

Guide for Discussing the Meaning of Christian Marriage with a Couple Seeking Convalidation

The following is a recommended discussion guide for the priest in charge of the formation of a couple seeking convalidation. For some couples it will be possible (and encouraged) to go into much more depth on each of these topics, but for others it will be necessary to provide a very basic understanding of what the sacrament of marriage is and how they are called to live this out.

- I. **Ask: Why are you seeking the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony? Why do you want this?** Are they seeking a convalidation because they hope to be able to serve as a godparent/sponsor? Or has there been an encounter with Christ that has led to a desire for God and the sacraments?

This is a great way to begin the conversation because it allows the priest to get to know more about the couple's background, their story, where they are in their journey of faith, and can also help identify where the couple is in regard to their understanding of Christian marriage.

- II. **What is a Sacrament? What is the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony?**
- a. **An outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace.** Marriage is a concrete sign of God's presence and a conduit of God's grace that effectively conveys something about God to the world.
 - b. **Marriage is a part of God's plan of salvation.** Scripture is a story of marriage from the very beginning (Adam and Eve in Genesis) and it ends with the wedding of Christ and His bride the Church (Book of Revelation). God created us out of love and for love, and in the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony the love between spouses becomes an image of God's total and faithful love for all of humanity. (See CCC 1602-1605)
 - c. **Contract vs Covenant:** A civil marriage is simply a legal document. There's always an out. Marriage in the Catholic Church is seen in a different way. Marriage is a *covenant*. This means there is a total gift of self to the other for their entire lives, an agreement to help one another to grow in holiness (become saints), and openness to life. (CCC 1601)
 - d. **Marriage is celebrated in the Church for a reason.** While a civil ceremony can happen almost anywhere, a sacramental marriage must take place in the Church because it is a liturgical act and it reflects the union between Christ and His Bride, the Church. (See CCC 1621, 1630, Ephesians 5:32)
 - e. **More than "getting your marriage blessed by the Church."** Convalidation means being united in the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony, which can only take place in the Church before an ordained minister. You are inviting Christ to be at

the center of your marriage.

III. What is required to have a “valid” marriage? (Capacity, Consent, Canonical Form) Review the 3 Questions Before the Consent (See CCC 1625-1632)

a. Have you come here to enter into Marriage without coercion, freely and wholeheartedly?

- i. **Capacity:** psychological capacity (emotional maturity and stability), physical capacity, and freedom from impediments (e.g. previous marriages, vows to a religious order, etc.)
- ii. Are there any previous marriages or other impediments for either person that need to be resolved? (see Pre-nuptial investigation) If there are prior marriages, contact the Tribunal or the Cana Project for assistance in guiding the couple through the process.

b. Are you prepared, as you follow the path of Marriage, to love and honor each other for as long as you both shall live?

- i. **Consent:** to a lifelong marriage and an exclusive marriage. This consent must be given without being forced or manipulated. The Church teaches that marriage is a sacred covenant and therefore we are serious when we say, “until death do us part.” This reflects God’s free, total, faithful, and fruitful love for us. As married couples you are called to be a witness of that love in the world with the grace of the sacrament. In a very real way, this is a call for both the husband and wife to embrace the Cross of Marriage, to die to self, and give a total gift of self to the other. This is what St. Paul is talking about in Ephesians 5:22-27.

Ephesians 5:22-27: “²²Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord.²³For the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church, he himself the savior of the body.²⁴As the church is subordinate to Christ, so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything.²⁵Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her²⁶to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word,²⁷that he might present to himself the church in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

c. Are you prepared to accept children lovingly from God and to bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?

- i. “Marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the begetting and educating of children.” (GS 50) Being open to the gift of children and raising them to know and love God are essential parts of the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony. Marriage and the sexual union are

designed to be both unitive and procreative (love-giving and life-giving). These purposes cannot be separated.

- ii. Remember, the vows reflect how Christ loves us, and Christ did not withhold anything from us. Imagine if Christ had not been willing to give all of himself for us on the cross? Or if He had withheld the gift of Eternal Life for us? It would not make sense. It is the same in marriage. We cannot pick and choose how we will love our spouse; we must be “all in”, even when it comes to the gift of our fertility. Therefore, this question of openness to the children God may give us is a crucial one. By saying yes, it means that every act of intercourse is an invitation for life.
- iii. However, the Church does not teach that every act of intercourse must result in a child. The Church teaches **responsible parenthood** and acknowledges that every couple’s circumstances are different, and the discernment of spacing pregnancies is something between the couple and God. But it is necessary for God to be part of the discernment.
- iv. Also, the Church encourages couples to learn about something called **Natural Family Planning** as a way of working with God’s natural design of fertility. It is a scientific method for observing a woman’s natural signs of fertility and infertility each month. The Diocese of Tyler offers various opportunities for couples to learn about this method. Couples can find a full listing of available courses around the diocese and online on the St. Philip Institute website: www.stphilipinstitute.org/familylife. (see CCC 2370)

