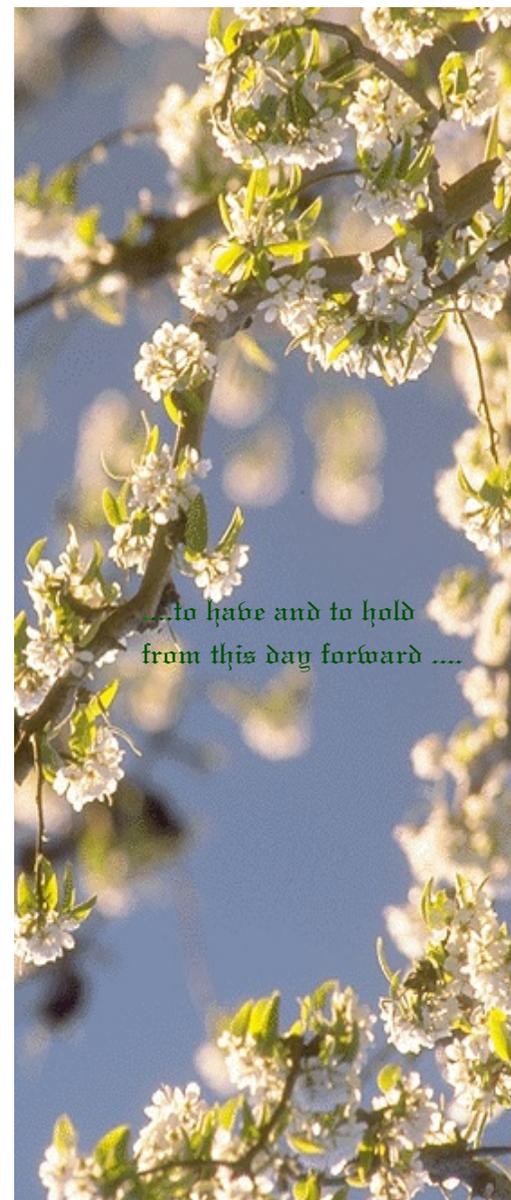




till death
us do part

...to have and to hold
from this day forward

Introduction



This booklet is the fruit of a long period of reflection on Matrimonial Spirituality. We are four couples and a priest, who, a long time ago, experienced a Worldwide Marriage Encounter Weekend. Between us we have over 600 years of life, 210 years of marriage and 50 plus years of priesthood. As married couples, we have collectively 18 children and 28 grand-children.

One of the most important results of our weekend experience was the deepening of our understanding of the concept of 'Church' and the reality for us, as couples and a priest, of what it means to be a Sacrament- a 'living sign' of the reality of Jesus' unconditional love for his 'bride' the Church. We were inspired to become involved in promoting this vision of Church in various ways. Altogether we have 150 collective years of working in Marriage preparation, Marriage enrichment days, Diocesan Marriage and Family Life ministry and

weekend courses to over 3000 couples as well as other aspects of Parish life and mission.

Just over three years ago we decided to meet together as a result of our individual and mutually growing concern regarding the specific support for Marriage in the Church and to explore the distinctive aspects of Marriage as a Sacrament. We applaud the Bishops Conference initiative in seeking to develop and improve the understanding and importance of family life with the launch of 'Listening 2004' and recently 'Familias'.

Building on that initiative, our own experience over many years prompted us to clarify the distinctive nature of sacramental marriage, which is based upon the sacramental union of husband and wife.

The concept of 'family' is of course wide, as the Bishops are justly concerned to emphasise in this day and age of complex relationships. Some families have only one parent in the home and others are reconstituted from earlier families. We call Mary, Joseph and Jesus 'the Holy Family' although, according to the teaching of the Church, Mary and Joseph never had intercourse together. Also, in the Christian Church, we refer to the 'parish family' or 'religious family', where men and women are bound together, not by ties of blood, but by their common commitment to Gospel values.

We wish therefore to emphasise in this booklet that the sacramental union of a man and a woman in marriage has distinctive qualities, both personally for them as a couple and, as a result of that union, for their children and the Church as a whole. These qualities are summarised in the marriage vows

'to have and to hold,
to love and to cherish,
in sickness and in health
from this day forward
until death do us part.'

