

## **Not a Single Divorce in Town**

*As you may know, Pope Francis has called for an Extraordinary Synod of Bishops to meet this October on the topic of the Family and Marriage. As such, I thought we'd do a little reflecting on marriage ourselves. The following article is one that I share with all of my couples who are going through marriage preparation. It is a beautiful meditation on how, for the Christian, married love is a reflection of the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. May the Holy Spirit of Christ's Cross purge away the spirit of divorce in our own country.*

In the town of Siroki-Brijeg, Croatia, not one single divorce has been recorded among its 13,000 inhabitants. Not one single family has broken up in living memory. Does Herzegovina enjoy a special favor from heaven? Is there a magic formula that keeps the demon of division at bay?

The answer is very simple: For centuries (because of the pressure from the Turks and then the Communists) the people suffered cruelly as their Christian faith was always threatened. They knew through experience that salvation comes through the Cross of Christ. It does not come from disarmament plans, from humanitarian aid or peace treaties, even if these things may bring limited benefits. The source of salvation is the Cross of Christ! These people possess a wisdom that does not allow them to be duped over questions of life and death. That is why they have indissolubly linked marriage with the Cross of Christ.

The Croatian marriage tradition is so beautiful that it is beginning to take hold in Europe and America. When a young couple is preparing for marriage, they are not told that they have found the ideal partner. No! What does the priest say? "You have found your cross. And it is a cross to be loved, to be carried, a cross not to be thrown away, but to be cherished." In Herzegovina, the Cross represents the greatest love and the crucifix is the treasure of the home.

When the bride and groom set off for the church, they bring a crucifix with them. The priest blesses the crucifix, which takes on a central role during the exchange of vows. The bride places her right hand on the crucifix and the groom places his hand over hers. Thus the two hands are bound together on the cross. The priest covers their hands with his stole as they proclaim their vows to be faithful, according to the rites of the Church. The bride and groom do not then kiss each other, they rather kiss the cross. Anyone close enough to see their two hands joined over the cross understands clearly that if the husband abandons his wife or if the wife abandons her husband, they let go of the cross. And if they abandon the cross, they have nothing left. They have lost everything for they have abandoned Jesus.

After the ceremony, the newlyweds bring the crucifix back and give it a place of honor in their home. It becomes the focal point of family prayer. When a trouble arises, or a conflict breaks out, it is before this cross that they will seek help. They will not go to a lawyer, they will not consult a fortune-teller or an astrologer, and they will not rely on a psychologist to solve the problem. They will go straight before their Jesus. They will get on their knees there and weep their tears and pour out their hearts, and exchange their forgiveness. They will not go to sleep with a heavy heart because they will have turned to the only One who has the power to save. They will teach their children to kiss the cross every day and not to go to sleep like pagans

without having thanked Jesus first. They know that Jesus is holding them in His arms and there is nothing to be afraid of.

### **Encouragement for Divorced Parishioners**

I mentioned the other week that, with the upcoming Synod in Rome on Marriage and the Family, I will be putting some reflections in the bulletin on the sanctity and dignity of marriage. At the same time, I want to express my solidarity with those in our parish who have been through a divorce for legitimate reasons. While it is true that we Catholics discourage divorce and do not recognize any effect from such a civil action, that does not mean that we should shun our brothers and sisters who have the misfortune of going through a divorce. It is certainly not my wish to hurt or alienate anyone in our parish by reflecting on the beauty of Holy Matrimony. Rather, I encourage all of you IHM parishioners who have been through a divorce to be actively involved in our parish. Perhaps the divorce was not your fault, or perhaps it was. Either way, God loves you and wishes to help you find peace and direction in life by following the path He is laying out for you. He will forgive you and will help you to forgive. It is my prayer that your own painful experience of going through a divorce will allow you to see for yourself—and remind the rest of us of—how beautiful and mysteriously powerful God’s plan for a holy and healthy marriage is. To the rest of you: I fully expect all of us here at IHM to embrace those parishioners who are divorced and support them in their time of vulnerability. Of course we must have the charity to correct our brothers and sisters when they are in danger of error or sin, but no matter their choice, we must always be willing to take them back with the love of Jesus Christ. Always remember that we are all sinners. We may judge the actions of others, but we must never judge their hearts. Rather, we pray for and support one another as one family in Christ.

### **Marriage Exhortation**

*With the upcoming Extraordinary Synod on the Family and Marriage that Pope Francis has called for this October, let us continue to reflect on the beauty of the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony. The following article is the traditional Marriage Exhortation that may be read to the couple before they exchange their vows. If you’ve ever been to a Confirmation or an Ordination, then you’ve heard similar exhortations. The purpose is to summarize what is most important about the Sacrament for those who are to receive it. While I myself don’t usually read it to couples at the wedding, I do always give it to them to read beforehand. Perhaps you and your spouse might take the time to reflect upon this exhortation this week.*

Dear Children of God,

You are about to enter upon a union which is most sacred and most serious. It is most sacred because it is established by God Himself. By it, He gave to mankind a share in the greatest work of creation, the work of the continuation of the human race. In this way He sanctified human love and enabled man and woman to help each other live as children of God, by sharing a common life under His fatherly love. Because God Himself is its author, marriage is of its very nature a holy institution, requiring of those who enter into it a complete and unreserved giving of self.

