

(Bishop Michael Sheridan concludes his catechesis on marriage.)

Marriage is a lifelong partnership of the whole of life, of mutual and exclusive fidelity, established by mutual consent between a man and a woman, and ordered towards the good of the spouses and the procreation of offspring (see CCC 1601).

Marriage is a . . . partnership . . . between a man and a woman, and ordered towards the good of the spouses and the procreation of offspring. We find the meaning of marriage, as intrinsically a union of one man and one woman, simply and beautifully set forth in the second chapter of the Book of Genesis. Having created Adam, God noticed that the man was "alone." Adam needed a suitable companion, but no other creature fit the bill. So God created woman. "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body" (Gn 2:24). Jesus repeats this teaching (Mt 19:4-6). "God blessed [the couple] and God said to them: Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it" (Gn 1:28).

This is God's plan for love and life. The complementarity of man and woman — a complementarity that is ordered to the procreation of children — is God's own creation. No one need be acquainted with the Bible, however, to understand the relationship between man and woman. Every culture known to man has embraced the institution of marriage as one that provides mutual love and companionship, as well as children for the society.

In our pastoral letter, "Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan" (2009), the bishops of the United States cited "one of the most troubling developments in contemporary culture, . . . the proposition that persons of the same sex can 'marry'" (p. 21). The church's firm stand against so-called same-sex marriage is not a discrimination against homosexual persons. It is simply and clearly a restatement of biblical teaching and natural law. Two people of the same sex are incapable of intercourse and the procreation of children. No amount of redefining of marriage can change that.

Pope Benedict XVI repeats the church's position in this matter in his recent book, *Light of the World*. Homosexual persons, the pope says, are human beings and "as human beings they deserve respect, even though they have this inclination, and must not be discriminated against because of it. Respect for man is absolutely fundamental and decisive. At the same time, though, sexuality has an intrinsic meaning and direction, which is not homosexual. . . . The meaning and direction of sexuality is to bring about the union of man and woman and, in this way, to give humanity posterity, children, a future" (pp. 151-152).

If we understand that marriage is ordered to the good of the spouses and the procreation of children — and that these are inseparable

— we can more easily see why contraception is sinful. Turning again to the bishops' pastoral letter, we read: "Deliberately intervening, by use of contraceptive practices, to close off an act of intercourse to the possibility of procreation is a way of separating the unitive meaning of marriage from the procreative meaning. This is objectively wrong in and of itself and is essentially opposed to God's plan for marriage and proper human development . . . Conjugal love is diminished whenever the union of a husband and wife is reduced to a means of self-gratification" (p.18).

There is yet another way by which many couples today refrain from giving themselves completely to each other, even though seeming to do so. That is the widespread practice of cohabitation. Social science research has proven that cohabitation, far from ensuring the success of a marriage, does just the opposite. These same studies also show that cohabitation has a negative impact on children. In spite of the facts, many couples continue to believe that cohabitation is a helpful first step to marriage — or even a form of marriage itself.

"Clearly, there is no substitute for the binding lifelong commitment of marriage," the bishops write in their pastoral letter, "and by definition, there is certainly no way to 'try it out.' Only the public and legal commitment of marriage expresses the complete gift of self that is the basis of marriage . . . At the heart of cohabitation lies a reluctance or refusal to make a public, permanent commitment" (p. 26).

Marriage is among the greatest blessings and gifts of God. Marriage in Christ, i.e., sacramental marriage, is an even greater blessing because it bestows the grace of Christ on the married couple. Christian marriage is a communion of persons that reflects the love of the Persons of the Blessed Trinity and, at the same time, draws the couple into the Trinitarian life of God. And yet the numbers of those Catholics embracing marriage in the fullness of its meaning continues to decline. The need for adequate preparation for marriage is greater now than at any other time in our lifetimes.

The threats to marriage from our culture are many and serious. We cannot expect to stand strong against those threats if we Catholics do not ourselves understand and deeply appreciate marriage as both a gift of creation and a sacrament of the church. I urge all of our Catholic faithful to study carefully the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter, "Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan." It is available online at usccb.org/loveandlife/MarriageFINAL.

pdf, or from the Publications Office of the USCCB.

Pray for married couples. Pray for those entering marriage. Support them with your love and friendship. Encourage them to live



THE BISHOP'S VOICE

MOST REV. MICHAEL J. SHERIDAN, S.T.D.
Diocese of Colorado Springs

their marital commitment in love and fidelity and openness to the gift of children. Every marriage has its trials, but the joys of a faithful and life-long marriage are real and

attainable. They have been lived by countless couples who have gone before us, and there are many today whose marriages attest that these joys can continue to be lived.

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