



by Jethro Higgins

Chastity for a husband and wife in holy matrimony?

Outside of Christianity, the concept of chastity is not well understood. Some might be familiar with the image of a chastity belt. Others may connect the word with the prohibition of sexual relations before marriage. However, there is more to it than that — much more.

Some of the most contentious religious debates in our culture stem from misunderstandings about chastity. For example, many are surprised to find that chastity plays a prominent role in the lives of married couples, within the context of Christian marriage.

The English language can be fickle. So, before we can speak in depth about marriage, we will have to define a couple of words. What these words mean within the context of the Church, and what they may mean to the rest of the world, are very different.

Fidelity: it comes down to commitment

One of the differences between secular marriage and the sacrament of holy matrimony within the Church is fidelity. Even in the secular world, it is understood that commitment is a key component to any meaningful relationship. In the words and actions of the marriage ceremony, one pledges complete fidelity to one's spouse. And through the power of the Holy Spirit, God gives one the grace to endure in that fidelity, through the best, and worst of times. Marriage is not just a promise between two individuals, but a covenant with God as well. With him at the center of the bond, Christian marriages are meant to bear any suffering in union with the suffering of Christ. For this reason, divorce is not an option within the Church. A valid marriage cannot be dissolved, as spouses are called to that fidelity, "until death do us part." Sometimes, unfortunately, it is necessary for a married couple to separate, and in some cases, even become civilly divorced. But without a declaration of nullity, these individuals are still married in the eyes of God and the Church. We will discuss more on annulments later.

The word of the day is Chastity

Pope St. John Paul II left a wonderful gift to the Church in his *Theology of the Body*. This 129-part series helps us define chastity in great detail. More digestible definitions however, can be found in the Catholic Encyclopedia *New Advent* which states:

"Chastity is the virtue which excludes or moderates the indulgence of the sexual appetite. It is a form of the virtue of temperance, which controls according to right reason the desire for and use of those things which afford the greatest sensual pleasures."

As well as in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

"Chastity means the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being. Sexuality, in which man's belonging to the bodily and biological world is expressed, becomes personal and truly human when it is integrated into the relationship of one person to another, in the complete and lifelong mutual gift of a man and a woman. The virtue of chastity therefore involves the integrity of the person and the integrality of the gift."
(CCC 2337)

The above understanding of chastity was universally accepted by all of Christianity until the sexual revolution in the 1960s. Even the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a law of chastity — available on their website — which mirrors Catholic teaching on the subject. It states: "sexual relations are proper only between a man and a woman who are legally and lawfully wedded as husband and wife."

We see in the definition of chastity, the reserving of sexual intercourse for the two-fold purpose for which it was created: 1) To be fruitful and multiply (the first

command of God); and 2) to grow in fidelity through the intimate bond that sharing the marriage bed creates. We also see that this purpose for human sexuality is integrated most fully into the human person when given as a mutual gift between husband and wife. Therefore, we should control our sexual feelings and sexual desires through the virtue of temperance, so that we are the masters of our desire for physical intimacies, rather than letting the desire for sexual intimacy control us and our relationships. In doing so, we glorify God and the gift he has given us. The chaste expression of sexual intimacy is so much more profound than the broader cultural understanding of chastity — abstaining from sexual relations. The gift of sexual intimacy is a great good, but can be misused.

Our sexual appetite is similar to our appetites for other things such as food, in that, when we lack the temperance to control those appetites, we find ourselves in dangerous proximity to the seven deadly sins. This is true for all people. We are all called to live temperate lives and to take our own unofficial vows of chastity. Our culture places the fulfillment of our desires at the forefront of our human existence. However, our lives are more than just an exercise in personal gratification. It seems counterintuitive, but as we sacrifice personal pleasures and give those sacrifices as gifts to God and others we find ourselves more satisfied. This is an expression of charity.

Charity: What is Love? Baby don't hurt me

We often think of charity as helping the less fortunate in the way Catholic Charities or other service based ministries would. It is true that helping those in need is an expression of charity — one which our holy Church leads the world in — but charity is really the virtue of love. Love means “to will the good of another” (CCC 1766). As part of our marriage covenant, we must will the good of our spouse above our own thoughts and desires, as they are called to do for us in return. Willing the good of another is often quite different than willing they get what they want. It is not loving, not willing the other's good, to condone behavior that is sexually immoral or unchaste. Both inside and outside of marriage, it is a form of abuse to make a partner feel like they must act in an unchaste manner to show their “love.” As stated above, making a sacrifice to forgo personal gratification for the sake of the good of another is one of the greatest expressions of charity. Sometimes love hurts because love is not an emotion, it is a decision. It's difficult to love in this way, but we are called to do so.

A secular definition

The religious aspect of marriage is frequently misunderstood in secular culture. In movies, tv and other entertainment, religion is often used as a gag. An example would be the Leonard Nimoy film *Holy Matrimony*, where the beliefs of a religious minority are the subject of an “absurd situation.”

