 God who created man out of love also calls him to love—the fundamental and innate
836 vocation of every human being.⁷⁵

837 The Church teaches that marriage is an authentic vocation, or divine call. As a vocation,
838 marriage is just as necessary and valuable to the Church as other vocations. For this reason, all of
839 us should pray that men and women will enter into marriage with the proper understanding and
840 motivation and that they will live it generously and joyfully.

841 As with every vocation, marriage must be understood within the primary vocation to
842 love, because humanity “is created in the image and likeness of God who is himself love.”⁷⁶ In
843 Baptism, God calls the faithful to grow in love. This vocation to love, in imitation of God’s
844 infinite love, is also a vocation to grow in holiness, for greater participation in God’s love
845 necessarily entails a greater participation in God’s holiness. The Second Vatican Council teaches
846 that “all the faithful, whatever their condition or state are called by the Lord—each in his or her

⁷⁴ CIC, c. 1125.

⁷⁵ CCC, no. 1604.

⁷⁶ CCC, no. 1604.

own way—to that perfect holiness by which the Father himself is perfect.”⁷⁷ Within this universal vocation to holiness, God calls some men to the priesthood or to the diaconate, other men and women to the consecrated life. For the vast majority of men and women, however, God places this universal vocation to holiness within the specific vocation of marriage. Those whose circumstances in life do not include marriage, ordination, or consecration are nonetheless also called to discern and make a personal gift of self in how they live a Christian life.

How do men and women discern a call to marriage? Discernment of and preparation for marriage begins early in life. *Familiaris Consortio* identifies three stages of marriage preparation: remote, proximate, and immediate.⁷⁸ *Remote* preparation occurs early in life, as children experience the love and care of married parents and begin to learn the values and virtues that will form their character. *Proximate* preparation begins around puberty and involves a more specific preparation for the sacraments, including an understanding of healthy relationships, sexuality, the virtue of chastity, and responsible parenthood.

By the time of *immediate* preparation, the couple has developed a conviction that God is calling them to marriage with a particular person. Prayer, especially for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the help of wise mentors are crucial in this discernment process. Discernment also involves an honest assessment of qualities that are foundational for the marriage. These include an ability to make and keep a commitment, the desire for a lifelong, faithful relationship, and openness to children. The couple will also want to reflect on the values they share, their ability to communicate, and agreement on significant issues.

The marital vocation is not a private or merely personal affair. Yes, marriage is a deeply personal union and relationship, but it is also for the good of the Church and the entire

⁷⁷ LG, no. 11; see CIC, c. 210; CCEO, c. 13.

⁷⁸ See FC, no. 66.

869 community. The Second Vatican Council teaches that “the well-being of the individual person
870 and of both human and Christian society is closely bound up with the healthy state of marriage
871 and the family.”⁷⁹ As a vocation, or call from God, marriage has a public and ecclesial status
872 within the Church. Catholic spouses ordinarily exchange marital consent within a church setting,
873 before a priest or deacon.⁸⁰ The living-out of marriage takes place within the whole Body of
874 Christ, which it serves and in which it finds nourishment.

875 Moreover, the state and the secular community officially recognize a couple’s marital and
876 familial status and are obliged to help support and sustain it. The ecclesial and public nature of
877 marriage and family life is what keeps marriages and families from becoming isolated. Marriage
878 and families are compelled, by their very nature, to contribute to the life of the Church and to the
879 broader needs of society.

880 **Growth in Christian Marriage**

881 On their wedding day, the couple says a definitive “yes” to their vocation of marriage.
882 Then the real work of marriage begins. For the remainder of their married lives, the couple is
883 challenged to grow, through grace, into what they already are: that is, an image of Christ’s love
884 for his Church.⁸¹

885 “Become what you are!”⁸² might be a great exhortation to newly married couples, who
886 often reduce the love of the marriage bond to only a feeling, perhaps the romantic love of
887 courtship and honeymoon. When that feeling dries up, it may seem to them that they have
888 nothing left and that they have failed.

⁷⁹ GS, no. 47.

⁸⁰ See CIC, c. 1108; CCEO, c. 828.

