



DIOCESE OF PATERSON

Diocesan Center
777 Valley Road
Clifton, New Jersey 07013

Office of
THE BISHOP

(973) 777-8818 Fax (973) 777-8976

PASTORAL LETTER

MARRIAGE AND A CHURCH WEDDING

To all the faithful, religious, deacons and priests:

*Grace and peace be yours in abundance
through knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*

(2 Pt 1:2)

[1] One of the greatest paintings displayed in the Louvre is Veronese's Wedding Feast at Cana. The artist depicts the first miracle of Jesus at the wedding of Cana in the midst of a sumptuous feast of food and music. Veronese's vivacious style brilliantly joins the Biblical event and the contemporary. The artist places Christ at the very center of a lavish wedding feast of 16th century Venice, because Christ is at the center of every Christian marriage.

[2] The marriage of Christians is never a private event. It is a religious event made sacred by the presence of Christ. It is a union that affects not just two people but the entire community.

[3] The institution of marriage is in the midst of a great cultural crisis. The radical individualism that permeates our society is divorcing marriage from its life-giving roots within the Christian community. Many no longer see marriage as a sacred event. They reduce it to a mere partnership of two individuals.

[4] In fact, the number of marriages is declining. Almost forty-nine percent of adults in the United States between the ages of 18-64 are currently married. This is an all-time low. People are choosing to cohabitate rather than to marry. Almost 18 million Americans are now living with an unmarried partner.

[5] There are twice as many young and middle-aged Americans who cohabitate than there were twenty-five years ago. And, a staggering sixty-six percent of married couples have lived together before they marry. Clearly, the religious significance of a man and woman united by the sacred bond of matrimony is quickly disappearing from the American landscape.

[6] Besides the decline in the numbers of those entering marriage, there has been an increase of those who no longer marry in a church. Couples are choosing to exchange their vows in barns, on farms, on mountains,

PASTORAL LETTER – MARRIAGE AND A CHURCH WEDDING

in hotels, restaurants, country clubs, museums, wineries, in gardens and parks, on boats or at the beach. According to a recent survey, only twenty-six percent of couples in the United States celebrated their wedding in a religious institution. That is almost half the number of ten years ago.

[7] When we Catholics speak of marriage in the Church, we are expressing two meanings to what we say. In the first instance, the word *church* stands for the physical building. It means that the wedding takes place within a church or chapel, a place where the Eucharist is celebrated. In the second instance, the word *Church* signifies the spiritual community of the faithful, not the physical building. In special circumstances, when a marriage is celebrated outside the physical building of a church, a marriage done in accord with Church law and with all the proper dispensations is still considered to take place within the Church, the spiritual community of the faithful.

[8] Sadly, for many young people, the trend today is not to celebrate marriage in the Church. They do not ask for a priest or deacon to witness their vows and bless their marriage. Instead, they arrange for a civil official to witness their vows. Or perhaps even a family member or friend. And, they choose a venue other than a church or chapel. The physical church building is not what it was for their grandparents, a center of worship and social contact. Nonetheless, the reasons for marriage in the Church in both senses of the word are significant and compelling.

[9] Marriage cannot be divorced from God. It has been sacred from the very first moment of creation. At the very moment God formed man and woman in his own image and likeness, he united them in marriage. “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Increase and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it’” (Gn 1:28). This blessing of marriage is the one blessing not forfeited by the Flood. God’s original purpose for man and woman remains.

[10] The Church did not invent marriage. It came from the hands of the Creator. Sacred Scripture itself defines marriage when it says: “A man will leave his father and mother and will cleave to his wife, and they will become one flesh (Gn 2:24).” “It is a sacrament of the Creator of the universe, hence, it is engraved in the human being himself... [Marriage] is really ‘con-created’ with man as such, as a fruit of the dynamism of love in which the man and the woman find themselves and thus also find the Creator who called them to love” (Pope Benedict XVI, “Encounter with Youth,” St. Peter’s Square, April 6, 2006).

[11] During his public ministry, some Pharisees tested Jesus about marriage. They asked him, “Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?” (Mk 10:2) The Pharisees were hotly debating this question. The School of Shammai was strict. It allowed divorce only for sexual immorality. The School of Hillel was lax. Anything that a wife did that displeased her husband was grounds for divorce. They wanted Jesus’ opinion as a rabbi.

[12] But there is more to their question than theology. They were clearly trying to set a trap for him. Herod Antipas had only recently divorced his wife to marry Herodias who had divorced her husband. People were scandalized by this and were chattering about it. John the Baptist had spoken against it and was executed for condemning it (Mark 6:17ff). Those who question Jesus want him to say something that will offend Herod and precipitate the swift and untimely end of his ministry and life. Jesus wisely avoids the trap they set.

[13] In response to their question, Jesus returns to the original meaning of the union of man and woman. He says, “From the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female. 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

PASTORAL LETTER – MARRIAGE AND A CHURCH WEDDING

two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate” Mk 10:6-9). In God’s plan for human happiness, marriage is meant to be indissoluble, the lifelong gift of the spouses to each other.