So how does the world define marriage? The term marriage is currently defined by the Collins English Dictionary as:

1. the state or relationship of living together in a legal partnership
2. the legal union or contract made by two people to live together
3. the religious or legal ceremony formalizing this union; wedding

In this definition of holy marriage, almost all mention of the religious aspect of marriage is absent, with a small exception for the marriage ceremony itself. The lifelong aspect, and the terms husband and wife are notably missing from the majority of contemporary dictionary entries. But if you trace the word origin of marriage using the online etymology dictionary, there is a marked contrast between what it has meant for centuries in the public square, and the more modern definition.

*c. 1300, “action of marrying, entry into wedlock;” also “state or condition of being husband and wife, matrimony, wedlock;” from Old French mariage “marriage; dowry” (12c.), from Vulgar Latin *maritaticum (11c.), from Latin maritatus, past participle of maritare “to wed, marry, give in marriage” (see marry (v.)). The Vulgar Latin word also is the source of Italian maritaggio, Spanish maridaje.*

Meaning “a union of a man and woman for life by marriage, a particular matrimonial union” is early 14c. Meanings “the marriage vow, formal declaration or contract by which two join in wedlock;” also “a wedding, celebration of a marriage; the marriage ceremony” are from late 14c. Figurative use (non-theological) “intimate union, a joining as if by marriage” is from early 15c.

It's hard to discuss the concept of holy marriage in a secular forum, given the world's understanding of “traditional marriages”. When marriage can be celebrated at city hall, outside of a religious ceremony, in a very similar process to civil unions, the importance of holy unions is

almost entirely lost, along with the argument for keeping “husband and wife” in the definition. Compound that with the complexity of court decisions about marriage and the directive from the *Catechism* to eliminate every sign of unjust discrimination, it can prove difficult to broach the topic of holy matrimony from a Catholic perspective in the public forum. Many choose to avoid it all together. Yet the question really shouldn’t be about marriage, but rather, “Will this relationship be lived in chastity?” — a requirement for, and one of the vows of, marriage.

The Church addresses this directly in the Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraphs 2337–59. It is too long to quote here, and out of context, a one-line quote would not do justice to the wisdom packed into this section. I strongly encourage you to be docile to the teaching of the Church, and to read and understand this passage of the Catechism. Without this teaching about chastity in mind, important conversations about human sexuality, marriage, birth control and other difficult topics can simply result in parties talking past each other without bearing much fruit.

But why get married?

So far, we’ve focused mainly on ‘What is marriage?,’ but, arguably, more important would be the question ‘Why is marriage?,’ or ‘why do we get married?’ It’s a question that today’s young people struggle to answer. In fact, this PBS article outlines a major drop in the rate of single people choosing marriage. Oddly enough, the reason the author identifies for the dip in marriage is a decision not to make the sacrifice discussed earlier in this article: charity.

To unpack this a bit further, chastity calls us to reserve the marital act for within the sacrament of marriage, where the two primary ends of physical intimacy can be embraced fully — the procreative and the unitive aspects, or as some “mommy bloggers” have put it, “babies and bonding.” Where openness to one or both of these elements is missing from a physically intimate relationship, so is charity. If charity is willing the good of another, and the virtue of chastity is a moral good, then willing a relationship that is not chaste is to be uncharitable and unloving. Only in placing those rightly ordered goods into the context of fidelity through the marriage sacrament can they be said to be rooted in the virtue of charity.

If we look back in history, the vast majority of cultures independently adopted a practice of marriage as a necessary building block for society. Long before tax breaks came into the picture, society recognized marriage as the best environment for children to grow and develop. If the point of marriage is just allowing two

people who love each other to live together publicly, then that can and is being accomplished without marriage in our culture. So, if we are to answer the question ‘Why do we get married?,’ the answer must go deeper than for love and tax breaks.

Marriage in the Holy Bible

In the Bible, the words of Jesus Christ are quite clear on how God sees marriage. When we read his words through the lens of charity, chastity and fidelity, that meaning shines forth:

Some Pharisees approached him, and tested him, saying, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause whatever?” He said in reply, “Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate.” They said to him, “Then why did Moses command that the man give the woman a bill of divorce and dismiss [her]?” He said to them, “Because of the hardness of your hearts Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) and marries another commits adultery.” [His] disciples said to him, “If that is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” He answered, “Not all can accept [this] word, but only those to whom that is granted. Some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some, because they were made so by others; some, because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it.” (Mt 19: 3-12)

In Exodus, we see the sixth of the ten commandments pertains to unlawful sexual intercourse and states, “Thou shalt not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14). But here Jesus expands on that and describes how even in the case of divorce, adultery is still a possibility because people do not possess the authority to withdraw from a marriage which God has joined.