⁸¹ See FC, no. 17.

⁸² FC, no. 17.

889 It is at these very times, however, that their vocation as spouses calls them to go further,
890 to “become what they are,” members of a marital communion defined by the unbreakable
891 spousal love of Christ for his Church. While husbands and wives can cling to the unconditional
892 promise that they made at their wedding as a source of grace, this will require persistent effort.
893 Maintaining the common courtesies—persevering in fidelity, kindness, communication, and
894 mutual assistance—can become a deep expression of conjugal charity. It means growing in a
895 love that is far deeper than a romantic feeling.

896 That growth will be the occasion of admiration and gratitude for the good Christian
897 example of the other spouse and for the always undeserved gift of love. In this admiration and
898 gratitude for the enduring and faithful love of one’s spouse, one can see Christ, who loved to the
899 end. One can also recognize Christ at work in oneself as a spouse.

900 What about the physical expression of married love? It may be that at certain times in life
901 marital intercourse does not seem as satisfying as it once seemed to be, and couples in this
902 situation can come to think of themselves as having failed in the one thing that our secular
903 culture tells us is essential. It may seem foolish or dreary to persist in a marriage that has come to
904 seem unfulfilling. It is the consumerist-oriented version of sex, however, that is empty and
905 inevitably unfulfilling, and that ultimately deadens sexual life.

906 Human beings attain their deepest fulfillment only by participation in the divine life of
907 the Trinity, which comes through participation in the self-giving love pouring out of the pierced
908 heart of Christ on the Cross. This fulfillment is exactly what the Sacrament of Matrimony offers.

909 The clarity of a promise of love to the end makes it possible for the spouses, in Christ, to
910 achieve an intimacy where there is trust instead of shame. Leaving behind the lustful, self-

911 centered pleasures of our culture, one can journey, in Christ, towards the discovery of an
912 intimacy that is deeply satisfying because it is a participation in the intimate self-giving of Christ.

913 **Growth in the Virtues**

914 There is another way to look at growth in marriage: namely, as growth in virtue. As a
915 couple grows in virtue, they grow in holiness. In other words, the couple acquires, by prayer and
916 discipline, those interior qualities that open them to God's love and allow them to share in his
917 love more deeply. Couples instinctively understand this when they speak about their marriage
918 being a means of leading each other to heaven.

919 The vocation of marriage, like other vocations, is the living out of the theological virtues
920 of faith, hope, and charity—those foundational virtues that each person receives from the Holy
921 Spirit at Baptism and through which we all become holy. This means that a husband and wife are
922 called to live their marriage in faith—faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior and in accordance
923 with the Church's teaching. They are to foster this gospel faith among themselves and within
924 their children through their teaching and example.⁸³

925 Likewise, they live in hope of God's kindness, mercy, and generosity. In the midst of the
926 inevitable trials and hardships, they trust that God is graciously watching over them and their
927 family. They trust that the Father's love will never abandon them, but that, in union with Jesus,
928 they will always remain in his presence.

929 Faith and hope find their fullest expression in love—love of God and love of neighbor.
930 The call to love reaches beyond the home to the extended family, the neighborhood, and the
931 larger community. This marital and familial love finds its complete expression, following the
932 example of Jesus himself, in a willingness to sacrifice oneself in everyday situations for one's

⁸³ See CIC, c. 226 §1; CCEO, c. 407.

933 spouse and children. There is no greater love within a marriage and a family than for the spouses
934 and children to lay down their lives for one another. This is the heart of the vocation of marriage,
935 the heart of the call to become holy.

936 Love includes all the virtues, and each specific virtue is a manifestation of love. A holy
937 marriage, one that is a communion of persons and a sign of God's love, is made up of many
938 virtues that are acquired by human effort.

939 Rooted in the theological virtues, a couple must also grow in the principal moral virtues.
940 These include prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. All the other virtues are grouped
941 around these four. Practicing the moral virtues draws us ever more deeply into God's love
942 through the Holy Spirit, with the result that we habitually manifest his love in our daily lives.

