

Fit for Mission? Marriage

Preparation Plus Course

Couple's Book

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With the collaboration of the Diocese of Lancaster's Marriage
and Family Life Commission

Message to Couples



This beautiful and moving meditation on the sacrament of marriage was until 1969 read out to every Catholic couple in the United States just before they pronounced their wedding vows. I recommend that you reflect on its meaning and pray it together in the months leading up to your marriage.

Meditation on Marriage

‘As you know, you are about to enter into a union which is most sacred and most serious, a union which was established by God himself. By it he gave man a share in the greatest work of creation, the work of the continuation of the human race. And in this way he sanctified human love and enabled man and woman to help each other live as children of God, by sharing a common life under his fatherly care.

Because God himself is thus its author, marriage is of its very nature a holy institution, requiring of those who enter into it a complete and unreserved giving of self. But Christ our Lord added to the holiness of marriage an even deeper meaning and a higher beauty. He referred to the love of marriage to describe his own love for his Church, that is, for the people of God whom he redeemed by his own blood. And so he gave to Christians a new vision of what married life ought to be, a life of self-sacrificing love like his own. It is for this reason that his apostle, St Paul, clearly states that marriage is now and for all times to be considered a great mystery, intimately bound up with the supernatural union of Christ and the Church, which union is also to be its pattern.

The union is most serious, because it will bind you together for life in a relationship so close and so intimate that it will profoundly influence your whole future. That future, with its hopes and disappointments, its successes and its failures, its pleasures and its pains, its joys and its sorrows, is hidden from your eyes. You know that these elements are mingled in every life and are to be expected in your own. And so, not knowing what is before you, you take each other for better or worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death.

Truly, then, these words are most serious. It is a beautiful tribute to your undoubted faith in each other, that, recognizing their full import, you are nevertheless so willing and ready to pronounce them. And because these words involve such solemn obligations, it is most fitting that you rest the security of your wedded life upon the great principle of self-sacrifice. And so you begin your married life by the voluntary and complete surrender of your individual lives in the interest of that deeper and wider life which you are to have in common. Henceforth, you belong entirely to each other; you will be one in mind, one in heart, and one in affections.

And whatever sacrifices you may hereafter be required to make to preserve this common life, always make them generously. Sacrifice is usually difficult and irksome. Only love can make it easy, and perfect love can make it a joy. We are willing to give in proportion as we love. And when love is perfect, the sacrifice is complete. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son and the Son so loved us that he gave himself for our salvation. “Greater love than this no one has, that one lay down his life for his friends.”

No greater blessing can come to your married life than pure conjugal love, loyal and true to the end. May, then, this love with which you join your hands and hearts today never fail, but grow deeper and stronger as the years go on. And if true love and the unselfish spirit of perfect sacrifice guide your every action, you can expect the greatest measure of earthly happiness that may be allotted to man in this vale of tears. The rest is in the hands of God. Nor will God be wanting to your needs; he will pledge you the life-long support of his graces in the holy sacrament which you are now going to receive.’

Reflection

Consider two important ideas from this meditation on marriage:

‘...a union which was established by God Himself... Because God Himself is thus its author, marriage is of its very nature a holy institution...’ You may have heard of the phrase, ‘marriages are made in heaven’. This expresses the belief that not only does the institution of marriage originate in the eternal will of God, but that your sacramental marriage as a couple was envisaged by God from the very beginning of creation. Just as I was called by God to love and serve His Church as a bishop, God has called you to love and serve your family and His Church through your marriage.

‘And so he [Jesus] gave to Christians a new vision of what married life ought to be, a life of self-sacrificing love like His own’. The difference between your marriage and a ‘civil’ or registry office wedding is that it is a sacrament. From the moment you make your vows together before the Church you will both participate in a special way in the love Jesus has for the people of God. When you love in a way that is self-forgetful, and self-sacrificing, you make Christ’s love visible to each other, to your family and the family of the Church. Your calling is to remind us all what Christ’s love is really all about. Be confident that this grace will accompany you both as with all baptised couples who love each other and practice their faith.

I leave you with one final thought – my hope for you both is that as the years pass by, you will realise the truth of the words of this meditation in the day-to-day living of your marriage. It is a marvellous thing to be able to say together, ‘Yes, we know the truth of these words, an inexhaustible truth that draws us ever closer together in Christ.’

✙ *Patrick O’Donoghue, Bishop of Lancaster*

Overview



AIM OF THE PROGRAMME:

To prepare you to receive the Sacrament of Marriage

SESSION 1

Two become one

SESSION 2

Love is...?

SESSION 3

Respect the differences

SESSION 4

God's body talk

SESSION 5

Jesus' helping hand

SESSION 6

Loving each other in Christ

Welcome to the Marriage Preparation Plus Course

This overview is designed to introduce you to what you can expect over the next few weeks.

There are 6 sessions in the programme, as shown in the panel down the side. For each session you have a Session Summary for Couples.

The Session Summary gives:

- the aims and objectives for each session;
- the key features of the session to act as a memory jogger of what the session covered, and
- other material relevant to the session.

The sessions all contain some formal input time and some discussion time and activities. The Presenters will share some of their own experiences with you and you may like to share ideas with the group but you will not have to do anything you are uncomfortable with. Discussions are confidential to the group.