It is these distinctive qualities that lead us to recognise a distinctive 'Spirituality of Marriage' in contrast to the 'Spirituality of Family Life'.

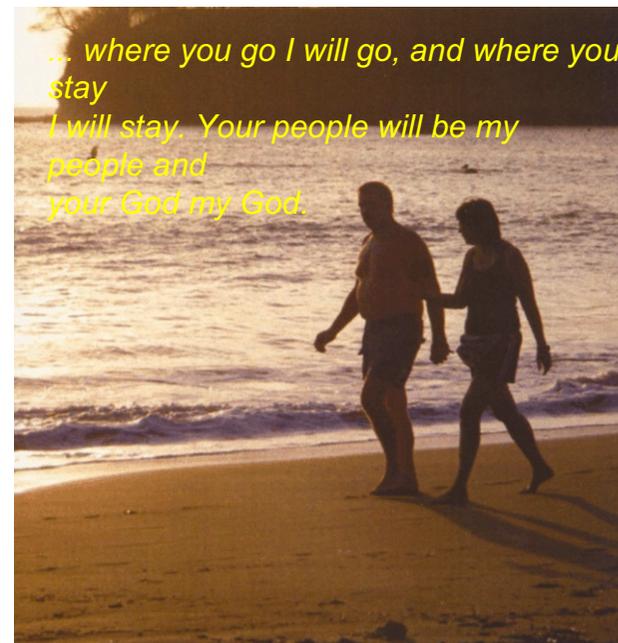
If the focus is only on family, we can be in danger of losing sight of the fact that, for children, the love of their parents for them is deeply rooted in their parents' love for each other. It is this couple relationship which is the cornerstone of family life. It is in witnessing and experiencing this love that our children will grow into a fuller understanding of the love of God for all of us. We are all agreed that marriage and an understanding of its *Spirituality* is of vital concern in the Church, especially today when it is under so much threat.

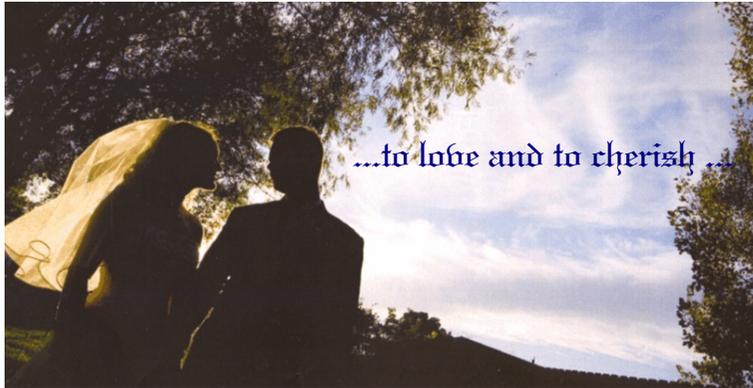
Guidelines for making life-giving decisions: 4 Ds

Dig. Deliberate. Decide. Do.

1. Dig: Find out the facts and get advice. It costs nothing to listen.
2. Deliberate: Having found the facts - all the pros and cons- write them down, weigh them up, and discuss all aspects as well as each other's feelings.
3. Decide: Make a mutual decision, taking each other's opinions and feelings into consideration.
4. Do: Carry out your decision. Be totally committed to it. To avoid making a decision can sometimes be immoral.

Life-giving, like our vocation, is a gift. We learn to live it and share it joyfully. Marriage morality is how we as catholic couples think, feel, and act toward one another - that is our witness to the world.





Endnotes and Bibliography

1) Over 600 couples taking part in 30 Catholic Pre-Marriage courses in S.W. London were asked: What is marriage? Of 49 typical responses, just 20% mentioned that it had something to do with God, Religion, a Vocation, or a Sacrament. The rest of the responses could have been applied to ceremonies conducted by a civil registrar. Most of the responses could have been applied to same-sex relationships. The point here is that such responses show the importance of making sure that engaged couples are fully aware of the difference between the commonly understood ideas of marriage and the nature of the life-long commitment that is Christian Marriage, based on Biblical and Church teaching.