One final Bible verse comes from St. Paul:

Now in regard to the matters about which you wrote: “It is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman,” but because of cases of

immorality every man should have his own wife, and every woman her own husband. The husband should fulfill his duty toward his wife, and likewise the wife toward her husband. A wife does not have authority over her own body, but rather her husband, and similarly a husband does not have authority over his own body, but rather his wife. (1 Cor 7:1-4)

This statement of St. Paul may appear shocking to many in our culture, "...does not have authority over [his/her] own body," but it is the lynchpin of what holds faith-filled marriages together. In the sacrament of marriage, we expose ourselves and become vulnerable to our spouse, giving them our very selves as a gift. That free gift of our whole selves, body and soul, mirrors the gift of Jesus Christ on the cross. It is necessarily sacrificial in nature.

Marriage in the Catholic Church

Catholic marriage is not about the gown or the flowers or the wedding party. Engaged couples are asked to take part in marriage preparation, not to prepare for the ceremony, but to prepare for how the sacrament of matrimony will fundamentally change their lives. Marriage is honorable, but it is also a lot of hard work. The Church sees fit to ask engaged couples to be certain that they are ready for a life together, not simply to protect the institution of marriage from the scandal of divorce, but also (and more importantly) to prepare the couple for a spiritual life together — to grow in mutual holiness and to push each other toward heaven.

What is annulment?

The Church, in her wisdom, has also developed a process for looking into the validity of a marriage. That process is called annulment. Annulment does not end a marriage. It declares that a marriage never occurred in the first place. There are several factors that might warrant this pronouncement. Personal information hidden by one party, when entering a marriage, might invalidate their ability to be in a marriage. Examples that might be considered as grounds for annulment would be: if one party was already married, or married and divorced, sexual abuse, and other grave matters. Another factor that may preclude someone from entering into a marriage is an unwillingness to be open to the gift of new life that marital intimacy brings. Church leaders have appointed tribunals in each diocese to look into these matters, always with the focus of finding the truth, and protecting the sanctity of this holy sacrament. The Holy Ghost's guidance in these matters is also essential.

The Church assumes that all marriages are valid unless the process of annulment declares differently. This would include secular marriages. So, even in very cut and dry cases, where the form of Catholic marriage was not followed, the annulment process must still run its course. In the eyes of the state, a divorce ends a marriage, but Catholic Christians believe that unless the Church declares that previous attempt at marriage null, the marriage is still valid. Any attempt to enter into a new relationship would be adultery. Catholic Answers is a great source for more detailed information on the annulment process.

There are two exceptions in Canon Law to the rule that a consummated marriage cannot be dissolved. They are:

- **The Petrine Privilege** — *A dispensation of the rule of indissolubility of a marriage, by the Pope, for the sake of the salvation of a soul who would then be free to marry within the Church.*
- **The Pauline Privilege** (1 Corinthians 7:12-15) — *The dissolution of a non-sacramental marriage between a man and woman who were not baptized at the time of the wedding and then one of the spouses becomes baptized and the other wishes to separate.*

In both instances, the purpose for the allowance is to open the way for a sacramental marriage to occur within the Church for the salvation of souls. Both situations still require the adjudication of the diocesan tribunal before the annulment can be pronounced.

What chastity and marriage mean for our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ

Marriage is a holy sacrament that reaches all the way back to Adam and Eve. It is deeply rooted in who we are, and is also a prototype for why we were created — to live in intimate relationship with the Lord. It is through marriage that we become co-creators with God — in the sense that husband, wife, and God come together to bring forth new life. It is within the context of marriage that we raise those children to come to know our savior Jesus Christ.

Let us pray

I was discussing vocations with a colleague here at OCP, and he made an interesting point. As Catholics, we know well the call to pray for vocations, but that has always meant vocations to the priesthood. And in a world where people are increasingly choosing no vocation at all, we must pray for every soul to find and live their vocation, including the vocation to marriage. Please join me in praying for this intention. God Bless!

Songs about marriage

Music accompanies all the most important times in our life, and that is especially true for the sacrament of matrimony. Couples spend a great deal of time picking music that will be sung at their weddings because music speaks to the soul and a wedding is the beginning of a lifelong union of two souls. It just so happens that my two favorite marriage songs at the moment are both duets — which seems all too appropriate.

Beloved, Arise

by Sarah Hart (ocp.org/songs/89270)

“Beloved, Arise” is a beautiful song from Sarah Hart’s album *Sacrament*. It captures the beauty of the permanent union sealed by God between spouses during sacramental marriage. A duet with PJ Anderson, this song is an instant classic. It’s also a slow waltz, perfect for a first dance... hint, hint.

Set Me as a Seal

by Matt Maher (ocp.org/songs/51669)

Adapted from *Song of Songs*, this text is a beautiful representation of the marriage bond, sung in duet. It’s from Matt Maher’s deeply theological early work published by OCP.

Love

by Curtis Stephan (ocp.org/songs/68124)

From his collection *Songs for Prayer and Worship*, Curtis’s song “Love” is based on the quintessential wedding Scripture passage from 1 Corinthians, chapter 13.

This series is intended to provide a more in-depth look at each of the Sacraments their institution in the Bible, current practice, and some beautiful musical suggestions. Explore more from related articles in this series:

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