943 *Chastity* and *gratitude* are two virtues that are sometimes overlooked in relation to
944 married life. These should be practiced in both natural and sacramental marriages.

945 **Chastity**

946 Everyone is called to chastity, whether married or not. The virtue of chastity is
947 traditionally considered an expression of the virtue of temperance, which enables one to enjoy
948 various kinds of pleasures when it is good and appropriate to do so, and to reject certain
949 pleasures when it is not. Chastity is specifically concerned with the proper disposition of sexual
950 desire. It refers to the peaceful integration of sexual thoughts, feelings, and desires.

951 Learning to live chastely is part of learning how to use one's freedom well. The
952 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, "Chastity includes an *apprenticeship in self-mastery*

953 which is a training in human freedom. The alternative is clear: either man governs his passions
954 and finds peace, or he lets himself become dominated by them and becomes unhappy.”⁸⁴

955 Chastity will be lived somewhat differently depending on the circumstances of one’s life.
956 Single people, consecrated religious, and priests experience chastity differently from married
957 persons. In fact, some people are surprised that married persons are called to chastity. They
958 confuse chastity with celibacy or sexual abstinence, but marital chastity has a distinct meaning.

959 Married people are called to love with conjugal chastity. That is, their love is to be total,
960 faithful, exclusive, and open to life.⁸⁵ Conjugal love merges “the human and the divine,” leading
961 the “partners to a free and mutual self-giving.”⁸⁶ The practice of marital chastity ensures that
962 both husband and wife will strive to live as a gift of self, one to the other, generously. In other
963 words, marital chastity protects a great good: the communion of persons and the
964 procreative/educative purposes of marriage.

965 In this pastoral letter, we have already discussed how contraception threatens marital
966 chastity. Other threats to marital chastity abound. In the workplace, men and women deal with
967 boundary issues as they form professional relationships and personal friendships. Military
968 deployments can strain marriages as they separate spouses for long periods of time.

969 Pornography, particularly Internet pornography, is a serious threat to marital chastity. The
970 Internet has made pornography readily accessible within the privacy of one’s home. Using
971 pornography can quickly become an addiction that erodes trust and intimacy between husband
972 and wife and, in some cases, leads to the end of the marriage itself.

973 A strong defense against these temptations is a marriage that is continually growing in
974 physical, emotional, and spiritual intimacy. Communication and relationship skills are crucial to

⁸⁴ CCC, no. 2339.

⁸⁵ See HV, no. 9.

⁸⁶ GS, no. 49.

975 building such intimacy. As spouses learn to improve their communication, they can better
976 respond to each other's need for love, acceptance, and appreciation. They deepen marital
977 intimacy and strengthen their practice of chastity.

978 **Gratitude**

979 Adam's exclamation upon seeing Eve—"this one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of
980 my flesh!" (Gn 2:23)—is one of joy. He expresses joy in receiving from God someone who is
981 truly as human as he is, but who is different in a matching or complementary way. His joy is an
982 expression of gratitude at receiving the gift of Eve. Eve, too, must have rejoiced upon seeing
983 Adam, for she also saw someone who complemented her and was truly human like herself. This
984 virtue of joyous gratitude is critical for marital and family love. Each married couple is called to
985 foster this joyous gratitude—thankfulness that each is a gift to the other and that this gift of the
986 other ultimately comes from God's bounteous love for them.

987 Within marriage, the joyous gratitude is expressed, as it was for Adam and Eve, in the
988 giving of one's whole self to the other. In joyful gratitude for his wife, a husband gives himself
989 completely to his wife; and in gratitude for her husband, a wife gives herself completely to her
990 husband. This joyful self-giving is specifically expressed and exemplified in sexual intercourse.
991 As the Second Vatican Council teaches, "The acts in marriage by which the intimate and chaste
992 union of the spouses takes place are noble and honorable; the truly human performance of these
993 acts fosters the self-giving they signify and enriches the spouses in joy and gratitude."⁸⁷

994 There is a second element to this gratitude that is related to the first. As a husband and
995 wife are thankful for one another and express this gratitude in the giving of themselves
996 completely to one another, so this gratitude is open to the further gifts that this self-giving

⁸⁷ GS, no. 49.