2) CCC1606: 'Our union with God and our relationships with others are threatened by discord, a spirit of domination, infidelity, jealousy, and conflicts. These can escalate into hatred and separation.'

3) In Canon Law, Christian Marriage is referred to as a covenant, the 'very nature of which is ordered to the well-being of the spouses [noticeably now *first*] and to the procreation and upbringing of children' (1055).

CCC – 'The Catechism of the Catholic Church.' London: Geoffrey Chapman Pub. 1994.

FC – '*Familiaris Consortio*' (1981).

We ourselves will continue to work together and with others, to find ideas and ways of communicating the vocation of marriage to couples and young people in our parishes and schools. We are aware that most marriages are not between two Catholics but we see this as all the more reason to promote a 'Civilisation of Love' that begins with the married couple.

We hope that this booklet will be helpful in all the initiatives and developments that are being promoted to support family life. The following contains the fruits of our collective reflection, namely:-

A response to the question: 'Why and how is Christian Marriage Holy?'
The key issues we see and possible ways of responding to them.
Marriage is a Vocation
Marriage as a Covenant
The Marriage of Two Christians is a Sacrament

Yours in Christ,

'TWO IN ONE FLESH'

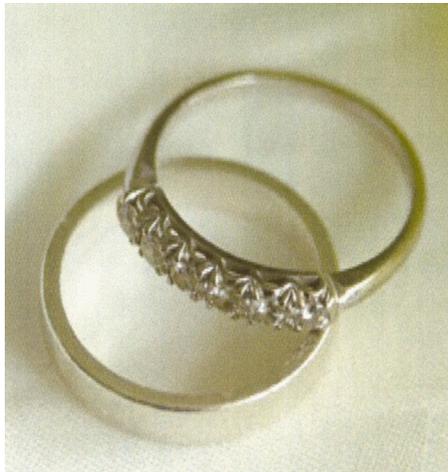
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**Response to the question
'Why and how is Christian Marriage Holy?'**

We approached our response to this question by looking at what we meant by 'spirituality' rather than by way of a formal treatise or a technical analysis of the elements that make up what in traditional language is called 'The Spiritual Life'. In this connection, we are aware that 'spirituality' is a word that is used to describe many kinds of human experience. We recognise that 'spirituality', whether in the relationship between an individual and God, or between human beings themselves, is God at work in the life of every person. There is however, an added dimension to 'spirituality' - when a person or a couple consciously invite the Holy Spirit to enter into, and guide them, in all aspects of their life and relationships.

For us, the tendency to regard Marital Spirituality and family spirituality as being the same is fundamentally wrong. This belief underpins the thrust of the whole perspective in this booklet.



MARRIAGE is a life-long commitment by a man and a woman to grow in love together and to be open to new life. The needs of children inevitably engage a considerable portion of a couple's time and energy. How the married couple discerns how best to meet those needs, can draw them closer together. When two Christians approach marriage, open to include all aspects of their relationship with God and each other, there is an added dimension to their married life. God desires to have an intimate relationship with them. The more they respond to God's goodness,

wisdom, love and power in their lives, the more they recognise the need to change their behaviour and attitudes, towards themselves and others, because of their love for each other and for others.

This requires them being open to the Holy Spirit in deepening their personal relationship with God, to open their minds and hearts to God's plan

The Key issues we see and possible ways of responding to them

In our view, the key issues that face the Church today in the context of marriage are:

a. The need to develop an appreciation of what the Sacrament of Marriage means to the life of our Church..

This might be more easily achieved if marriage was not automatically categorised with family. Gone are the days when 'love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage'. Today, we have horseless carriages, loveless marriages and love without marriage. In treating marriage and family separately, the message about what the Sacrament of Marriage means to the life of our Church could be more specifically communicated. In particular, we believe more opportunity should be taken to speak to this during the preached word at Mass. The formation of parish groups specifically brought together to discover and implement ways of affirming, supporting and enriching marriage, would also be a good way forward.

b. The need to affirm and promote the lived example of Married Couples.

