



LESSON TWENTY-THREE

The Sacrament of Matrimony: The Domestic Church

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, by your presence at the wedding in Cana you blessed the state of Holy Matrimony. Be ever present with your servants who seek to understand this great sacrament more deeply. Fill their hearts with love and unity, that they may reflect your divine love in the world. Grant them the grace to grow in virtue, patience, and faithfulness. Through the prayers of the Most Holy Theotokos and all the saints, have mercy on us.

Amen.



Lesson Objectives:

- ❖ Recognize the biblical view of marriage as a solemn covenant instituted by God and elevated by Christ to a sacrament that reflects his love for the Church.
- ❖ Understand the Sacrament of Matrimony as a call to self-giving love lived through mutual sacrifice, fidelity, and openness to life, and learn the four properties of a sacramental marriage: free, total, faithful, and fruitful.
- ❖ Distinguish the Church's teaching on divorce and annulment, and recognize the family as the domestic church, the first school of holiness for children.

BURNING QUESTIONS

- ❖ What makes Catholic marriage different from just being in love or living together?
Our culture celebrates love but often struggles to define it. Is love just a feeling? A commitment? A spiritual bond? What makes a relationship holy or blessed by God?
- ❖ If marriage is lifelong, why do so many marriages end in divorce?
It's a painful reality that many marriages end in divorce. How do your past experiences shape your hopes—and fears—about marriage?

Saints Louis and Zélie Martin

Feast Day: July 12

Lived: 1823–1894 (Louis); 1831–1877 (Zélie) · Bordeaux and Gandelain, France · Patrons of Marriage, Parenting

Of the thousands of canonized saints, fewer than five percent were married, maybe because their holiness is often hidden in the ordinary work of family life. Louis and Zélie Martin married three months after meeting on a bridge in Alençon and had nine children, raising the five who survived infancy to love God deeply. Zélie died of breast cancer at forty-five; Louis later suffered mental illness and a slow death that his daughters called his martyrdom. All five daughters entered religious life, including their youngest, St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Canonized together in 2015, they are the Church's patron saints of marriage and parenting.



“God gave me a father and a mother more worthy of heaven than of earth.”

St. Thérèse of Lisieux

Marriage Woven Through Scripture

From Genesis to Revelation

At the beginning of Scripture, Adam and Eve are united by God in a bond of love and fruitfulness: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23). Jesus performs his first miracle at a wedding in Cana (see John 2:1–11). And at the very end of Scripture, the Book of Revelation describes the wedding feast of the Lamb (see Revelation 19:7). Marriage is not incidental to salvation history—it reveals something profound about the relationship we were created for.

A Covenant, not a Contract

Popular culture generally views marriage as a contract—a civil union that can be legally dissolved. The Church teaches that matrimony is a holy covenant: an exchange of persons that establishes a relationship that can end only at death. A contract exchanges goods or services; a covenant exchanges selves, irrevocably.



“A man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.”

Genesis 2:24

An Icon of Christ's Love

A Reflection of Divine Love

Marriage images both the inner life of the Trinity—a communion of total self-giving love—and the union of Christ and the Church. St. Paul writes: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25). How did Christ love the Church? By laying down his life for her. That same self-emptying call echoes in the heart of every Christian marriage.

Four Elements of Sacramental Marriage

A sacramental marriage is meant to be free (entered without coercion), total (a complete gift of self, holding nothing back), faithful (exclusive and lifelong), and fruitful (open to life). These four properties, lived daily, become the means by which husband and wife grow in holiness—even, and especially, through the hidden, ordinary acts of family life.



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Indissolubility, Divorce, and Annulment

What God Has Joined Together

When questioned about divorce, Jesus explained that Moses permitted it because of the people's hardness of heart, but said, "From the beginning it was not so" (Matthew 19:8). He affirmed God's original design: an indissoluble, lifelong union between one man and one woman. The Church does not recognize civil divorce as ending a valid marriage (see Mark 10:9)—divorce ends legal obligations under civil law, but it does not dissolve a sacramental bond.

What a Declaration of Nullity Is

An annulment is not a "Catholic divorce." It is a formal declaration, made after careful Church review, that something essential for valid matrimony was missing from the very beginning—free consent, the intention to be faithful, openness to life, or proper canonical form. Because of this absence, the Church judges that a true sacramental marriage never took place, even though a wedding occurred.



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

Mark 10:9



Matrimony:

A Mirror of Christ's Love

Discussion Questions

- ❖ How does the Catholic understanding of marriage differ from what our culture typically presents in movies, social media, and popular music? What challenges might couples face when trying to live out a countercultural commitment to each other?
- ❖ What does it mean in practical ways for spouses to help each other grow in holiness? What are some examples of how the daily realities of married life—including conflicts, sacrifices, and forgiveness—can serve as opportunities for spiritual growth?
- ❖ Catholic marriage involves a promise to love that is free, total, faithful, and fruitful, mirroring Christ's love on the Cross. Which of these four aspects do you think would be most challenging to live out in today's world, and why?
- ❖ Marriage can be described as an “icon” of Christ's love for the Church. What does this mean? How could it change the way Catholics approach difficulties in marriage?

Faith and Fun

In the Bible, what local place is often associated with meeting one's future spouse? (Hint: It's where Isaac's servant found Rebekah and where Jacob met Rachel.)

a. A farm/field

b. A place of worship

c. A bridge

d. A well

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- When looking for a wife for Abraham's son, Isaac, Abraham's servant meets Rebekah at a well (see Genesis 24).
- Jacob meets Rachel at a well (see Genesis 29:1–14).
- Moses meets Zipporah at a well (see Exodus 2:11–25).
- Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman at a well, inviting her to know the true Bridegroom (see John 4:1–42).

Wedding Rings

A Sacramental Sign

Wedding rings are recognized across cultures, but in the Catholic Church they carry sacramental significance. After the exchange of consent, the priest or deacon blesses the rings: “Bless, O Lord, these rings which we bless in your name. Grant that those who wear them may ever remain entirely faithful to each other.” This blessing sets the rings apart for a sacred purpose.

Diminishing Self, Revealing Christ

By wearing blessed rings, husband and wife are not merely signaling that a union has taken place—they are inviting God’s continuing grace into their marriage. While not essential for the sacrament’s validity (unlike consent and proper form), the exchange of rings is a cherished, near-universal practice, a visible sign of an ongoing, living covenant that mirrors the unbreakable love between Christ and the Church.



Living It Out:

Take a quiet moment this week to ask God to bless your current vocation or, if you are discerning, to lead you toward the path he has prepared.

Closing Prayer

O God, who by your mighty power created all things out of nothing, and, when you had set in place the beginnings of the universe, formed man and woman in your own image, making the woman an inseparable helpmate to the man, that they might no longer be two, but one flesh, and taught that what you had

united must never be divided; Look now with favor on your servants. May our love for one another be a witness to your faithful love in the world.

*Through Christ our Lord.
Amen¹*

1. Adapted from *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony* (USCCB, 2016), Nuptial Blessing, n. 74.

Announcements / Reminders — add notes here