However, Christ Our Lord added to the holiness of marriage an even deeper meaning and a higher beauty. He referred to love in marriage to describe His own love for His Church and for the people whom He redeemed by His own blood. He thereby gave Christians a new vision of

what married life should be, a life of self-sacrificing love like His own. It is for this reason that His apostle, St. Paul, clearly states that marriage is now and for all time to be considered a great mystery, intimately bound up with the supernatural union of Christ and the Church, which union is to be its prototype.

This union, then, is most serious, because it will bind you together for life in a relationship so close and so intimate, that it will influence and direct your entire future from this day forward. That future, with its hopes and disappointments, its successes and failures, its pleasures and its pains, its joys, and sorrows, is hidden from your eyes. You know that these elements are mingled in every life, and are to be expected in your own. And yet, not knowing what is before you, you take each other for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death. Truly then, these words are most serious.

It is a beautiful tribute to your undoubted faith in each other, that recognizing the full import of the words you are about to exchange, you are nevertheless, so willing and prepared to pronounce them. Because these words involve such solemn obligations, it is most fitting that you rest the security of your wedded life upon the great principle of self-sacrifice. You begin your married life by the voluntary and complete surrender of your individual lives in the interest of that deeper and fuller life you are to have in common. From this day on you will belong entirely to each other, you will be one in mind, one in heart, and one in affections. Whatever sacrifices you may hereafter be required to make to preserve this mutual life, always make them generously. Sacrifice is difficult and trying. Only love can make it easy, and perfect love can make it a joy. We are willing to give in proportion as we love. When love is perfect, the sacrifice is complete. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, and the Son so loved us that He gave Himself for our salvation. "Greater love than this no man has, that a man lay down his life for his friends." No greater blessing can come to your married life than pure conjugal love, loyal and true to the end. Our prayer for you is that this love, with which you join your hands and your hearts today, never fail, but grow deeper and stronger as the years go on.

If you allow true love and the unselfish spirit of perfect sacrifice to guide your every action, you can expect the greatest measure of earthly happiness that may be allotted to us in this vale of tears. The rest is in God's hands. Be assured that God will not fail you in your needs. God pledges you the life-long support of His graces in the Holy Sacrament which you are now going to minister to one another.

### **Things You Won't See at a Catholic Wedding**

by Rev. Lawrence Rice, CSP

*With the upcoming Extraordinary Synod on the Family and Marriage that Pope Francis has called for this October, let us continue to reflect on the beauty of the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony. The following article was taken from the website <[www.foryourmarriage.org](http://www.foryourmarriage.org)>, which is an excellent resource for couples both before and after marriage. It considers our beliefs about marriage in light of what we don't do during our marriage rites.*

There are few events in life that are as steeped in tradition as a wedding. And the traditions surrounding weddings come to us through our families, our friends, our culture, and our religious

traditions. But every religious tradition handles weddings differently, and some of the things that people expect to see and hear are often not part of the Catholic way of celebrating weddings.

For example, in some traditions, at the conclusion of the procession into the Church, the presiding minister may ask, “Who gives this woman to be married?” And the father of the bride will be expected to respond that he, or he and his wife, do. At Catholic weddings, it’s presumed that the bride—and the groom for that matter—give themselves to each other.

If you’ve ever seen a wedding on a television series, you’re probably familiar with the dramatic possibilities that arise when the minister asks, “If anyone knows any reason why these two should not be wed, let him speak now, or forever hold his peace.” Well, we Catholics don’t do that. In many places, notices of up-coming weddings are published, allowing anyone with objections to come forward before we get to the altar.

Another touching moment in most TV weddings is the phrase, “With this ring, I thee wed.” For us Catholics, the moment of the marriage is the exchange of consent, and the speaking of the vows. The ring is a symbol of the union that has already taken place. We bless wedding rings, and they are exchanged with the phrase, “Take this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Another thing we don’t say at Catholic weddings is “I now pronounce you man and wife.” We believe that the couple becomes husband and wife not because the minister declares them to be such, but because they have given their consent and made their vows to each other. The function of the priest or deacon is to preside and witness these vows, not to make the marriage happen. Through all of the ceremony, the emphasis is on what the bride and groom do, and not on anyone else. This celebration of love and unity mirrors the love of God for his people. Ideally, it inspires all of us to be more loving, more committed people.