

Because of recent state government legislation and recent court decisions the subject of marriage has been discussed a good deal lately. Often, it seems, many people are not clear about the difference between civil marriage and the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony. Civil marriage is a legal contract governed by each state individually and legally can be whatever that state defines it to be (and which the state's electorate will accept and the U.S. Supreme Court will uphold as constitutional). The Sacrament of Holy Matrimony, however, was instituted and defined by Jesus Christ and can only be interpreted by the magisterium (teaching authority) of the Catholic Church, all the Bishops world-wide validly ordained in the Apostolic Succession gathered in a General or Ecumenical Council. The following is an excerpt from a document issued by our sister St Paul's Parish in Riverside, Florida.

Sacrament of Holy Matrimony

To understand what the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony is, the best place to start is with the human person. After all, marriage is a unique relationship between two specific persons, one man and one woman. We must ask, "What does it mean to be a human person, as a man or as a woman?" First, men and women are created in the image of God (Genesis 1.27)

God himself is the author of marriage. When God created human persons in his own image, as male and female, he placed in their hearts the desire, and the task, to love – to give themselves totally to another person. Marriage is one of two ways someone can make a total self-gift. [The other is in celibate ministry: lay, religious, or ordained.]

Marriage is not something thought up by human society or by any religion – rather, it springs from who the human person is, as male and female, and society and religion affirm and reinforce it. The truth of marriage is therefore accessible to everyone, regardless of his/her religious beliefs or lack thereof. Both faith and reason speak to the true meaning of the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony.

The Sacrament of Holy Matrimony is the lifelong partnership of mutual and exclusive fidelity between a man and a woman* ordered by its very nature to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of children.

When all five of the elements necessary for the valid celebration of a Sacrament are present (form, matter, proper minister, proper recipient [subject], and intention of the minister), marriage is a Sacrament. This means that the bond between husband and wife is a visible sign of the sacrificial love of Christ for his Church. As a Sacrament, Holy Matrimony gives spouses the grace they need to love each other generously, in imitation of Christ.

* When, after a divorce (the legal dissolutionment by the state of the legal contract), it can be shown that all five elements necessary for the valid celebration of a Sacrament were not present at the beginning, the Church, through the diocesan bishop, can issue a Declaration of Sacramental Nullity. This is not dissolutionment of an existing Sacrament (which can only be done by the death of one of the spouses) but a descriptive statement that while the civil contract may have been fully legally valid (and thus all children "legitimate," etc.), the conditions required for a valid Sacrament of Holy Matrimony were not present from the beginning.

The difference between men and women is for the sake of their union with each other. It is what makes spousal union possible. Of course love and commitment are important for marriage – as they are for many relationships. But the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony is unique because the commitment it calls for is better described as communion, where “the two become one flesh” (Genesis 2.24). Only a man and a woman in marriage can become a “one flesh” communion. The unity of husband and wife is so intimate that from it can come a “third,” the child – a new life to be welcomed and raised in love. No other relationship, no matter how loving or committed, can have this unique form of commitment – communion – that exists in Holy Matrimony, between a husband and a wife.

The Church cares about marriage because marriage is a fundamental good in itself and foundational to human existence and flourishing. Today people all over the world are suffering because of the breakdown of the family: divorce, out-of-wedlock childbearing, etc. Marriage is a personal relationship but not a private one. In fact, marriages play a crucial role in society.

Marriage protects and promotes the dignity of men and women, the dignity of children, and the dignity of all persons in society. The lifelong partnership of marriage is the only place where men and women can truly “speak” the language of sexual love: total, faithful, lifelong, and open to children. Only within marriage can sexual relations mean what they are supposed to mean as an expression of self-giving love between a man and a woman (not selfish use). By being joined in the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony, husband and wife enter into a unique communion and sharing of their whole lives.

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The Canon Law of the Episcopal Church requires that the man and the woman, as the Ministers of the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony, must have signed a Declaration of Intention in administering this Sacrament to each other.

We, _____
man
and _____
woman

desiring to receive the blessing of Holy Matrimony in the Church, do solemnly declare that we hold marriage to be a lifelong union of husband and wife as it is set forth in the liturgical forms authorized by this Church. We believe it is for the purpose of mutual fellowship, encouragement, and understanding, for the procreation (if it may be) of children, and their physical and spiritual nurture, and for the safe-guarding and benefit of society, and we do engage ourselves, so far as in us lies, to make our utmost effort to establish this relationship and to seek God’s help thereto.

/signed/ man

/signed/ woman

/witnessed/ Priest