If there are any areas covered on the course that you would like to know more about, the Presenters can help with your questions and give you a Reading List or source of material for the topics. Scripture references are from the Revised Standard Version (Catholic Edition).

We hope that you enjoy the course.



Session 1

Two become one

AIM

To introduce the course and make connections between your experience of love and the Church's teaching on love

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

- Describe the connection between your love and the God of love
- Explain God's meaning and purpose for marriage
- Discuss the opportunities and challenges of marriage
- Start to plan how to deepen your love for each other

'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.'
(1 John 4:7-8)

Since God created him, man and woman, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man. It is good, very good, in the Creator's eyes. And this love which God blesses is intended to be fruitful and to be realised in the common work of watching over creation: "And God blessed them and God said to them: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.'"

Catechism of the Catholic Church, CCC1604

Activity: Getting to know each other

We're all here because we know that love is at the heart of Christianity. Jesus commanded us to love God and to love each other. The love that you share now as couples thinking about marriage, and that you will share as husbands and wives is a special expression of this love. This is why married love has its own sacrament. Talk about the following questions in your couples (say for 5 minutes), then we'll come together to share.

1. Where did you first meet?
2. When did you know you were in love?
3. What does being in love feel like?
4. How have you changed each other's lives?
5. How do you know the other person loves you?



Your love as baptised Christians in all its aspects – emotional, sexual and spiritual – is a special participation in God's love

Activity: Whoever loves knows God

As a couple discuss the question, ‘What strikes you about this passage?’ for the passage(s) you have been allocated. (Suggest 5 minutes). We’ll then come together to share.

What strikes you about this passage?

(A) The LORD says: Sing for joy O heavens, and exult O earth; break forth O mountains into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people [Israel], and will have compassion on his suffering ones. But Israel said, “The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me”. Can a woman forget her baby at the breast; feel no pity for the child she has borne? Even if these were to forget, I shall not forget you. Look, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands. (Isaiah 49:13-16)

(B) The LORD says: Therefore, I will now attract her [Israel], and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her... On that day, says the Lord, you will call me, “My husband”... And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord. (Hosea 2: 14-20)

(C) The LORD says: I have loved you [Israel] with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers... Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. (Jeremiah 31: 3, 13)

(D) The LORD says: You [Israel] grew up and became tall and arrived at full womanhood; your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare. I passed by you again and looked on you; you were at the age for love. I spread the edge of my cloak over you and covered your nakedness: I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant [marriage] with you, says the Lord God, and you became mine... I clothed you with embroidered cloth and with sandals of fine leather; I bound you in fine linen and covered you with rich fabric... You grew exceedingly beautiful, fit to be a queen. (Ezekiel 16: 7-13)

Lord God, the source of all love, your loving plan has brought us together.

As we prepare for the sacrament of marriage, strengthen our hearts, so that we will keep faith with each other, please you in all things, and so come to the happiness of our wedding day. Amen.

Activity: What is marriage?

Read the statements below and decide as a couple whether or not you agree with them and why. (Suggest 8 minutes). We will then discuss the questions as a group.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Depends	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Marriage should be about total mutual self-giving – this is best expressed through sexual love.					
2. If a couple's relationship has irretrievably broken down, and it is impossible for them to live together, it is OK for them to separate.					
3. If both partners agree, it is permissible for a couple to use pornography to spice up their sex lives.					
4. It is OK to get married and agree to only have two children.					



God loves Israel with a passion! He expresses His love in terms of total commitment, He will be totally faithful and expects Israel to be totally faithful in return, and belong to him. God isn't afraid to express his love for humanity in erotic terms. The Bible is clear that sexual attraction and feelings are good and an important part of love between a husband and wife.

Passages from the Old Testament, and others in the New Testament, have led the Church to understand that the sacrament of

marriage, and its unique expression through sexual love, is an image, a sacramental sign, of two essential expressions of God's love:

- The self-giving love of the inner life of the Holy Trinity.
- The total self-giving, unbreakable, faithful love between Jesus and the Church, the Bridegroom and his Bride.

There are four essential qualities of Christian marriage:

1. **Personal unity.** Sexual love is essential for the wellbeing of the marriage. Through sexual love husband and wife 'speak' the language of total self-gift, through which they give themselves to each other physically, psychologically, personally and spiritually.
2. **Indissolubility.** When a man and woman give consent during the marriage ceremony to mutually give themselves to each other, they form a bond that is sealed by God himself. When the words of self-giving are consummated by the sexual act of self-giving, the marriage can never be dissolved. The husband and wife enjoy a bond that can be described as forming 'one heart and soul'. Therefore marriage is indissoluble.
3. **Faithfulness or fidelity.** When you give yourself totally in sexual love to your husband or wife and accept the gift of the other, there is a body language of total trust, total commitment and a promise of faithfulness. By its nature, sexual love requires that it is exclusive to marriage.
4. **Openness to fertility.** If a couple get married but have no intention of having children **there is no marriage. A principal / One of the principal/ the basic purpose of sexual love is the procreation of children, and the creation of a loving and stable family for** their wellbeing and education. If a couple intend to have children, but due to infertility cannot conceive children, the intention is enough to make the marriage as real and true as one that has children.

Action Planning

It is important that these sessions are not just conversations, but lead to real actions.

Love is a verb - it is something that we have to DO in order for it to flourish. As a couple consider what you will do differently as a result of this session.

STOP: Is there anything you should stop doing?