997 literally embodies: that is, a gratitude for the possible further gift of children. Inherent within a
998 husband's gratitude for his wife is that together with her he can beget children. Inherent within a
999 wife's gratitude for her husband is that together with him she can conceive children. Together a
1000 husband and wife are gratefully open to the gift of children.

1001 Marriage, then, is to be a school for nurturing gratitude for the gifts of God and for
1002 openness to the gifts of God that are proper to marriage. In practicing the virtue of gratitude and
1003 openness, spouses cooperate fully in the procreative task of married life: conceiving and
1004 educating children. Because the children are received in gratitude and in a spirit of openness to
1005 each of them as God's gifts, they are themselves formed in that very openness and in
1006 appreciation for all of those gifts. These gifts include life itself, the dignity of human beings
1007 created in the image and likeness of God, and the wondrous gift of the whole of the earth where
1008 all of life is nurtured and supported.

1009 Moreover, the virtue of gratitude overflows from the marriage and family to embrace the
1010 Church and the world. With gratitude for their vocation to serve, married couples and their
1011 children are motivated to participate actively, in keeping with their individual talents and
1012 charisms, in the building-up of Christ's Body, the Church.

1013 Lastly, living a married life in joyful gratitude and openness fosters hospitality. When the
1014 spouses become one flesh, their openness makes them a home to each other. Their communion
1015 with each other becomes a home for children. Their family, with its heightened awareness of
1016 human dignity, reaches out in hospitality to the poor and to anyone in need, in keeping with the
1017 words of the final blessing from the ritual of weddings:

1018 May you always bear witness to the love of God in this world
1019 so that the afflicted and needy

1020 will find in you generous friends,
1021 and welcome you into the joys of heaven.⁸⁸

1022 **Growth Toward Perfection**

1023 Some might object that growing in virtue—to be perfect as the Heavenly Father is
1024 perfect—is an unrealistic vision for married couples. After they are married, couples are still
1025 themselves, with all their personal faults and failings. Sacraments, each in their own way, really
1026 do configure us to the love of Christ revealed in his Passion, Death, and Resurrection (the
1027 Paschal Mystery), but they do not bring instant perfection.

1028 In Baptism all of us are fully liberated from sin. We receive a new identity: “having
1029 become a member of the Church, the person baptized belongs no longer to himself, but to him
1030 who died and rose for us.”⁸⁹ Yet our spiritual journey has only just begun in Baptism. We have to
1031 grow according to the love to which we have been configured. In Baptism we have been
1032 configured into the likeness of Christ so that we can grow in holiness of life and become
1033 increasingly conformed to his divine and resurrected likeness. We have to “become what we
1034 are.”⁹⁰

1035 While the Church is holy because of her union with the all-holy Christ, the spotless Bride
1036 of the spotless Lamb (see Rev 22:17), she is “always in need of purification.”⁹¹ Christ loves the
1037 Church “to the end” (Jn 13:1), and he continually purifies and reforms the Church. The Church is
1038 always called to “become what she already is,” the holy Bride of Christ.

1039 In a similar way, the Sacrament of Marriage configures the spouses into a sign of Christ’s
1040 loving and unbreakable communion with his Bride, the Church. In their exchange of a promise

⁸⁸ *Rite of Marriage A*, no. 125.

⁸⁹ CCC, no. 1269; see 1 Cor 6:19, 2 Cor 5:15.

⁹⁰ FC, no. 17.

⁹¹ CCC, no. 827.

1041 of fidelity *to the end*, their communion becomes a participation in Jesus' everlasting spousal love
1042 for his Church.⁹² By symbolizing and sharing in Christ's purifying and sanctifying love for his
1043 Church, married couples are called to an ever deeper holiness of life, just as Christ calls his
1044 Church to an ever deeper holiness of life.

1045 Getting married does not, therefore, magically confer perfection. Rather, the love to
1046 which the spouses have been configured is powerful enough to transform their whole life's
1047 journey so that it becomes a journey toward perfection. In this journey, the spouses are ever more
1048 conformed into the likeness of Christ so that they can ever more perfectly love one another as
1049 Christ loves his Church.

