

Marriage Guidelines

Introduction

A commitment in any relationship is a challenging task. But to surrender oneself to the intimacy and the constant day-to-day demands of married life is perhaps one of the greatest opportunities for fulfilment and growth that a person can face. Over the centuries of Christian reflection, the Church has come to see marriage as a sign of unconditional love Christ has for us, and a sign of the unity in which we as Christians are called to live.

What is special about Marriage?

When a couple marry in the Catholic Church, the ceremony speaks of love, permanent commitment, fidelity, openness to children, and perseverance in good times and bad. It is these qualities which make marriage a unique relationship. There is no other human relationship which requires so total a commitment between two people.

In fact, marriage is more than a relationship. It is a union, a communion, between husband and wife. Their life together is now very different from their lives as two separate individuals. Once married, everything they do is done with the other in mind. They do not lose their individual identity, but that identity is enriched by sharing life with the other partner. Their marriage holds out an extraordinary challenge: to become so completely united that everything they do, big or small, is geared towards strengthening and deepening their union. There is no development unless both develop, no happiness unless both are happy. And so their communion grows through their years together. It can never remain static.

Day by day husband and wife seek a greater knowledge and understanding of one another. They celebrate and deepen their communion through the most intimate form of communication possible between two people: through sexual intimacy. In the union of sexual intercourse, the couple are also opened to the possibility of children. As the fruit of their love, children expand the marital circle of love and challenge it to achieve new depths.

The Sacredness of Marriage

If this is the ideal to be sought, it can be seen that marriage is different from other human relationships. There is something sacred about it. That it is possible for a couple to love each other in this way is a gift from God. In their acceptance of this

gift, a couple not only experience a communion with each other, they experience a sustaining love which is bigger than their own individual efforts. They are drawn into a communion with God who assists and empowers them in their efforts to strengthen and deepen their married life.

For the baptised there is an even more profound dimension to this sacredness. For the baptised, marriage is a sacrament. A sacrament is a sign. This loving communion that exists between a husband and wife is the clearest sign and indication available of the extent to which God loves the human family. That's why the scriptures use so many marital images to describe God's relationship between God and God's people. Just as married love is a commitment to grow in intimacy, to permanence and to fidelity in good times and in bad, so God's love for us is all these things.

Yet, our understanding of marriage as a sacrament goes even further than this. Not only do a couple mirror or reflect God's love, they embody the presence of Christ in a unique way. They are tangible signs of what it means to be a Christian. In short, the sacrament of marriage reveals to us the intimate relationship we share with Jesus. We are his beloved.

In St Paul's letter to the Christian community at Ephesus, he urges husbands and wives (in terms appropriate to his day) to mutually surrender to one another in love. He then continues:

For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church. (Ephesians 5.31-32)

So, when a couple marries in the Catholic Church, they are not simply saying 'yes' to each other. They are saying 'yes' to the Christian community:

'Yes, we commit ourselves to being a sign of Christ's love to you'.

'Yes, we will strive to love one another so totally and unconditionally that you will see in us the love Jesus has for you.'

'Yes, we will love each other forever, because that is the way Christ has promised to love his Church and, by the witness of our lives, we will make his extraordinary promise believable.'

In turn, the community of faith offers its support to the couple as they journey through life. It also undertakes a responsibility, not just to support and nurture marital vocations, but to call its couples to ever-greater heights of faith and love.

Preparation for Marriage

The Church believes in the sacredness of marriage and urges couples to prepare well for this special day and married life. The aims of marriage preparation courses are several: to support you in recognizing the need for good communication and constant love; to help you to examine the level of commitment that is required for married life; to assist you in understanding the Church's teaching on the sacrament of marriage and the vocation to married life; and to explain the Church's teaching on

sexual morality. In addition, the course provides an opportunity to prepare for your marriage. ceremony.

Look before you leap!

For anyone thinking of marriage, it is suggested that you ask some questions before you say "I do."

"Look before you leap" is an old saying but it is a wise one. Selecting the right partner is one of life's most important decisions. It is a choice which requires the utmost care. These are some areas to consider before you say, "I do."

Is my partner emotionally stable and mature?

A lack of stability and maturity is the most common cause of failed marriages.

Immaturity has many guises. Some have a poor capacity to cope with frustration or the postponement of immediate pleasure. Others allow apprehension to dominate their lives. They see the world as a threatening place; they feel that all the world is against them. Some are very indecisive, unable to make up their own minds and very reliant on the opinion of others. Some hunger for affection. No amount of affirmation is enough for them. They are the people who find it difficult to believe that they are lovable. They almost apologise for their existence. Some others try to hide their inadequacy relying on drugs or alcohol. Finally there are the cool, reserved types. They keep everyone at an arm's length and are unable to cope with intimacy and affection.

All these types are immature people. Beware of making a life with any one of them. It is a mistake to believe that you will be able to "rescue" or "convert" such people. Unless the person does some serious work on these deficiencies before marriage, think twice before you say "I do." Immature tendencies tend to persist through life.

Do we respect each other?

A modern Christian marriage is built on love and mutuality. Each partner is to be respected as an equal. Marriage cannot be truly successful if one partner dominates the other or treats him or her as an inferior.

Does my partner exhibit personal integrity?

Courtship should give you ample opportunity to assess one another's character. Ask yourself, how honest? how ethical? how respectful of others is my partner? If the answer is "not very", be on your guard. Very few partners become more ethical once they are married. Dishonesty expressed in other settings is usually carried over

into relationships. The more promiscuous and dishonest a person is before marriage the more likely they are to be unfaithful after marriage.

Do I know the family background?

Family of origin has shaped your partner's life. Get to know your partner's family. You will learn a great deal by observing how they behave and how they treat one another.

Are we spiritually compatible?

In the end, mutuality in marriage is a question of spirituality. Shared values, life experience, culture help to strengthen marriages. Faith is the keystone of a Christian marriage. Very few marriages survive as Christian if faith is not present, shared and constantly developed.

How do family and friends see the relationship?

If those who know and love you best approve of your decision to marry, chances are that the relationship will work out well. If the wise counsel of family and friends is against marrying, you should be concerned that you are about to make a big mistake.

Do we know one another well enough?

It takes time to truly know a person and to form a mature judgement about them. There is a lot of evidence to suggest that people who marry before they are twenty years old are very likely to break up. Before you say "I do" you need to be sure. If you are not sure, take some more time. Don't rush into marriage.

Sustaining Marriage

While you celebrate the sacrament of marriage in a very special way on your wedding day, the sacrament of marriage is a source of grace, of God's presence and blessing, every day of your marriage.

This does not mean that there are not times that can be very difficult. Some parishes and dioceses may have supports for married couples and families. Some organisations or movements have as their particular focus the support of married couples.