START: What will you start doing?

CONTINUE: What are the things you should continue doing – or do even more of?



Session 2

Love is...?

AIM

To deepen your understanding of love and how to increase your love

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

- State the Christian understanding of love
- Discuss the opportunities and challenges of marriage
- Accept the benefits to marriage of leading a virtuous life
- Describe how the deadly sins endanger marriage
- Apply practical strategies for leading a virtuous life

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away... So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

(1 Corinthians 13:1-8,13)



"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

(John 3:16)

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

(John 15:12-13)

Activity: How will being married be different?

Being married will bring about differences in your life. Here are some things which others have said about the difference marriage makes. Take some time to think about which apply to you. (Say 10 mins) Are there any you would like to discuss further? Are there any differences you would add?

- It is great to share everything: our house, our daily lives, ourselves.
- It is wonderful to have that commitment both ways! Till death do us part.
- It's a relief to be able to share everything about myself with someone I completely trust.
- At last we'll be able to fully express our sexual love and desire for each other.
- I'll be able to share my personal relationship with God with someone else.
- Standing together as wife and husband before the Altar of God is going to be very special.
- When I'm married I'll know what my place is in God's plan for my life.
- It provides the right environment for bringing up our children.
- Other people think of us and treat us differently as a married couple.
- The grace that God gives through marriage helps us to stay together through the difficult times.
- It's the best way to express our love for each other.
- Having the blessing of the Church and all our friends and family on our love is very powerful.

The Greeks had four words for four different types of love – affection, friendship, erotic love and self-giving love. [Add the greek words in, why not ??]

Affection cherishes and appreciates the uniqueness of the other, makes allowances for the irritating things they do and makes the other feel safe and wanted.

Friendship is a non-sexual type of love, sharing and caring for someone on a deeply personal level.

Erotic love, including the sexual act, is meaningful on a personal level; it makes both feel valued, appreciated, respected and recognized as a person.

Self-giving love sacrifices your own needs or happiness for the needs and happiness of the other.

Activity: What is Love?

Together as a couple, consider the following examples of love and then answer this question: Which description(s) best describe love and why do you think so? (Suggest 10 minutes).

1. Mary was very fond of John. She liked the way he laughed so much at silly things, that the tears ran down his face and the way he wiggled his feet in the air and rolled around the settee. For days afterwards it brought a smile to her face remembering his uncontrolled laughing.
2. Bill really enjoyed playing tennis with Julia, because she was competitive and was helping him improve his service. Best of all, Bill enjoyed going to the pub afterwards with Julia and just talking about things.
3. Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love-making is sweeter than wine; delicate is the fragrance of your perfume, your name is an oil poured out.
4. Alice knew that Thomas got his strength to face imprisonment in the Tower from prayer and his faith. His faith gave him the courage to endure being taken from her and the children, to face death on his own. All he had to do was say a couple of words, even if he didn't mean them, and the King would let him come back to her. But Thomas wouldn't say words that were a lie and he wouldn't collaborate in an evil act that went against the good of the country and the truth of the faith handed down by the apostles. **St Thomas More was executed in London in 1535.**

Activity: The fruits of love



Love changes the way that we act. If we are filled with love then the way we behave will change. The secrets to a happy marriage are those behaviours which come from love. These are: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control and chastity. The threats to a happy marriage are those behaviours which do not come from love such as pride, avarice, lust, wrath, gluttony, envy, and sloth.

For this activity look at the descriptions on the next page and match them to the virtue or vice. If you have time you could start thinking about which virtues are the most important to you as a couple and which vices are the worse. After about 15 minutes we'll come together to discuss.

Virtues: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control and chastity.

Vices: pride, avarice, lust, wrath, gluttony, envy, and sloth.

Virtue	Description	Ranking of importance
	To act in a way you know deep down is the right thing to do.	
	A state of calmness and relaxation, where there is emotional balance and harmony.	
	The focus of your sexual desire on, and activity with, your spouse. In marriage it is the complete and lifelong mutual gift of a man and a woman.	
	Ultimately sacrifice; it is the willingness to lay down one's life for another.	
	An open and forgiving largeness of soul that is prepared to give.	
	To receive or suffer unwelcome actions whatever the source with calmness and resolve to endure come what may.	
	Personal integrity and involves the practice of saying 'no' to one's self.	
	Not weakness but quiet self-possession, control of self and responding without self-assertion and violence.	
	Not to be confused with pleasure or happiness, rather it is an inner sense that you are in the right place, doing the right thing, with the person you want to be with for the rest of your life, as God intends.	
	Keeping promises and commitments, being dependable, reliable.	
	Respectful and tender care for the needs of the other.	
	Purity of heart that protects the intimate privacy of the person with patience, decency and discretion.	
Vice	Description	Ranking
	Excessive consumption, or immoderation or an inordinate desire for food.	
	A desire for revenge, a deliberate desire to kill or seriously wound a neighbour.	
	The feeling that you are better than everyone else.	
	Not only laziness but a refusal to do what you know is the right thing to do because you just can't be bothered.	
	Arises from a passion for riches and the power, status and celebrity that come with being rich.	
	Refers to the sadness at the sight of another's goods and the immoderate desire to acquire them for oneself, even unjustly.	
	The disorder of sexual desire, when you want to pleasure yourself on another as if they were a plaything and not a person. This happens in marriage when you use each other for sexual pleasure, with no expression of love or openness to fertility.	