This could be achieved through a positive 'discriminatory' elevation of the importance of the Sacrament of Marriage by ensuring that married couples are involved in and through all key areas in the life of our Church, including: The Bishops' Conference, Seminary Training, Deanery and Parish Councils, Schools and College Syllabus, Catechesis and Adult Formation, and especially Marriage Preparation.

These ideas will necessitate the development of a positive perspective that recognises and accepts the need for much more to be done to further educate and inform the whole Church about the meaning of the Sacrament at all levels. Beginning with Primary Schools, through to catechesis in the parishes and including the formation of priests, the potential is huge.

them to be a visible sign to the Church and to the world of the reality and presence of God's love in and through their love for one another.



Such an inspiring vision of marriage is challenging. Choosing to live in such a way is empowering. If Christian couples live this 'vision' to the best of their ability, it gives deeper meaning and purpose to their love for one another. Not only do they have, through the graces of their sacrament, the resources to forgive and heal each other, they are also enabled to touch profoundly the lives of those they come across on their journey through life.

Today's situation requires a courageous 'reading of the times' and a prayerful discernment on how the Spirit is moving the Church.

Such a view of marriage could carry a message of hope to those who are disillusioned to the point that they no longer formally marry. Within the 'coupling' of young Christian couples today is the 'seed' of God's gift of love. This reality needs nurturing and educating. The positive example of sacramental couples will help, but it is not enough. The Magisterium needs to proclaim and teach a clearer message about Christian Marriage and its holiness, a message which calls couples to commit their life and love to a vision of marriage that really matters in and to the mission of the Church.

for their marriage, to help them to assist each others growth as a person, and to provide them with guidance and help in their relationships with others. The husband/wife relationship is the best model of what loving means, because of the intensity (scope, extent, degree) of the intimacy and vulnerability in the husband/wife relationship, which encompasses both marital, and in most cases, parental loving. The on-going dialogue between husband and wife - with its emphasis on appreciating differences, communicating feelings, listening, conflict resolution, forgiveness and reconciliation etc- provides the best example of 'lessons in loving'.

It also assists the provision of the stable secure environment that is necessary and desirable for the marriage and any family members. Hence, the content of the couple's day to day living and the communication between them is the essence of Marital Spirituality. We know from our own experience and working with hundreds of couples, that it is possible for a couple's understanding of themselves and their marriage to be deeply changed once they grasp God's plan for their marriage.

PARENTHOOD on the other hand, is a nurturing relationship with a child that is preparing for the day when the child leaves home to follow his/her own vocation. Both marriage and parenthood reflect God's love for his people but, if we are to minister to the spirituality of married couples and the spirituality of parents effectively, the different natures of these two relationships must be understood.



How couples live 'Marital Spirituality' depends on their appreciation of what 'marriage' is or what being married means to them. Our 'vision' of something...what we think it is...affects our values, our behaviour and our attitudes. What you think about yourself as a person, about the beginnings of life, about what happens after death, about God, about suffering, about evil, etc. are not just theoretical questions. The answers we give affect the way we live our lives. If we think 'God' is just an invention of human beings, then we are likely to live our lives in a different way to that of a believer. If, when faced with what seems like 'irreconcilable difficulties' in our relationship, we

think that marriage is just a human institution, we are likely to have a different attitude to resolving differences to that of a Christian who believes that marriage is of God and requires fidelity to a life-long commitment. Our concern is that the Church should be seen to be more actively promoting the Christian vision of marriage. For these, and many other reasons, we think initiatives such as 'Home is a Holy Place' should include and actively promote Marriage as a Vocation, a Covenant and a Sacrament. The following is a reflection on these three important aspects of Christian Marriage.



