

Through the Years

In the marriage covenant, two individuals become 'we', walking together into the future. The wedding is the beginning. Romantic love will develop and mature into a commitment of enduring and deepening love. A married couple will find themselves renewing their commitment and their decision to be with each other many times, as their marriage relationship develops and grows and as, together, they encounter life's joys, sorrows and challenges. In the sharing of life, love and intimacy, each partner helps the other to become the best person God calls each to be - a 'whole' (and holy) person.

Helpful contacts and resources:

FOCCUS

A program based on a set of statements designed to assist couples communicate at a deeper level on; expectations, family, friends, interests, religion, sexuality, relationship and communication skills. Participation in FOCCUS is available through your local parish and Centacare.

Centacare:

www.centacare-sandhurst.org.au

Centacare offers a range of interesting, interactive and informative workshops to assist couples to prepare for marriage and then, to keep their relationship strong.

Email relationship@centacare-sandhurst.org.au or call numbers below.

Centacare in the Diocese of Sandhurst is also a place of hope and healing. It offers a range of counselling and educational services for individuals, couples and families. **Freecall** 1800 461 444 or call (03) 5443 9577 for programs in Bendigo, Shepparton or Echuca And (03) 6056 1861 for programs in Wodonga.

Teams:

<http://www.tol-oceania.org.au> or contact your parish for 'Teams' in the Diocese of Sandhurst. Teams is a lay movement within the Catholic Church supporting couples in discovering Christ's presence in their marriage and helping them to live in Christian fellowship with other couples. The goal of the movement is to help couples live their lives with more strength, light and hope.

Catholic Engaged Encounter:

www.engagedencounter.org Offers a weekend retreat away with other engaged couples and alone together, to prepare for the Sacrament of Marriage and communicate honestly about their prospective life together.

Worldwide Marriage Encounter Australia

www.wvme.org.au Offers weekends to help turn good marriages into great marriages, helping couples discover their best friend and the spark that was there when they first married.

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Sacraments ~ Part 6

Reconciliation

Sacraments of Commitment

Baptism is the first sacrament of commitment when we take on the life of Jesus Christ; his values, hopes and dreams for the coming of God's reign on earth. As life goes on, we begin to know, in the deepest and truest desires of our hearts, the particular way God is calling us to live out all that our Baptism means – a personal vocation. Marriage is such a vocation.



Marriage: Sacrament of Life and Love

Marriage reminds us that God loves all people and God's love is present in every loving relationship.

Every Sacrament is an 'outward sign of an inward grace' – of God's friendship, love and presence. Christian marriage is a sign of God's love. In the life-long exclusive union of a man and woman who love each other, we see that 'God is love' (1 John 4:7). We see God's love in action; in the friendship, the love-giving, self-giving and life-giving; in mutual respect, care and support and in family life. Do good to enemies (Luke 6:31-38); A woman is forgiven (John 8:1-11).

A Convent

The ancient prophets regarded marriage so highly they chose this image to explain God's faithful relationship with the people – a covenant (eg. Hosea 2:1-20). God's covenant love is full of tenderness, compassion and loving kindness (*hesed* in Hebrew).

Jesus recognised the goodness of marriage. He enjoyed celebrating weddings with friends and family (John 2). He used the idea of a wedding feast to describe the Kingdom (or Reign) of God (Matthew 9:15, 22; Luke 14:7-11). In his time, men and women were not equal partners in marriage and men could easily divorce their wives. Jesus reminded the people that marriage was God's great idea, a lifelong committed relationship for the man and the woman (Mark 10:6-9; Matthew 19:4-6; Luke 16:18).

Saint Paul compared the union of a man and woman in marriage to the union of Christ with the Church. Christian marriage reflects a new covenant between God in Jesus and people (Ephesians 5:25-33). It is interesting that Paul seems to place a lesser value on marriage than other vocations. His reasons relate to the common belief of Christians in his time that Jesus would return soon -bringing the end of time as we know it (the 'end times' - the *parousia*).

The Church in our time reaffirms the importance and value of marriage alongside other vocations to which Christians may be called. Marriage has its origin in the God who is Love.