1050 **Marriage and the Eucharist**

1051 [The Eucharist is] the memorial of the love with which he [Christ] loved us "to the end,"
1052 even to the giving of his life. In his Eucharistic presence he remains mysteriously in our
1053 midst as the one who loved us and gave himself up for us.⁹³

1054 In the Eucharist, Catholic married couples meet the one who is the source of their
1055 marriage. "In this sacrifice of the new and eternal covenant, Christian spouses encounter the
1056 source from which their own marriage covenant flows, is interiorly structured and continuously
1057 renewed."⁹⁴ Pope Benedict XVI explains how, in the Eucharist, the very meaning of marriage is
1058 transfigured: "the imagery of marriage between God and Israel is now realized in a way

⁹² See FC, no. 20.

⁹³ CCC, no. 1380.

⁹⁴ FC, no. 57.

1059 previously inconceivable: it had meant standing in God's presence, but now it becomes union -
1060 with God through sharing in Jesus' self-gift, sharing in his body and blood."⁹⁵

1061 Moreover, Pope Benedict points out that the sacramental mysticism he mentions is
1062 "social in character."⁹⁶ The Eucharist "makes the Church" because "those who receive the
1063 Eucharist are united more closely to Christ. Through it Christ unites them to all the faithful in
1064 one body—the Church."⁹⁷ In the Eucharist, spouses encounter the love that animates and sustains
1065 their marriage, the love of Christ for his Church. This encounter enables them to perceive that
1066 their marriage and family are not isolated units, but rather that they are to reach out in love to the
1067 broader Church and world of which they are a living part.

1068 Marriage continually sends the believing Catholic back again to the Eucharist. Here is
1069 where the gratitude that has become a life-giving habit in a marriage can be fully and completely
1070 expressed. "Eucharist," after all, means "thanksgiving." In the Eucharist one thanks God the
1071 Father for his supreme gift, the gift of his risen Son, who, in turn, bestows most fully the divine
1072 life and love of the Holy Spirit.

1073 Marriage is a school for gratitude. By celebrating the Sacrament of Marriage, "Christian
1074 spouses profess their gratitude to God for the sublime gift bestowed on them of being able to live
1075 in their married and family lives the very love of God for people and that of the Lord Jesus for
1076 the Church."⁹⁸

1077 Procreation and education, the basic and irreplaceable service of the family to society, are
1078 part of a formation in love and a formation for love that is a participation in building up the

⁹⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *God Is Love (Deus Caritas Est [DCE])* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006), no. 13.

⁹⁶ DCE, no. 14.

⁹⁷ CCC, no. 1396.

⁹⁸ FC, no. 56.

1079 Kingdom of God.⁹⁹ Just as the Church is a "sacrament . . . of communion with God and of the
1080 unity of the entire human race,"¹⁰⁰ Christian marriage and the family contribute to the unity of
1081 humanity and to humanity's communion with God.

1082 For example, since the Eucharist "commits us to the poor,"¹⁰¹ so the hospitality of
1083 Christian marriage becomes enlarged as a commitment to the "preferential option for the
1084 poor"¹⁰² by training each family member to recognize the image of God in each other, even the
1085 least. Thus, the natural virtue of marital hospitality is nourished and formed even more widely by
1086 the spouses' Eucharistic life.

1087 Their hospitality, in turn, will build up the Church, making the Church a more hospitable
1088 or homelike place¹⁰³ and thereby an even stronger witness to Christ's love in the world. Thus,
1089 "the Christian family [that] springs from marriage . . . is an image and a sharing in the
1090 partnership of love between Christ and the Church; it will show to all people Christ's living
1091 presence in the world and the authentic nature of the church."¹⁰⁴

1092 **Marriage Fulfilled in the Kingdom of God**

1093 A marriage that is truly in Christ, a marriage upon which his school of gratitude and
1094 openness has left its mark of joy and warmth, is a sign of the Kingdom that is coming. It is a
1095 blessing to the couple, to their children, and to everyone who knows them. It offers a sign of
1096 hope and a loving witness to human dignity in a world where hope often seems absent and
1097 human dignity is often degraded. It is a sign of the Kingdom because the love of Christ moves
1098 the married couple to ever greater heights of love.