Note: The depth of discussion on this would of course depend on the age of the couple; however, at a minimum it is important to present the Church’s teaching on the unitive and procreative aspect of marriage.

d. What is needed for a Catholic wedding?: Canonical Form

White dress, tuxedo, big party, lots of flowers, choral music, and hundreds of guests are commonly raised excuses for not having a wedding. All that is needed for a Catholic wedding is the bride, groom, the minister of the Church (bishop, priest, deacon) and two witnesses. Remember this is *liturgical act*, so it is appropriate that it take place in a Church. As the Bride and Groom you are actually the ministers of the Sacrament, and the priest/deacon is the *witness* of the covenant being formed between the two of you. (see CCC 1663)

- i. Additional “things” that can be used in a wedding:
 - 1. **Rings**- symbol of lifelong love and fidelity. While the exchange of rings is a beautiful symbol of each giving of themselves completely

to the other, couples are not required to do so during the matrimonial liturgy. The inability to purchase elaborate rings should never delay the reception of the Sacrament of Matrimony.

2. **Coins/Arras-** The coins are significant because they denote the unconditional love between the husband and wife. The groom pledges to place all his goods into her care. The passing of coins back and forth is a symbol of sharing worldly goods for richer or for poorer.
3. **Lasso/Lazo-** Symbol that the couple is united forever in the sacrament, the unbreakable bond that has been created before God and with God's help.
4. **Bible and Holy Rosary-** The Word of God and the assistance of the Blessed Virgin Mary remind the couple of God's plan for their marriage and the continual intercession of the Mother of God on their behalf. The couple that prays together, stays together. In the Diocese of Tyler these gifts are presented to the couple after the liturgy.

IV. What do the vows mean?

*I, N., take you, N., to be my
(wife/husband).*

*I promise to be faithful to
you*

in good times and in bad,

in sickness and in health,

to love you and honor you

all the days of my life.

*I, N., take you, N. for my
lawful wife/husband,*

*to have and to hold from
this day forward,*

for better, for worse,

for richer, for poorer,

in sickness and in health,

to love and to cherish

until death do us part.

- a. Notice how the vows reflect that call to **free, total, faithful, and fruitful love**. It is a total gift of self, for the rest of your lives. The only way we can make this promise is with the grace that comes from God in the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony, otherwise it would be *impossible!*
- b. As a married couple you are called to live out these vows **daily**. Also, it is important to remember that every time you are united in the marital embrace

you are renewing these vows. Therefore, the Church teaches that sexual relations should only occur within the Sacrament of Marriage. We cannot promise these vows without the grace that comes from the sacrament!

V. The Importance of Confession and Encouraging Couples to Time of Abstinence before Convalidation (from Fr. Lowry's article)

- a. **As Christ's ministers of reconciliation, we should encourage the couple to go to confession at a determined time** — certainly before the convalidation rite (Rite of Matrimony) takes place — but even weeks or months before the convalidation. Of course, we cannot require them to go to confession without first explaining the conditions.
- b. **To make a valid confession, they will need to make a commitment to Christ of sexual abstinence until their marriage convalidation.** We as priests need to discuss with the couple in the external forum the amount of time and the sleeping arrangements before the sacrament of confession. It might even be helpful for them to make a pledge to God and to each other in our presence — outside of confession — to help them realize that this is part of their commitment to Christ and each other in formation for holy matrimony.
- c. **Why a time of abstinence?**
 - i. Act of Penance
 - ii. Good way for the couple to communicate verbally in their time of marriage formation instead of solving their problems with sex.
 - iii. In order that they can begin receiving the Holy Eucharist (Strengthened and healed by Christ's Body and Blood). This should not be done publicly at risk of causing scandal. The couple should make arrangements with the pastor to receive the Eucharist privately.
 - iv. Encourages the couple to look forward to a new honeymoon the night of their convalidation — that for the first time ever God will sanctify their sexual embrace after a time of hopeful abstinence.
- d. **Ongoing Encouragement and Reminder of God's Mercy**
 - i. Because they are human, the couple may fail. They need to be reminded that if they fall, they should come to confession as soon as possible, not receive Holy Communion until sacramentally absolved, and simply begin again. Our hope is that their period of abstinence, confession, and receiving Holy Communion during marriage formation will bring them closer to Christ and each other in this life and more perfectly reflect the mystery to which St. Paul refers in his Letter to the Ephesians, that is, the love of Christ and His spotless bride, the Church.