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The sacrament of marriage

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Last week's article "The value of marriage" emphasised that marriage involved the free choice of partners, and its success depended on the guidance of God who created the institution. This week we focus on Marriage, the Sacrament, which further emphasises that marriage is not a human instrument but rather God's instrument, which requires special graces to serve his purpose.

Many view marriage as the next stage after finding the right person and falling in love. Seldom when marriage is considered, is there any thought given to God's purpose for us, God's purpose for bringing man and woman together or God's ultimate purpose for marriage. The faith of the Catholic Church teaches that it is God's plan that man and woman should complete each other and draw strength from each other and contribute to one another's spiritual growth.

This is achieved through marriage where the minds, hearts and bodies of a man and woman are joined together to bring about a richer and new unity. The following paragraph from the *Compendium* highlights this spiritual aspect of marriage, likening God's love for humankind as evidenced by the sacrifice of his son Jesus Christ whose love for the Church is to be reflected in love between a man and a woman.

"By Christ's institution, the baptised live the inherent human reality of marriage in the supernatural form of a sacrament, a sign and instrument of grace. The theme of the marriage covenant, as the meaningful expression of the communion of love between God and men and as the symbolic key to understanding the different stages of the great covenant between God and his people, is found throughout salvation history (*Familiaris Consortio*).

At the centre of the revelation of the divine plan of love is the gift that God makes to humanity in his Son, Jesus Christ, "the Bridegroom who loves and gives himself as the Saviour of humanity, uniting it to himself as his body. He reveals the original truth of marriage, the truth of the 'beginning' (cf Gen 2:24; Mt 19:5), and, freeing man from his hardness of heart, he makes man capable of realising this truth in its entirety (*Familiaris Consortio*)."

It is in the spousal love of Christ for the Church, which shows its fullness in the offering made on the cross that the sacramentality of marriage originates. The grace of this sacrament conforms the love of the spouses to the love of Christ for the Church. Marriage, as a sacrament, is a covenant in love between a man and a woman (*Gaudium et Spes*)."

Many persons get married to serve their own purpose and not God's purpose, which is to grow in love and to rear, educate and provide moral training for future generations. For many, marriage is not seen as a vocation, on which spouses' salvation and that of their children depend.

“The sacrament of marriage takes up the human reality of conjugal love in all its implications and “gives to Christian couples and parents a power and a commitment to live their vocation as lay people and therefore to ‘seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God’ (*Gaudium et Spes*)”.

Intimately united to the Church by virtue of the sacrament that makes it a “domestic Church” or a “little Church,” the Christian family is called therefore “to be a sign of unity for the world and in this way to exercise its prophetic role by bearing witness to the Kingdom and peace of Christ, towards which the whole world is journeying (*Familiaris Consortio*).”

The grace of marriage is supposed to perfect the natural love between husband and wife and this is expected to bring them to a supernatural level which goes beyond mental and physical compatibility. It must be noted that, no matter how compatible a couple is, the vocation of living together for years and raising children will bring upon it stresses.

A husband or wife may be discouraged by domestic and other problems, they may at times upset each other. It is here that the grace of the sacrament of marriage enables them to help one another grow in spite of each other’s faults and weaknesses. The key to experiencing this is through the couple’s cooperation to give God a chance to show what he can do.

“Conjugal charity, which flows from the very charity of Christ, offered through the sacrament, makes Christian spouses witnesses to a new social consciousness inspired by the Gospel and the Paschal Mystery. The natural dimension of their love is constantly purified, strengthened and elevated by sacramental grace.

In this manner, besides offering each other mutual help on the path to holiness, Christian spouses become a sign and an instrument of Christ’s love in the world. By their very lives they are called to bear witness to and proclaim the religious meaning of marriage, which modern society has ever greater difficulty recognising, especially as it accepts relativistic perspectives of the natural foundation itself of the institution of marriage.”

How many of us honestly view marriage this way? For those of us who are married, do our marriages reflect these principles? For those of us who are preparing to get married, this is good food for thought.

Next week’s topic: “The Social Subjectivity of the Family”.