⁹⁹ FC, no. 50.

¹⁰⁰ LG, no. 1.

¹⁰¹ CCC, no. 1397.

¹⁰² FC, nos. 47, 64.

¹⁰³ FC, no. 64.

¹⁰⁴ GS, no. 48.

1099 Christian married love is a preparation for eternal life. At the end of time, the love to
1100 which spouses have been called will find its completion when the entire Church is assumed into
1101 the glory of the risen Christ. Then the Church will truly be herself, for she will experience fully
1102 the self-giving love of her spouse—the Lord Jesus Christ.

1103 This is the glorious wedding supper of the Lamb, to which the Spirit and the Bride say
1104 “Come!” (Rev 19:9, 22:17). Just as Christ once proclaimed the greatness of marriage by his
1105 presence at the wedding feast in Cana, so now, at the heavenly wedding banquet, marriage and
1106 all the blessings of the Holy Spirit, given to us by the Father through Christ, his Son, will find
1107 their ultimate consummation because we will be in perfect union with God.

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A COMMITMENT TO MINISTRY

1110 In November 2004, we, as the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, made a
1111 commitment to promote, strengthen, and protect marriage. We began a National Pastoral
1112 Initiative for Marriage in order to communicate from the riches of our Catholic faith the meaning
1113 and value of marriage and to offer support and practical assistance for it to flourish both in
1114 society and in the Church.

1115 This pastoral letter extends and enriches the work of the National Pastoral Initiative for
1116 Marriage. It is a sign of our continuing commitment and of the priority we have given to
1117 marriage in the evangelizing mission of our bishops' conference. It is an expression of our
1118 esteem for the gift of married life and love that couples share so generously for the benefit of
1119 Church and society.

1120 The Church is built on a foundation of marriage and family life, which it cherishes as the
1121 school of a deeper humanity and a cradle of the civilization of love. For this reason, both Pope
1122 John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI have emphasized that pastoral ministry in service of
1123 marriage and family life should be an urgent priority for the Church.

1124 We wish to echo and reinforce that message.

1125 The vision of married life and love that we have presented in this pastoral letter is meant
1126 to be a foundation and reference point for the many works of evangelization, catechesis, pastoral
1127 care, education, and advocacy carried on in our dioceses, parishes, schools, agencies,
1128 movements, and programs.

1129 We urge a renewed commitment by the entire Catholic community to helping those
1130 called to the vocation of married life to live it faithfully, fruitfully, and joyfully.

1131 We pledge to be a marriage-building Church, drawing strength from God's grace while
1132 using creatively the gifts and resources entrusted to us.

1133 We call for a comprehensive and collaborative ministry to marriages. Because of the
1134 complexity and challenges we face in society today, our ministry must be one that

- 1135 • *Proclaims and witnesses* to the fullness of God's Revelation about the meaning
1136 and mystery of marriage
- 1137 • *Accompanies and assists* people at all stages of their journey: from the early years
1138 when young people begin to learn about committed relationships to the later years
1139 of married life, and even beyond them to grieving the loss of a spouse
- 1140 • *Invites and includes* the gifts of many, beginning with married couples themselves
1141 and welcoming also the service and witness offered by ordained ministers and by
1142 women and men in consecrated life
- 1143 • *Encourages and utilizes* many methods and approaches in order to serve
1144 individuals and couples whose circumstances in life, whose needs, and whose
1145 preparation and readiness to receive the Church's ministry can vary widely
- 1146 • *Celebrates and incorporates* the diversity of races, cultures, ethnicity, and
1147 heritage with which God enriches the world and the Church especially in our
1148 nation

1149 Finally, we acknowledge with respect and gratitude all those who are working to defend,
1150 promote, strengthen, heal, and reconcile marriages, either through church ministries or in other
1151 professions and fields of endeavor. We pledge our collaboration with all who seek to create a
1152 vibrant culture of marriage rooted in God's plan for the good of humanity.

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