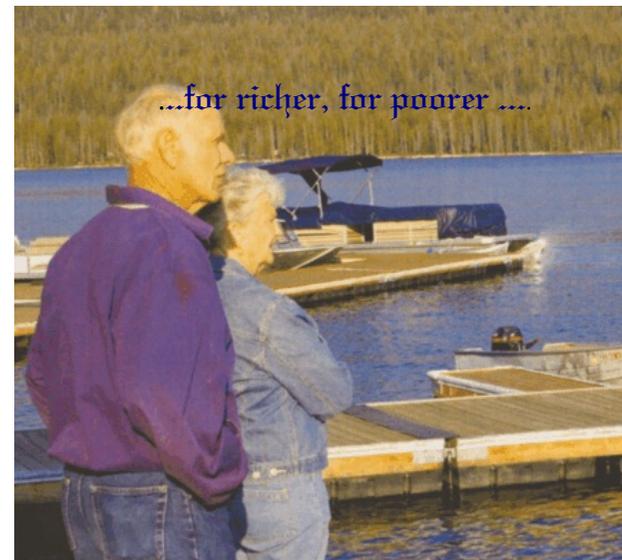
Marriage is a Vocation

In the image of God...male and female he created them ...be fruitful, multiply (Gen 1:27-28)

From the beginning of humanity, men and women have been called by God to live in a lifelong, fruitful, i.e. unifying and procreating, relationship. This belief is based on the two Genesis accounts of creation that reveal that the vocation of marriage is incorporated in the very nature of men and women as they come from the hand of the Creator. Genesis sets out the first theological 'treatise' related to the union of man and woman. This shows the importance of relationship and the equality of male and female under God and before God. Physically and by natural instinct they are made for union with each other. Here we find God's plan for marriage: the loving relationship of husband and wife, created *in the image of God*, a union reflecting that of God who, it can be

Rites' or 'Rituals' in which objects, words and actions are used as outward visible signs of a deeper spiritual reality, the way in which a sacramental couple choose to live their life will determine how they reflect God's love. Vatican II refocused sacramental marriage as 'a communion of love and life' and although not denigrating the importance of parenting, stressed the significance of the relationship and the need for the couple to have the utmost care for the quality and life-giving aspects of their love for one another.

On their Wedding Day, the priest asks God to bless the couple within whose relationship the love of God that is invisible, is 'made visible' each day in the love they have for each other, a love that the Priest prays will continue to grow and become increasingly visible as this couple, in countless ways, show their love for each other, for God, their children and others throughout their marriage. On the surface they remain just as they were, 'him and her', but now he has become 'husband' and she has become 'wife', their name now is 'married' and they have become 'couple'. This is their ongoing sacramental sign for the Church.



John Paul II makes the point, Jesus' presence is not a one-off received on the wedding day, but rather he 'accompanies the married couple throughout their lives' (FC 56). In making promises, their solemn binding agreement to each other in front of church witnesses, the couple become a living flesh and blood sacrament of the Church. The rings, together with the

words and actions used in the Marriage Rite, are the outward signs of the covenant commitment the couple make 'before God and his Church'. It is the love of God, alive in them through the power of the Holy Spirit, that enables

Paul powerfully proclaims the dynamic life-giving and unifying principle and potential of marriage. Christian marriage he said should be lived *in the Lord* (1 Cor 7:39). Clearly this ‘message’ manifests how the union of husband and wife is such that behind its human ‘face’ is a spiritual reality filling it with deep significance as well as profound meaning and purpose. The commitment of a Christian married couple to such a way of life, is shown by their willingness to deepen their understanding of all that is involved when they take each other, ‘to have and to hold, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish till death us do part’. It involves each person being willing to look at all the ‘baggage’ they bring into the relationship, to explore significant differences in their family backgrounds, to share their expectations of marriage and their attitudes to ‘life’ issues.



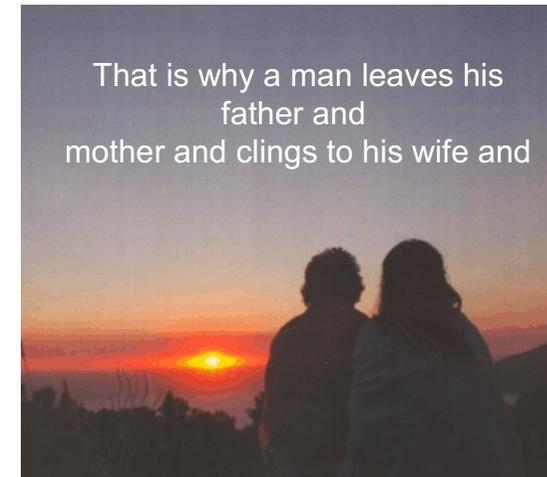
This includes bringing life to each other at every stage of their marriage, and a readiness to ‘accept children lovingly from God’. This is shown by their openness to equip themselves for the responsibilities involved in growing in relationship and bringing up their children ‘according to the law of Christ and his Church’. This means them embracing romance and joy throughout their life together, as well as times of disillusionment, hurt and the need for forgiveness

