

“Marriage based on exclusive and definitive love becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people and vice versa. God’s way of loving becomes the measure of human love.”

Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, #11

God will not leave us: How Lifelong Married Love Shows God to the World

Don’t we all long for someone to love us without reserve? To be there always? We know by faith that God loves us with that kind of faithful love. But that is too much to expect from another human being.¹

Isn’t it?

God knows how hard faithful love can be for us. The Church understands, too. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* acknowledges, “It can seem difficult, even impossible, to bind oneself for life to another human being.”¹

The good news is that marriage between a baptized man and woman involves more than human love; it is also a sacrament (it communicates God’s grace). God wants to give us the grace to live faithful love.

The Good News

The *Catechism* continues, “This makes it all the more important to proclaim the Good News that God loves us with a definitive and irrevocable love, that **married couples share in this love**, that it supports and sustains them, and that **by their own faithfulness they can be witnesses to God’s faithful love.**”

What a miracle! The sacrament of marriage means that the husband



and wife are given the grace to love one another for life, not simply with their own love but **with God’s own love!**

In fact, St. Paul tells us, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the Church” (Ephesians 5:31-32).

What is St. Paul talking about? Good news: on the Cross, the Church comes forth from the wounded side of Christ, like Eve came from the side of Adam in the Garden. The Church

is Christ’s Body, because Christ and the Church are one flesh. Christ has married the Church by loving all of humanity faithfully until death on the Cross. This is the great love story of history: God so loves the world that he gave his only Son (John 3:16).

If Christ and the Church are married, what does this tell us about Christian marriage?

Well, St. Paul gives us a hint: “So also husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. 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” (Ephesians 5:28-29).

In other words, **husbands are called to love their wives as Christ loves the Church.** Christ will not leave his Church! God will not leave his people. Only in the sacrament of marriage can we human beings show such love. But with the “yes” of marriage, we enter into the faithfulness of Christ—who gives himself away completely, in total self-giving love, on the Cross and in the Eucharist.

Even the self-giving love of a non-sacramental marriage causes humans to flourish. For example, social science provides evidence that children thrive in this setting. The presence of a child’s biological father and mother in a low-conflict marriage leads to optimal outcomes for children on many different measures.

Troubled Marriages

But what about troubled marriages? Does the Church have no sympathy for couples in those situations?

The United States Catholic bishops have repeatedly emphasized that **the Church is for your marriage.** In fact, they initiated a website, www.foryourmarriage.org, to provide resources and information. There are many programs available to help improve marriages, such as Worldwide Marriage Encounter (www.wwme.org). WWME has many evening and day-long programs, in addition to their weekend retreats; visit www.MassCatholicMarriage.org for more information. In addition, **Retrouvaille** helps couples in troubled marriages (www.retrouvaille.org).

In fact, there is good cause for hope: 64% of adults who said they were unhappy in their marriage, but remained in it, reported five years later that they were happy.²

“God, who is love and who created man and woman for love, has called them to love. By creating man and woman he called them to an intimate communion of life and love in Marriage. “So they are no longer two but one flesh.”

(Mt 19:6). *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, # 337

What happens if the marriage ends in **divorce**? People in this situation need the Church’s pastoral care and are gently invited to come to her. Sometimes it is necessary for spouses to separate, and many spouses are abandoned through no-fault divorce. But choosing divorce is contrary to the reality of marriage. “The Church does not recognize a civil divorce because the State cannot dissolve what is indissoluble” (www.foryourmarriage.org). But it is important to know that “divorced Catholics in **good standing with the Church**, who have not remarried or who have remarried following an annulment, may receive the sacraments,” including Holy Communion.

“Oh, **annulment**,” you may be thinking. “That’s just another name

for a ‘Catholic divorce.’” This is a misunderstanding. What a divorce tries to do is to take two married people and make them unmarried (which is in fact impossible). A marriage either occurs at a wedding, or it doesn’t (for various reasons). An annulment is the judgment that the marriage didn’t exist in the first place.

A final thing may be noted about the indissolubility of marriage: even the grave betrayal of adultery does not dissolve the marital bond. Marriage images God’s love for humanity: no matter how many times we have betrayed Him through sin, He seeks us out to forgive us—so that God and humanity can be joined at the wedding feast of the Lamb for a love that never ends. This is the truth of every marriage. ☪

¹*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1648. ²<http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/divorce.shtml>, citing Linda J. Waite, et al, *Does Divorce Make People Happy? Findings from a Study of Unhappy Marriages* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2002).

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