[14] Already in the Old Testament, the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea saw this understanding of marriage as an icon of the love of God for his people. Jeremiah speaks of God marrying and becoming the husband of Israel (Jer 3:14; 31:32). In Isaiah, the Lord refers to himself as a bridegroom of the house of Israel: “For your Maker is your husband; the Lord of hosts is his name” (Is 54:5). And, Hosea uses his love in a troubled marriage as the faithful, unrelenting, forgiving love of God for his unfaithful people (Hos 1-3; cf. Ez 16).

[15] In the New Testament, Paul further teaches that marriage is an image of Christ’s love for his Church. Just as Christ loves us totally, remaining faithful in his love to us, so must be the love of Christian husband and wife. Marriage, thus, is not a mere civil or legal contract with mutual obligations and responsibility.

[16] The total giving of one spouse to the other is an expression of divine love revealed in Christ. It is sacrificial love, dying to oneself for the good of the other. The fidelity of husband and wife even in the face of failures is an image for others of God’s unconditional love for us in Christ. (Eph 5:21-33) This is why Paul calls it “a profound mystery” (Eph 5:33). The Greek word *μυστήριον* (mystery) means something hidden and now made known. Thus, the full meaning of marriage foreshadowed and present from the very beginning is now revealed in Christ.

[17] Because of the deep meaning and importance of marriage, Jesus chose to begin his ministry in the midst of a wedding feast at Cana. Most likely, the spouses were relatives of Mary and she arrived before Jesus. This is the only occasion in Sacred Scripture where Mary is mentioned before Jesus. Jesus attends the celebration along with his first disciples. At a certain point in the festivities that could have lasted as long as a week, the wine ran out. A disaster. As the rabbis say, “No wine, no joy.” And so, at the request of Mary, Jesus worked his first miracle.

[18] He turns six stone jugs of water into wine. So good is the wine that the headwaiter, not knowing where it had come from, says to the bridegroom, “Everyone serves good wine first, and then when people have drunk freely, an inferior one; but you have kept the good wine until now” (Jn 2:10). By this miracle, Jesus blesses the joy of every marriage.

[19] As Venerable Fulton Sheen once preached, “It is a beautiful and a consoling thought that our Blessed Lord, who came to teach sacrifice and urge us to take up our cross daily, should have begun His public life by assisting at a marriage feast.” Christ wills to be present at every Christian marriage, changing by his grace the water of human love into the wine of divine love. Christ’s presence at Cana confirms the goodness and the holiness of marriage.

[20] Many today are unaware of the deep religious significance of marriage. Marriage comes from the hands of the Creator himself. It is not a simple arrangement to live together. Marriage is not only for the husband and wife. It is a commitment to cooperate with God in building up the human family. In fact, because marriage is a sacrament, a symbol of Christ’s love for the Church, it is God’s way to build up the world.

[21] When couples choose to have a wedding in church, they spend time in preparation and prayer. They

PASTORAL LETTER – MARRIAGE AND A CHURCH WEDDING

are made to see that marriage is not a mere social contract, but a sacred vocation. And they are better prepared to live out their commitment. When marriage weakens, society worsens. A wedding in the Church is the way to begin a strong marriage.

[22] Some will argue that God is everywhere and that there is no need to celebrate marriage within a church. God is everywhere indeed. He is in parks and at bus stops, in a beautiful mansion and in a wretched hovel. Yet, who would choose to solemnize their vows at a bus stop or train station? The place is important. It says something about the event. So why a wedding in the Church? It best expresses what marriage truly is.

[23] In Veronese's magnificent painting of the Wedding at Cana, there is a small detail that should not be missed. At the top of the painting, right above Jesus, an animal is being slaughtered. The animal foreshadows the sacrifice of Jesus as the Lamb of God. Cana and Calvary are one. Jesus begins his public ministry at a wedding where water runs into wine. He ends his life on the Cross where wine runs into blood. In his blood is established the new covenant, God's undying love for his people.

[24] "The married couple are...a permanent reminder for the Church of what took place on the cross; they are for one another and for their children witnesses of the salvation in which they share through the sacrament" (Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 72). Thus, it is most appropriate that a Catholic marriage begin in the church at the altar. For here, the great mystery of our redemption, the new covenant, is made present in the Eucharist, the sacrifice and sacrament of love. And marriage symbolizes this great mystery.

[25] It does not take a perfect man and a perfect woman to make a perfect marriage. But, it does take a man and a woman in union with Christ. Contrary to every trend and fad of our age, a Church wedding, therefore, is the best portal to a good marriage.

*Given at the Pastoral Center of the Diocese of Paterson,
on the Feast of St. Matthew, the twenty-first day of September
in the year of Our Lord, two thousand and nineteen.*

+ Arthur J. Serratelli

+Arthur J. Serratelli, S.T.D., S.S.L., D.D.
Bishop of Paterson

Sr. Joan Daniel Healy, SCC

Sr. Joan Daniel Healy, SCC
Chancellor