and reconciliation. For this, they need the strength that comes from the active power and presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. These resources are readily available as God’s gift, but will be developed through a strong relationship with each other and with God through prayer, especially together, and the sacraments.

Creation is the first visible expression of the invisible love of God, especially the creation of man and woman. This includes their sexuality and its intended ‘fruit’, first in the reality of their love and then the expression of their love with names: their children. Whilst God in his love and providence provides for their sustenance and well-being, it is the quality of their choices that will result in the effectiveness of their love for each other and those around them. So just as sacraments involve ‘Sacred



said, looking from a New Testament perspective, is Love, Unity and Persons in a Relationship of Being. They are called to be ‘one flesh’, including sexual intercourse, which is intended to strengthen their love and their unity and partake in the creative love of God.



There is a great need for Christian couples to comprehend more fully the nature of loving one’s partner and one’s self in their sexual relationship and its place in God’s plan. They are also called to *increase and multiply and fill the earth and make it yours*. So in loving one another and satisfying their desire for unity: *to become one flesh*, they are by God’s grace and intention enabled to co-operate with him in the awe-inspiring privilege of the creation of another human being. So God’s plan for a man and a woman in marriage has a unitive and a procreative purpose, each distinct but inter-related. Since God created them man and woman, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves us. There is only one love: God’s. Married couples experience God’s love through their human ways of relating and minister his love to each other in and through the everyday aspects of their lives together. Nevertheless, the love we receive and the love we minister to each other is imperfect. There is ‘disorder’ brought about by ignorance, by differences in language, culture, expectations, attitudes, selfishness, pride and so on. All these factors make it difficult for couples to live out their commitment to love. But the graces from God that have been made available to them make it possible for reconciliation in their relationship.



Marriage as a Covenant

The promises of God through his prophets are for you, and you share in the covenant which God made with your ancestors (Acts 3:25).

In addition to the Genesis concept of marriage, a Christian marriage involves a **covenanted relationship**. John Paul II spoke of marriage as the ‘covenant of love and fidelity’ (cf. FC 13, 51). It involves solemn promises that can only be ended by the death of one of the partners.

On their Wedding Day a man and a woman enter into a covenanted commitment in which they freely consent to love each other unconditionally in imitation of the unconditional love that Christ showed for all the people of God. Jesus made it clear that the Genesis



account of marriage calls a couple into a life-long covenant commitment, ‘until death us do part’. Such a covenant commitment involves calling upon God by way of a sworn oath to illustrate the strength of the commitment they are making.

HOWEVER, when the covenant involves a sworn oath in which the couple commit themselves to imitating Christ’s unconditional love for his bride, the Church, the covenanted relationship moves to another state, that of a Sacrament.

The Marriage of Two Christians is a Sacrament

This mystery has great significance, but I am applying it to Christ and the Church (Eph 5:32).



For Catholics Marriage is a **‘Sacrament’**, a sacred ‘sign’ or ‘symbol’ in which the husband and wife are called to reflect Christ’s unconditional love for His bride, His people, the Church, in so far as this is humanly possible with the grace of God. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (5:21-33) sees the Christ-Church relationship as a

paradigm of the husband-wife relationship, in that the ‘wholeness’ of the union of the spouses symbolises and reflects the total commitment of Christ to his body, the Church. The parallels are there: a mutual relationship (21), sacrificial (25), a call to purity, holiness and perfection (26-27) that requires ongoing nourishment and a sense of one’s own goodness in and as the Body of Christ (28-29). Paul’s theology on marriage, rooted in rabbinic teaching and founded on the Old Testament (and perhaps influenced by his relationship with Priscilla and Aquilla), is an essential ‘message’ about its importance, relevance and symbolism.