Session 3 Respect the differences

AIM

To establish practical ways of positively engaging with the differences between man and woman and explore how these can be the source of marriage's strength and richness, but also a source of misunderstanding, conflict and hurt

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

- Explain that God made males and females to complement and complete each other
- Use effective strategies for speaking and listening
- Indicate ways of resolving conflicts
- Accept the importance of forgiveness and what this means

"Put on then compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

Colossians 3:12-14

Activity: Respect the differences

Sometimes you may hear talk about men and women as if they were two different species. However, the differences between masculinity and femininity have their origin in God's will and purpose for men and women.

Together as a couple, think about what ways you are different from, or the same as, each other? (Take about 10 minutes).

- The things you like doing... What do you like to do to relax and recharge? What energises you?
- How do you like to receive information? (e.g. general outline vs. great detail).
- The ways you react to things... What guides you most when you react and/or make decisions? (e.g. objective logic vs. values and feelings).
- The way you do things... Do you prefer order or flexibility? (e.g. carefully scheduled plans vs. flexible spontaneity).

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply..." (Genesis 1:27-28)

Strategies for listening effectively (PEARS)

- **Probe:** use open questions to really understand what the speaker is saying; that is, use questions which demand a fuller answer than “yes” or “no” to encourage the other person to explain more fully: e.g. “tell me a bit more about that”.
- **Empathise:** respect and reflect the underlying feelings, put yourself in the speaker’s position.
- **Awareness:** be aware of our tendency to distort and really seek to understand what the other person is trying to say; build on the speaker’s ideas; do not change direction or take control of the discussion.
- **Respond non-verbally:** show attention, make good eye contact, respond naturally.
- **Summarise:** use your own words to paraphrase what you think you’ve heard to check you’ve got it right and show that you have really been listening; do not just repeat the speaker verbatim.



Strategies for effective speaking

- **Love:** Remind yourself that you love your spouse and that he or she loves you.
- **Intention:** Think what you are trying to say before you start to speak.
- **Attention:** Tell your spouse what you need of them (e.g. “I just need you to listen to me for a minute, as there’s something I want to tell you”).
- **Clarity:** Use short sentences.
- **Unity:** Avoid the language of blame. Talk instead about what you would like to be different, e.g. instead of: “it’s your fault the kids were left at school - you never remember when it’s your turn to pick them up!” you could say: “I would like us to agree a way of making sure you remember when it’s your turn to pick the kids up from school.”).
- **Expression:** As well as thinking about what you are going to say, it is important to remember that messages are a complex mix of what can be called words, music and dance.

The words are what you say;

The music is your tone of voice and expression;

The dance is all the body language you use to express yourself: eye contact, facial expression, gesture.

Activity: Speaking and listening effectively

- Think of an event in your own lives that you could use to practise 'speaking and listening'. Perhaps a happy event, e.g. an outing you have enjoyed together.
- Decide who is going to start as the Speaker and who will start as the Listener.
- Give the Speaker the couple's book to hold. He / she has the 'floor' whilst holding it.
- As the Speaker you break down what you want to say into clear points to ensure that all you want to say is actually said.
- As the Listener you want to try to be an effective listener (remember Pears). In particular, summarise or paraphrase what the Speaker has said to show that you have heard and clearly understood the message. It is important that you concentrate on what the Speaker is saying and don't respond with explanations of your own, or retaliations.
- When the Speaker has finished and is happy that the Listener has understood, the Speaker and Listener should change roles and work through the steps again with the new Speaker presenting his or her side of the events, feelings etc.

(You have about 10 minutes for the activity; try to share the time equally between you so you each have 5 minutes when you are Speaker and 5 minutes when you are Listener.)



A useful tool to help you openly and constructively talk about behaviours or situations that upset or threaten you is 'EEC'. This stands for Example, Effect, Change or Continue. Example of using EEC:

- **E**xample: When you contradicted me in front of our friends last night.
- **E**ffect: I felt embarrassed and angry.
- **C**hange: I don't want you to contradict me in public; can you tell me about your different point of view when we get home?

Activity: What do we do when we are faced with conflict?

- Working in pairs, take a couple of minutes to think of one or two occasions recently when you disagreed or argued with each other. (Say 2 mins).
- Individually, jot down how you acted (e.g., did you shout, become sarcastic, make a joke of it etc), then jot down how your boyfriend / girlfriend acted. (Say 5 mins).
- Finally compare notes and consider “What aspects of your boyfriend’s / girlfriend’s way of handling the disagreement did you find helpful and which unhelpful?” (Say 8 mins).

ME	YOU
<input type="checkbox"/> Become sarcastic	<input type="checkbox"/> Become sarcastic
<input type="checkbox"/> Become angry and shout	<input type="checkbox"/> Become angry and shout
<input type="checkbox"/> Become defensive	<input type="checkbox"/> Become defensive
<input type="checkbox"/> Become quiet and withdrawn	<input type="checkbox"/> Become quiet and withdrawn
<input type="checkbox"/> Ignore the whole issue	<input type="checkbox"/> Ignore the whole issue
<input type="checkbox"/> Make a joke of it	<input type="checkbox"/> Make a joke of it
<input type="checkbox"/> Try to calm the situation	<input type="checkbox"/> Try to calm the situation
<input type="checkbox"/> Try to listen	<input type="checkbox"/> Try to listen
<input type="checkbox"/> Talked about it	<input type="checkbox"/> Talked about it
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please describe)	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please describe)

Action Planning

As a couple consider what you will do differently as a result of this session? You might like to consider the following:

- How will you make sure you listen effectively to one another?
- How will you make sure how you speak to one another shows love and respect?
- How will you resolve conflicts that arise between you?

