

DISCOVER

the Joy of Christ



“Do we really have to have children if we’re married?”

To answer this question, let’s take a closer look at what makes marriage unique, so much so that both society and the Church have given it special status.

What is special about marriage? The first answer I would expect to get is that marriage is a special kind of love. Great. That’s true. In fact, as Catholics we believe that marriage is one path to achieving the perfection of Christ-like love. But is love all there is to it?

Well, I love lots of people. I love my best friend, but I’m not going to marry him. I love my sisters, but I’m not going to marry them either. So there must be something more to it than love.

Yet, this is where our culture tends to stop. It may add the concept of romantic love, which includes physical attraction and a few other elements that I don’t share with my sisters and my best friend. But there’s an inherent problem with defining marriage as romantic love. Romantic love (as our culture understands it) is inherently selfish. Oh - don’t get me wrong. There’s nothing evil about romantic love. It’s a great part of human life. But it doesn’t go far enough for marriage. Romantic love is all about “what’s in it for me.” It makes me feel good. It makes me feel desired. It fulfills my needs.

And here’s where culture goes wrong, if our divorce rate and attitudes toward marriage are any indication. Our culture has come to define marriage as a source of personal fulfillment - something that makes two people happy. That certainly makes such a relationship temporary instead of permanent. We’re hearing more and more in the media (especially from Hollywood) things like, “I just don’t think human beings are made to be stuck in one relationship forever.” Well then we don’t really have marriage, do we? And it would beg the question; why would society and

the Church consider temporary, self-seeking relationships worthy of being elevated to special status?

No, marriage is much more than romance and love. Marriage has special status in society and in the Church because marriage is about family.

In fact, we can summarize the three vows that we profess to each other in the sacramental rite for Holy Matrimony to sound something like this: “I love you so much that I want to commit my entire self to you for the rest of my life so we can raise a family together.”

It all starts with love and romance. As spouses learn to love each other more and more, they create an environment of love. They then welcome new life into that environment and nurture that new life in love. Then together the family grows in selfless, Christ-like love, and parents lead their children through their own love to the very love of God.

OK, that’s the full perspective of marriage as Jesus instituted it as a Sacrament. What about society? The very reason that society gives special status and special benefits to marriages is because marriages create families. Studies have shown time and time again that there is no better school than the family for the creation of healthy, active citizens who will look out for each other’s good. So that’s why (historically speaking) society has given special legal status to marriage.

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DIocese of LA CROSSE, WI

I hope you're seeing that the answer to the question about children is "yes." But we have to make one last point here. What about couples who get married beyond their child-bearing years or couples that get married knowing that they are infertile for one reason or another? Neither the Church nor society has any interest in operating from exceptions. The general rule is that if a couple is biologically compatible for the creation of new life (a male and a female who are able to complete the marital act), they can get married. The problem comes when we try to make the exception into the rule: "Well, if it's OK for them, then it should be OK for any two people who want to get married whether or not they are biologically capable of having children." The exception is not the rule. The exception is simply an attempt to handle the messiness of human life.

One sign that we have fallen too much into the changing cultural mindset about marriage is that children are seen as either a burden (if you don't "want" them) or as an expensive luxury item (if you do want them). But children are not a commodity. They are not a pathway to self-fulfillment. They are personal manifestations of a committed selfless love that creates new life - and they are people to be loved and sacrificed for. And that is their beauty.

Let's all pray for the grace to be more open to loving like Christ - with life-giving, generous love.

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