'Authentic married love is caught up into divine love and in the plan of God.'

It is a sacred bond, an 'intimate partnership of married life and love.'

(Vatican II, The Church in the Modern World, par 48).

It is 'a covenant of faithful and fruitful love.'

(Catechism of the Catholic Church, par 1662).

When two people marry, the sacramental sign of God's love and grace - the sign that a marriage has come into being - is the couple's free consent to marry and the vows they make to each other. Two baptised persons, a man and woman, freely commit to life - long love and fidelity. When they do this in the faith community, the spouses confer the Sacrament on each other.

Married love is patterned on Jesus' way of loving: 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends' (Jn 15:12-13).

The sexual union of a married couple is a deep expression of the committed love giving and life - giving that characterises everything about their relationship. This relationship is open to new life, the birth of children and the nurturing of a family - now a little community of life and love.

In Christian Marriage the couple are not just relying on themselves alone to meet the challenges life brings. God's extraordinary love and grace is present in special way through all the ordinary and not so ordinary circumstances of life.

God is present in this sacred bond which does not depend on the couple alone

(The Church in the Modern World, 48).

The Sacrament of Marriage 'gives spouses the grace to love each other with the love with which Christ loved his Church.'

The grace of the sacrament perfects the human love of the spouses'.

(Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1661).

Preparing for Christian Marriage

Because Marriage is such an important life-long partnership, Catholic dioceses ask engaged couples to participate in pre-marriage preparation. With their local parish priest, or another parish leader, the couple explore the sacramental nature of marriage, and the meaning of commitment. They prepare the wedding liturgy. In the parish setting, or with an organisation such as Centacare, engaged couples participate in FOCCUS, a communication task, to help them explore communication and problem solving strategies, marital goals and expectations, family background, staying close as a couple and much more. In some parishes, programs for engaged couples are also led by trained married couples.

A True Marriage

For a man and woman to enter into valid marriage, a true covenant relationship, both parties must be of mature age, unmarried, not closely related by blood or marriage. Both must freely desire marriage, intending to commit themselves to a lifelong covenant of faithful love. Each must be capable of sharing sexual union as an expression of their love and open to the possibility of children.

Celebration of Christian Marriage

In the Catholic tradition, the Marriage Rite is set within the celebration of Eucharist or a Liturgy of the Word. As the rite begins the priest asks, 'Do you come here freely to give yourselves?' A marriage is brought into being when the man and woman express their consent to marry each other and exchange their vows in the presence of the priest, two witnesses and the Christian community. The Priest is the Church's official witness. He blesses the rings for the couple to exchange as symbols of their fidelity and unending love, and imparts a nuptial blessing upon them. While the couple may decide to write their own vows, the traditional words spoken by husband and wife are;

'I.... take you.....to be my wife / husband.

I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health.

I will love you and honour you all the days of my life.'

*This Sacrament flowers over the years
as husband and wife live out their relationship with each other
in the presence of the God of Love revealed in Jesus Christ.*



Support for Married Couples

The Parish community has a role in welcoming and supporting the married couples and families in its midst. Pastoral care for married people and families, support groups and marriage enrichment opportunities are ways that the Church community enables good marriages to become better. 'Teams' is a movement of couples in fellowship with each other, supporting the spirituality of married couples of all ages. Passionist Family Groups also offer support and enrichment for married couples and families. Through Teams and Passionist Family Groups, each of which has a strong presence in the Sandhurst Diocese, couples continue to find Christ's presence, strength and enduring hope in their marriages.

Difficulties

The ideal of a true Christian marriage is one of the greatest gifts of our God of Love. Yet, as we know, some marriages experience difficulties. In such circumstances the Church encourages those who are suffering to receive the Sacraments and to remain close to the Christian community. Fellow parishioners are asked to support those who are hurting. Centacare is one of the organisations providing counselling and support for couples and families who are suffering.

Annulment

If a marriage breaks down, the couple separate and divorce, one or both may seek an annulment. An annulment is the Church's official declaration that a relationship was not a true covenant marriage to begin with, because it lacked an essential factor; commitment, freedom, understanding or maturity. When this declaration is made, the individuals are free to enter into a new true Christian marriage.