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3:12-14)

Then Peter went up to him and said, “How many times must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?” Jesus answered, “Not seven, I tell you, but seventy seven times.” (Matthew 18:21-22)



Session 4

God's body talk

AIM

To appreciate that being created by the God of love, our bodies reflect their origin in his loving purpose. This purpose informs what is the right and wrong use of our bodies.

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

- Explain the meaning and purpose God has given sexual love
- State why contraception and IVF contradict the meaning of marital love
- State why the marriage vows of unity, indissolubility, faithfulness and openness to life are vital to the success of a marriage
- Explain why the Church advocates natural fertility awareness

The human person: with our openness to truth and beauty, our sense of moral goodness, our freedom and the voice of our conscience, with our longings for the infinite and for happiness, we question ourselves about God's existence. In all this we discern signs of our spiritual soul. The soul, the "seed of eternity we bear in ourselves, irreducible to the merely material" can have its origin only in God.

(CCC 33)



"Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones. Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your cries are continually before me."
(Isaiah 49:13, 15-16)

Made in the image of God

As a couple, read the accounts of creation below and answer the three questions. Suggest 10 minutes). We will then discuss the questions as a group.

- What do these extracts tell us about human beings being different from animals?
- What do these extracts tell us about the relationship between men and women?
- What do these extracts tell us about the purpose and meaning of sexual love?

First account of creation

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth”.

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it. (Genesis 1:26-28)

Second account of creation

Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed...

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”

So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.

The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.”

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed. (Genesis 2: 7-8, 18-25)



Why contraception and IVF are wrong?

True or false

Read the statements below and decide as a couple whether they are true or false, giving reasons. (Suggest 5 minutes).¹

We will then discuss the questions as a group

	True	False
1. The Church is against contraception because sex is something bad and dirty.		
2. The Church is against contraception because it wants every act of sexual love to result in a baby.		
3. The Church is against contraception because it makes a lie out of God's language of love.		
4. The Church is for couples spacing the number of children using Natural Fertility Awareness.		
5. The Church allows couples to use Natural Fertility Awareness to permanently avoid pregnancy.		
6. The Church is against IVF because children conceived in a test tube are not really human.		
7. The Church is against IVF because she doesn't want the marriage bed to be replaced by the laboratory.		
8. The Church is against IVF because she doesn't care about the suffering of infertile couples.		

¹ This activity is based on Dr C O'Donnell's *Questions & Answers on Sex and Marriage*.

God created human beings to be a union of body and soul. The fact that human beings are created as a union of body and soul means the body is never 'something' but always 'someone' who shares in the dignity of the 'image of God'. One of the reasons why God made us a union of body and soul is so we could form loving relationships with each other, create children to love, and could be capable of knowing and loving him.

We can see signs of God's design and purpose in nature. The Church teaches that we can come to know God in two ways:

- through our reason observing nature and ourselves, and
- through God's Word in the Bible and the life of the Church

"Scripture would not wish to inform us about how the different species of plant life gradually appeared or how the sun and moon and the stars were established. Its purpose ultimately would be to say one thing: God created the world...all of this comes from one power, from God's eternal Reason, which became – in the Word – the power of creation. (Cardinal Ratzinger, 'In the Beginning', p.5)

God created masculinity and femininity to reveal our spiritual nature and share in his creation of new life. The Church teaches that sexual love expresses in a profound way our nature as beings created to be a union of body and soul, made in the image of God.

Jesus reveals and heals our capacity for self-giving love. We can only know our true dignity and the depth of our ability to love through Jesus Christ.

Are you ready to accept children lovingly from God?

As a couple take some time to discuss the following questions: (5 mins)

- What do we mean when we say that children are a gift from God?
- Would you want your children to be brought up in the Catholic faith? Why?

The Church understands that there are times when a couple may wish to space the births of their children, due to poverty, or the health of the wife or husband. It is then right to use Natural Fertility Awareness to abstain from sexual relations during the woman's fertile period, and to have sexual relations during the infertile period. This does not go against God's will for our fertility because the couple are using the natural, God-given cycles for their correct purpose. However, the couple must ensure that their motivation is the good of the family and not some selfish desire.

However, the Church is against both contraception and IVF as they artificially break the inseparable bond between the act of sexual love and openness to fertility. In addition, contraception also makes the act of love a 'lie' by withholding one of the essential qualities of marriage: openness to fertility. The most important and special statement that the body language between wife and husband makes is, "I love every aspect of you so much" – it does not add "except for your fertility"!

Action Planning

As a couple consider what you will do as a result of this session. You might like to consider the following:



- Discuss together God's meaning and purpose for sexual love and your approach to having children.
- Find out about Natural Fertility Awareness. Practitioner teachers of the 'ovulation method' or 'multiple-indicators' can be found on the web by typing in the key terms in 'ovulation method' or 'multiple-indicators'.

