

In this Sunday's gospel for the 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Jesus outlines the essence of his teaching on marriage.

Jesus Himself is divine, but for his own teaching he references the Book of Genesis which is itself divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit. The inspired author of Genesis has already clarified the divine natural law - the essential nature of things - concerning marriage. Jesus reiterates it and makes it his own:

"... from the beginning of creation God made them male and female. This is why a man must leave father and mother, and the two become one body. They are no longer two, therefore, but one body. So then, what God has united, man must not divide."

Following the example of the Church fathers and her ecumenical councils, Holy Church has long since used philosophical terminology to explicate the revealed truths found in Sacred Scripture. Saint Thomas Aquinas remains the Church's official exemplar of this philosophical tradition, as Saint John Paul II teaches in *Fides et Ratio*. The key term in Mother Church's explanation of her doctrine concerning marriage is that of the marriage or conjugal "**bond**".

In any valid marriage, be it contracted in the Catholic Church or otherwise, there arises the marriage bond. This bond comes into "**being**" at the time during the wedding ceremony when a man and a woman exchange "consent", i.e.

when they make their promises to be husband and wife until "death us do part". The bond dissolves at the death of one of the parties to the marriage. Of course this is not to say that there will not continue a most precious relationship between the parties through all eternity.

We presume that if there has been a wedding ceremony, and the man and woman were both free to marry at the time, that the conjugal bond exists between them. However, when a marriage fails, the Church, via the bishop of a diocese, or those he appoints and delegates to judge these cases, may decide that in particular cases a marriage is declared "null". This means the Church judges that the marital bond never existed in this particular case and both parties to the wedding are free to marry again. I do not have the space here to begin outlining the "grounds" for marriage nullity, but would be happy to do so elsewhere. At the same time I am available to assist anyone who would like to pursue a review of a marriage that has broken down, particularly if they wish to remarry. In various circumstances, the Church's law also provides for the legitimate separation of the spouses while the marriage bond remains. In a valid marriage between two baptised persons the marriage bond is dissolved only by the death of one of the spouses.

Of course the Church's fervent hope is that all marriages are valid and flourish into old age. Certainly we presume that all marriages are valid unless the contrary has been actually proven by a formal ecclesiastical process. This process never results in divorce, but in a declaration of nullity, or not, as the case may be. To say that a person "got an annulment" is not helpful because it implies that the Church has somehow removed something that previously existed. A declaration of nullity is an ecclesiastical judgement that the conjugal bond never came into existence between a couple in a particular case.

All of this is an illustration of the Catholic tradition of the *via negativa* whereby we clarify Catholic doctrine by saying what it is not! The several grounds for marriage nullity help to highlight what marriage actually is. In both the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Code of Canon Law, Saint Pope John Paul II begins by addressing, not just Catholics but the whole world on the essential nature of any valid marriage, whether the wedding takes place in the Catholic Church or not!

In the code, which he promulgated in 1983, he teaches in canon 1055:

“The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life and which is ordered by its nature to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring, has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament between the baptized.” Saint John Paul II then goes on to specifically address Catholic marriages.

As indicated in the Church’s Rite of Matrimony, the norm for Catholic marriages is that they are sacramental. The sacrament of matrimony strengthens the bond which exists in any valid marriage be it Catholic or otherwise. However, if the foundations of a good natural marriage are not present, a Catholic wedding ceremony, be it within the context of a nuptial Mass or not, will not remedy the natural deficiencies. As the classic Catholic dictum runs: “Grace builds on nature”. We say in the Church that the Sacrament of Matrimony, administered by the bride and groom to each other in a valid marriage when both are baptised, sanctifies the marriage bond and strengthens it.

However, not all valid Catholic marriages are sacramental. If a Catholic person, with the necessary dispensation from his or her bishop, marries an unbaptised person the marriage is still a valid Catholic marriage, albeit not a sacramental marriage. This is because in the Latin Catholic Church, it is not the priest or deacon presiding at the wedding who “marries” the couple. It is the parties themselves, the man and the woman who mutually administer the sacrament of matrimony to each other when they exchange their consent to marriage. It is not possible for an unbaptised person to administer the sacrament of matrimony: therefore it is not possible that the marriage be sacramental if one of the parties to the marriage is unbaptised.

A married Opus Dei male friend of mine once said to me when we were discussing my state of life and his: “John, the only difference between you and me is one woman!” And so it seems to me that to enter marriage is to do something both heroic and wonderful. The married way of life obviously involves a significant degree of losing one’s life for one’s spouse in order to save one’s life (and the marriage!). For married people it is their married life that does indeed provide the context for their human and spiritual growth, for their salvation in fact. Apart from these principal benefits, marriage has the truly wonderful consolation of having a “partner in the whole of life for the whole of life”. This partnership is unique across the whole spectrum of human relationships as is the marital bond on which it is founded. The marriage bond is something that truly exists. In terms of Aristotle’s ten categories of existence or being it finds itself in the fourth category - that of a “relation”. As mentioned above, the bond remains in existence until one of

the parties dies. In some categories of marriage, the bond can be dissolved while both parties are still alive when the relevant authority in the Church invokes either the Pauline or the Petrine privilege. These judgements are something qualitatively different from a judgement of marriage nullity.

We haven't yet begun to discuss the wonder of a married couple bringing children into their family, into the world and into the Church. This too is a condition of the validity of any marriage - that the husband and wife are open to the procreation of children and their proper upbringing. The condition is clearly not that a couple actually have children, but that they are open to having children. A marriage with no issue, wherein the spouses have remained open to having children, is in no wise any less valid or holy.

Both the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Code of Canon Law refer to the "ends of marriage". Paragraph 2363 of the Catechism teaches that, "The spouses' union achieves the twofold end of marriage: the good of the spouses themselves and the transmission of life. These two meanings or values of marriage cannot be separated without altering the couple's spiritual life and compromising the goods of marriage and the future of the family. The conjugal love of man and woman thus stands under the twofold obligation of fidelity and fecundity."

I would strongly encourage you to "Google" the Catechism of the Catholic Church, click on marriage in the index, and peruse the section which appears under the heading "The love of Husband and Wife", beginning with paragraph number 2360 of the Catechism. This is richly rewarding reading for all of us.