

Marriage

By Jim Seghers

The moral climate in the United States is so injurious to marriages that we have the shameful distinction of having the highest divorce rate in the world. Tragically, American Catholics are not immune from this evil. Catholics in the U.S. have the highest divorce rate among Catholics anywhere in the world.

To grasp the magnitude of the current problem, consider the following disturbing statistics.¹

- Only 25%, one in four of all marriages endures and is happy. This does not indicate that 75% of all marriages end in a divorce, but it affirms that the combination of divorced marriages plus unhappy marriages that do not end in a divorce come to 75%. That is a heartbreaking figure!
- In 15% of all marriages, at least one person has been married three or more times.
- 25% of all first marriages fail within five years.
33% fail within 10 years.
43% fail within 15 years.
- Three-fourths of all Americans have been directly impacted by divorce – either the divorce of their parents or their own.

The solution to this awful problem for a Christian lies in a two-part process: first, understanding the meaning of marriage as intended by God and, second, making the decision to faithfully live it. This essay will focus on the meaning of marriage. A future *Reflections* will discuss the practical implementation of these principles.

In The Beginning

Marriage is no mere human construct, like a contract, in which the parties establish any deal points that meet their objectives. This is the first principle of the Christian understanding of marriage. Men create contracts to facilitate the exchange of *things*. The covenant of marriage was created by God to govern an exchange of *persons*. Thus we read in Genesis that at the dawn of civilization:

“God created man in his own image in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply’” (Gen 1:27-28).

God reiterated his command “to be fruitful and multiply” to Noah and his three sons after the flood (Gen 9:1).

In the recapitulation account in Chapter two of Genesis, God is depicted as a master potter when forming Adam (Gen 2:7) and a master architect in creating Eve (Gen 2:18-22). The narrative ends with this admonition:

“Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become *one flesh* (Gen 2:24).

¹ Warren, *Date or Soul Mate*, pp. 175-176.

Jesus cited this passage while confirming the indissolubility of marriage to the Pharisees (Mk 10:9). He ended his affirmation with the statement:

“What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.”

When God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden, he commanded Adam, “to till and keep it” (Gen 2:15) – literally “to work” and “to guard.” The *work* referred to is a special kind of work, namely, *worship*. Adam was destined to be a priest leading his family to God. His failure as a “guard” is exposed in Chapter three, when an adulterous intruder entered the garden to seduce Eve and, then, Adam into sin. These first parents did not take a bite from an apple, but, instead, swallowed a dose of Satan’s poisonous pride by attempting to supplant their entire dependence on God. They wanted to be like God making their own rules about what is good or evil. Instead, their sinfulness ruptured all their relationships.

When sin made them aware of their estrangement from God, the first couple hid from the one who created them out of love and for love (Gen 3:8). They experienced shame for the first time because they now looked at each other as an object to be used rather than as a person to be cherished (Gen 3:7). When God confronted them with their disobedience, they rationalized their behavior by engaging in the blame game (Gen 3:12-13). Sadly, the marriage covenant of love and life that God built into their wedded union was given a deep wound that has persisted into the twenty-first century.

Adam, the first man and the biological father of the human race, now had to contend with an internal rebellion as his emotions and appetites were no longer in perfect conformity with his intellect and will. Selfishness would now be a part of man’s nature opposing the self-sacrificing love that was God’s original plan for marriage and the human family. Material creation would now resist man’s efforts to feed and support his family (Gen 3:17-19). Eve and her daughters would experience “pain in child bearing” (Gen 3:16), but her great trial was that “your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen 3:16). Countless women since Eve have longed for their husband’s heart, but endured a tyrant instead.

Christian Marriage: The Remedy

At the marriage at Cana in Galilee, Jesus performed his first miracle, which was the first sign to his disciples of his divine mission to restore mankind from its fallen state. On this joyous occasion Jesus imparted a special blessing on the fortunate newlyweds that sanctified and consecrated their nuptial union. This was reminiscent of God’s blessing of Adam and Eve at the time of their wedded union. In blessing this couple, Jesus embraced all future Christian marriages, making available with divine largesse his superabundant graces to all spouses in the sacrament of matrimony.²

The connection between Christ’s blessings and the commitment of the newlyweds to each other is wonderfully expressed in the sacred marriage rite. First, the blessing of their rings ratifies their mutual consent, which is the very essence of their unconditional commitment

² *Dear Newlyweds*, Pope Pius XII, May 3, 1939, p. 6.

before God. Their rings symbolize their vow of complete and unalterable fidelity. Secondly, Jesus, the heavenly Bridegroom, together with his spouse the Church, prays for the couple so they will receive his strength that will support them in carrying out the grave responsibilities they have just assumed. Christ's blessing obtains for the newlyweds the divine assistance necessary to sanctify their married life so they can faithfully carry out the obligations of a faithful conjugal life.

In the sacrament of marriage, "God has become its Guarantor, elevating Christian marriage to a permanent symbol of the indissoluble union of Christ and His Church, so that we can declare that the Christian family, if it be truly and practically Christian, has a guarantee of holiness."³ In this marvelous sacrament God constituted the spouses as its ministers. They are instruments in his hand because Christ is the principal cause of each of his sacraments. The couple acts as the brush in the hand of the master artist. To the degree they allow Christ to guide their future, he will paint a masterpiece on the canvass of their married life.

Spouses also act as God's instruments in forming the bodies of their children. God alone, of course, can create souls and he alone can produce grace. Nevertheless he condescended to make use of men and women to draw souls from nothingness to life. The extravagant embrace of God's infinite love ardently desires to unite spouses with each other and with Him for the purpose of peopling heaven. His plan is to make parents and their children partakers in his life of eternal happiness. Therefore, their "one flesh" union becomes "a cradle for the gifts of God's omnipotence"⁴

In the holy and beautiful union of marriage, the couple has the faculty to transmit life in the natural order and to become occasions for the transmission of supernatural life in the spiritual order. Accompanying this awesome dignity is the great responsibility to protect natural life and safeguard supernatural life. The gift of Christian marriage lays before couples a road to holiness and salvation. The power emanating from Christ makes couples instruments of divine providence as they cooperate with the creative and sanctifying work of the Most Blessed Trinity.

Christian marriage is breathtakingly beautiful. Our faith teaches that this is no mere idealistic fantasy that is unattainable in the real world, although the statistics quoted earlier certainly gives any thoughtful person reasons to pause, reflect and even question. It is obvious that something radically goes wrong between the attainable Christian ideal of marriage and its practical execution, but that will be a discussion for another time.

³ *Dear Newlyweds*, Pope Pius XII, July 12, 1939, p. 9; See also: Eph 5:21-33.

⁴ *Dear Newlyweds*, Pope Pius XII, March 5, 1941, p. 14.