A child does not come from outside as something added on to the mutual love of the spouses, but springs from the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfilment... called to give life, spouses share in the creative power and fatherhood of God... they are co-operating with the love of God the Creator. (CCC 2366-7)



Session 5 - Jesus' helping hand

AIM

To see how a proper understanding of who Jesus is helps us understand what happens when we receive the Sacrament of Marriage. To appreciate the importance of this sacrament in helping us face the difficult times in our marriage

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

- Explain what a sacrament is and how sacraments help and support us through life
- Highlight why marriage is a sacrament
- Indicate your approaches to dealing with change and suffering
- Apply some practical actions to help with change and suffering

"If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain". 1 Corinthians 15:14

- During the marriage service, what do you think happens when you make your vows to each other before the priest or deacon, and in front of your friends?
- To whom are you making your promises to form a close, personal, permanent, faithful and fruitful union?

Symbols and Sacraments

Symbols are more than just things, they communicate and make real the person we love; they represent the other person and cause us to remember them or something about them. Sacraments are symbols arising from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus took ordinary, everyday things and gave them a special meaning and power that make him really and truly present. In the sacraments we receive 'grace', the gift of God's love which, if we accept it and believe in it, can empower and transform us.



The Church holds the exchange of consent between the spouses to be the indispensable element that "makes the marriage." If consent is lacking there is no marriage. The consent consists in a "human act by which the partners mutually give themselves to each other": "I take you to be my wife" -- "I take you to be my husband." This consent, that binds the spouses to each other, finds its fulfilment in the two "becoming one flesh". (CCC 1626-1627)

Who do you say Jesus is?

Read the statements below and decide as a couple whether or not you agree with them and why. (Take about 10 minutes). Then we will discuss the questions as a group.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Depends	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. As God, Jesus pretended to be human, only pretending to be weak and to suffer.					
2. It's OK not to want to become a saint.					
3. When we receive a sacrament, such as the Eucharist and Marriage, Jesus is as real and present to us as he was to the apostles, but in a different way.					
4. It's possible for our love as husband and wife to represent the love of Jesus for his people.					

The Sacrament of Marriage

God the Son became flesh and instituted the sacraments as a continuation of his physical incarnation. (CCC 456-478). Every week when we pray the Nicene Creed at Mass we say, 'For us men and our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit, he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made man'. By doing so God made all aspects of human nature – physical, psychological, spiritual, intellectual – the medium to communicate divine life and truth to us. As the Catechism puts it, 'In his soul as in his body, Christ thus expresses humanly the divine ways of the Trinity.' (CCC 470). This means a number of amazing things:

- God has assumed the nature of one of his creatures, making it part of the inner life of the Trinity.
- We can now become partakers of the divine nature because we share our human nature with the Son of God, 'For the Son of God became man so that we might become God'. (CCC 460).

Jesus instituted the sacraments to continue the effectiveness of his physical human nature as the medium of communicating the truth and power of God in our lives. As Pope St Leo the Great puts it, 'what was visible in our Saviour has passed over into his mysteries [sacraments]'. (CCC 1115). When you receive the sacrament of marriage you are truly physically and spiritually in touch with Jesus, true God and true man.

The graces we receive through the sacraments, if we co-operate with them, mould us and educate us to become more and more like Jesus.

As it says in the *Catechism*:

Spiritual progress tends toward ever more intimate union with Christ. This union is called "mystical" because it participates in the mystery of Christ through the sacraments -- "the holy mysteries" -- and, in him, in the mystery of the Holy Trinity. God calls us all to this intimate union with him. (CCC 2014)

During his earthly existence, the words and deeds of Jesus were the actions of a man who was the incarnate Son of God. This means that every word and deed of Jesus transcends time and space because God is eternal. The *Catechism* explains it as follows:

Sacraments are "powers that come forth" from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving. They are actions of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body, the Church. They are "the masterworks of God" in the new and everlasting covenant. (CCC 1116)

The Sacrament of Marriage of Christians has a private significance for the couple and a public significance for the Church. (CCC 1612-1617). Marriage between husband and wife can be seen as a covenant of love that establishes a community of love. Every marriage can be seen as having the potential of representing God's love.

St Paul was inspired to make this role of marriage explicit, when he described Christ's self-giving love for the Church:

Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her... "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the Church. (Ephesians 5: 25, 31-32)

This is how Cardinal Walter Kasper puts it:

Your sacramental marriage is not merely a model or example of Jesus' love for the Church... but a copy of that mystery that has grown out of the union of Christ with the Church and is borne up by and penetrated with that union. Marriage does not merely symbolise that mystery, it really represents it in itself and represents it by showing itself to be active and effective in it. (Walter Kasper, *Theology of Christian Marriage*, p. 37).

Dealing with change

- **Step 1** Agree on one or two major changes you foresee affecting your marriage, (perhaps having children, moving house or moving to a different part of the country).
- **Step 2** Take a few minutes to think individually about them. What are the positive things you think will come out of that change? What are the negatives or downsides?
- **Step 3** When you have done that compare notes with each other. Are your views the same or different and how?
- Spend a few minutes sharing the results with the group.



However you deal with change, and in particular suffering, there are a few important pointers to always remember, all of which are strengthened through the grace we receive through the Sacrament of Marriage.

- **Communicate:** remember the importance of effective listening and speaking. Do not cut yourself off from one another but be sensitive to one another's need for 'space'. Be honest with one another.
- **Practise the virtues:** especially kindness, be particularly attentive and loving to each other. Be prepared to persevere, to hold on when the going gets tough rather than cut and run.
- **Pray:** we will be talking more about this in the next session.
- **Use your community network:** During times of change and suffering it is important to remember that as a couple you are not on your own, but part of a larger net work of care and love, either through your family, friends or parish. Sometimes it may be necessary to seek outside help to cope with overwhelming problems, such as grief or depression.
- **Humour.** It can help us to laugh at our predicaments, which may make it possible to transcend anxiety and pain. However, this only works if the other factors in this list are in place, or it can become another disguise for anger at the other person's expense, and / or hurtful and destructive.



If you live your marriage with awareness and acceptance of the meaning and purpose given it by God then your lives will be enriched and strengthened by the gift – the grace – of the sacrament of marriage. “Christ dwells with them, gives them the strength to take up their crosses and so follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another’s burdens, to “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ”, and to love one another with supernatural, tender, and fruitful love. (CCC 164)



Session 6 Loving each other in Christ

AIM

To appreciate the significance and meaning of the different parts of the wedding service and that marriage is made in prayer

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

- Explain that you confer the sacrament of marriage on each other, before the Church and sealed by God
- State the significance of the different elements of the marriage liturgy
- Explain the meaning of the symbols of marriage
- Prepare for your own marriage service
- Describe the importance of prayer

Promises before God and his Church

As bride and groom during the wedding service you will both make promises to live according to the purpose and meaning God has given marriage. In this activity 'match' the promises from the wedding service with one of the four essential qualities of marriage: personal union, indissolubility, faithfulness and openness to life.

Promises from Marriage Rite	Essential quality of Marriage
Are you ready freely and without reservation to give yourselves to each other in marriage? Bridegroom: I am. Bride: I am.	
Are you ready to love and honour each other as man and wife for the rest of your lives? Bridegroom: I am. Bride: I am.	
Are you ready to accept children lovingly from God, and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church? Bridegroom: I am. Bride: I am.	
Bridegroom and Bride: I call upon these persons here present to witness that I, NN do take thee, NN to be my lawful wedded wife (husband), to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, In sickness and in health, to love and to cherish till death us do part.	

Consent

The priest or deacon invites the couple to declare their consent:

Priest or Deacon: Since it is your intention to enter marriage, declare your consent before God and his Church.

(To the Bridegroom) N.N., will you take N.N. here present for your lawful wife, according to the rite of our holy Mother the Church? Bridegroom: **I will.**

(To the Bride) N.N., will you take N.N. here present for your lawful husband, according to the rite of our holy Mother the Church? Bride: **I will.**

The Bride and Bridegroom join their right hands. The Bridegroom then says after the Priest or Deacon, or reads:

Bridegroom: I call upon these persons here present to witness that I, N.N. (full name, including surname), do take thee, N.N. (full name, including surname), to be my lawful wedded wife to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part.

They separate their hands for a moment and then rejoin them. Then the Bride says after the Priest or Deacon, or reads:

Bride: I call upon these persons here present to witness that I, N.N. (full name, including surname), do take thee, N.N. (full name, including surname), to be my lawful wedded husband to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part.

At this moment you have both conferred on each other the sacrament of marriage, and you are now married. The Priest or Deacon then receives your consent on behalf of the Church with this prayer:

Priest or Deacon: You have declared your consent before the Church. May the Lord in his goodness strengthen your consent and fill you both with His blessings. What God had joined together, let no man put asunder.

Marriage bond: The blessing and exchange of rings is a symbol of the couple's consent and creation of their marriage bond blessed by God. When you consummate your marriage through sexual intercourse you definitively express the meaning and purpose of the vows and consent you made during the rite of marriage – total self-giving love to the point where two become one.

Liturgical meditation on the meaning of your marriage

- **Sign of the cross** When we cross ourselves, let it be with a real sign of the cross, not a small cramped gesture but a large unhurried sign, from forehead to breast, from shoulder to shoulder. Consciously feel how it includes the whole of us, our thoughts,

our attitudes, the union of our body and soul, every part of us; for men our masculinity, for women our femininity. The sign of the cross consecrates and sanctifies us because it is the sign of our redemption. By the cross Jesus sanctifies man to the last shred and fibre of his being. We make the sign of the cross before we pray to collect and compose ourselves and fix our minds and hearts and wills upon God. When you receive the Nuptial Blessing by the priest or deacon, he will make the sign of the cross over you in order that the fullness of God's life may flow into your souls and sanctify you fully. It blesses us with Jesus' totally self-giving love, reminding us that we are called to show the same love to each other.

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- **Genuflection** We genuflect before entering the bench where we will sit, or going to read from the lectern or to act as an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion, as a sign of reverence before the Presence of the Blessed Sacrament in the Tabernacle or on the altar.

'On entering a church or in passing before the altar, kneel down all the way without haste or hurry, putting your heart into what you do, and let your whole attitude say, Thou art the great God'. (Romano Guardini).

- **Kneeling** It is usual for people to kneel, if they are not disabled, when they first enter their bench as a sign of respect to the presence of Jesus. Kneeling is a sacred sign that shows our recognition of God's power and holiness.

'When does our littleness so come home to us as when we stand in God's presence? He is the great God, who is today and yesterday, whose years are hundreds and thousands, who fills the place where we are, the city, the wide world, the measureless space of the starry sky, in whose eyes the universe is less than a particle of dust, all holy, all pure, all righteous, infinitely high. He is so great, I so small, so small beside him. One has no need to be told that God's presence is not the place in which to stand on one's dignity'. (Romano Guardini).

- It is a humbling thing to realise that almighty God has chosen men and women to represent his faithful, life-giving love through their living the sacrament of marriage. When you receive the Nuptial Blessing at the conclusion of the marriage rite you will be asked to kneel, which expresses your recognition of God's power and purpose for your lives together as husband and wife.

- **Standing** Like making the sign of the cross and kneeling, standing has a special meaning in the Church. Standing means we are attentive to God, ready for action according to his will. We stand when the Gospel is proclaimed by the priest or deacon, we stand when, as godparents at a baptism, we make our proclamation of faith. 'Standing is the other side of reverence towards God. Kneeling is the side of worship in rest and quietness; standing is the side of vigilance and action. It is the respect of the servant in attendance, of the soldier on duty, the parent looking after a child. As a bride and bridegroom you will stand when you make your promises to be faithful to your marriage vows and consent to be married before the altar. You will stand as a couple ready to do the will of the Lord in their service of love and their service of life.
- **Hands** As we saw when discussing God's body talk, we are a union of body and soul.

'Every part of the body is an expressive instrument of the soul. The soul does not inhabit the body as a man inhabits a house. It lives and works in each member, each fibre, and reveals itself in the body's every line, contour and movement. But the soul's chief instruments and clearest mirrors are the face and hands. Instantly, every slightest feeling – pleasure, surprise, love – shows in the hands.' (Romano Guardini).

- During the marriage rite your hands play a vital role, expressing the giving and receiving of your bodies and souls, one to the other, during your giving of consent when you confer the sacrament of marriage on each other. As Bride and Bridegroom you join your right hands when the Groom gives his consent. Then you will separate your hands for a moment and then rejoin them as the Bride gives her consent. There is greatness and beauty in this language of the hands. The Church tells us that God has given us our hands in order that we may 'carry our souls' in them. During the rite of marriage each receive the most precious of gifts, the care of each other's body and soul.
- **Walking** One of the most beautiful and spiritual of walks during a religious occasion is the bride's procession to stand next to her bridegroom. Your procession is so full of religious meaning, as we see in the Old Testament and New Testament, but simply put, your walk symbolises the dignity and nobility of marriage between woman and man.

"And when the occasion is religious, what a beautiful thing walking can be! It is a genuine act of divine worship. Merely to walk into a church in reverent awareness that we are entering the house of the Most High, and in a special manner into his presence, may be 'to walk before the Lord.'" (Romano Guardini).

- In a similar way, the procession as you both leave the Church as husband and wife is so moving and meaningful; full of joy and hope.

- **Symbols** You marry before the great symbols of holiness in the Church, that can be traced back to Abraham and Sarah, and Moses on Mount Sinai, and to Jesus in the Jordan, the Temple, and on Calvary – the Altar, the Tabernacle, the Lectern, the Baptismal font and the Confessional.
- **The Altar** This occupies the holiest spot in the church, and is elevated above the rest of the building. It is here that the sacrament of sacraments is celebrated, the sacrifice of the Mass, the consecration of the bread and wine that become the Body and Blood of Jesus, the real and true presence of God. The altar is also the table of the Lord to which all people are invited, as one family around the family table. (CCC 1182).
- **The Tabernacle** As we mentioned earlier, this is also deeply holy, because the Lord is really present in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar, the Body of Jesus. (CCC 1183)
- **The Lectern** This is another prominent feature of the church, from which the Word of God contained in the Bible, is proclaimed to the people. As well as being present in the sacraments, we believe that God is present in the living word proclaimed in the church. (CCC 1184)
- **Baptismal font** In the font people receive the fundamental sacrament of Christian life, baptism, which frees them from Original Sin and joins them, ‘grafts them’, into the life and graces of Jesus. Hopefully, in due time this is where you will bring your children to become members of God’s family. (CCC 1185).
- **Confessionals** The sacrament of reconciliation, involving confession, absolution and penance, is related to Baptism and is another sacrament of healing and life-giving grace. In these confessionals we receive Jesus’ forgiveness for our sins, spiritual advice and encouragement. A very good way of preparing for your wedding day is to go to confession to make a fresh start, which we all need to do from time to time.

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Nuptial Blessing

Father, by your power you have made everything out of nothing. In the beginning you created the universe and made mankind in your own likeness. You gave man the constant help of women so that man and woman should no longer be two, but one flesh, and you teach us that what you have united may never be divided.

Father, you have made the union of man and woman so holy a mystery that it symbolizes the marriage of Christ and his Church.

Look with love upon this woman, your daughter, who is to be joined to her husband in marriage. She asks your blessing. Give her the grace of love and peace. May she always follow the example of the holy women whose praises are sung in the scriptures.

May her husband put his trust in her and recognize that she is his equal and heir with him to the life of grace. May he always honour her and love her as Christ loves his bride, the Church.

Father, keep them always true to your commandments. Keep them faithful in marriage and let them be living examples of Christian life. Give them the strength which comes from the gospel so that they may be witnesses of Christ to others.

Bless them with children and help them to be good parents. May they live to see their children's children. And, after a happy old age, grant them fullness of life with the saints in the kingdom of heaven.

We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen

