

# A BRIEF CONSIDERATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE

FROM A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE FOR PENTECOSTAL CHRISTIANS

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## Abstract

In this article Kedjerski attempts to highlight areas of convergence between Pentecostal and Catholic understandings of the covenant of marriage while at the same time explicating the divergences of their respective theologies of marriage. He begins with a personal testimony as to why it is important, particularly for Pentecostals and other Christians, to understand why the ritual associated with marriage is important to Catholics. Then he proceeds to explain the Catholic view of marriage as a sacrament that could be intelligible to Pentecostal audiences, including the place of the Holy Spirit in the ritual and living out of marriage. Subsequent to this explanation Kedjerski explores three ways in which marriage is unique among the sacraments in the Catholic Church and then concludes with a consideration of three challenges to living out Christian marriage today that impact both Catholic and Pentecostal congregations.

## Contextualization

This dialogue of representatives from the Pentecostal Charismatic Churches of North America and the US Conference of Catholic Bishops now concludes its reflections on ritual/liturgy/sacraments with a consideration of the final traditional grouping of sacraments in Catholic theology, the “Sacraments of Vocation or Service.” This topic connotes an emphasis on Christian discipleship that has been a constant ancillary theme throughout all of our discussions. All of our conversations have included respectful efforts by both Catholics and Pentecostals to aid each other in our attempts to follow the Lord Jesus in our contemporary contexts. Hence it is fitting to conclude this round of dialogues with a consideration of the sacraments that, according to a Catholic perspective, confer the grace necessary for discipleship in the context of two vocations: the vocation to formalized and official church service as a member of the clergy, and the

vocation to serve the Church and the world as husband and wife in the context of what Catholics refer to as the domestic church, the family.

While Martin Mittelstadt has chosen to consider this topic as a whole, representing the Pentecostal tradition, Leonardo Gajardo and I have divided up the Sacraments of Vocation/Service, with Leo taking on the Sacrament of Holy Orders, leaving me to offer these brief reflections on the Sacrament of Marriage in the life of the Catholic Church. Although I am an ordained priest who has promised to live in celibate chastity as a way to proclaim the kingdom of God, I write this article from the perspective of one who not only has witnessed numerous marriage liturgies in my over twenty years of priestly service, but has also grown up in a Catholic Christian family and witnessed, as a son, the living out of the Sacrament of Marriage by my parents. I look forward to the dialogue that will aid me in widening my perspectives and humbly hope for an openness from others to ways in which this article might enrich their own awareness of other points of view.

## **Introduction**

Much ink has been spilled by Catholic theologians and canonists on the ethics and canonical dimensions of marriage and human sexuality. Given the synthetic nature of Catholic belief and practice it is not possible to ignore these essential elements of a Catholic understanding of marriage, yet the major emphasis of this article will be on the overall topic of our dialogue, our understanding of ritual and sacraments, as they relate to marriage. This topic will be developed through a) a personal testimony that will underscore the importance Catholics place on the use of what the Church deems to be valid rituals for marriage; b) a basic explanation of a Catholic understanding of marriage as a sacrament; c) a consideration of three aspects of the Sacrament of Marriage that make it unique from the other sacraments; and finally d) a brief exploration of contemporary challenges the Catholic Church faces in regard to current practices related to marriage. This topic will surely be the impetus for a lively exchange.

## **Personal Testimony**

Pentecostals generally find great value in personal testimony and witness to the working of God in the lives of Christians. Hence, I wish to begin this paper with an account of a personal experience that impacted members of my family and demonstrates why it is important for Pentecostals and Christians from other traditions to recognize the importance Catholics place on the proper matter and form of the Sacrament of Marriage. My mother's parents met while working at factories in Detroit during the Second World War, both of them motivated by the war effort to do their parts for the nation. My grandmother was an active member of the Church of Christ in Tennessee, a

daily Bible reader ardently in favor of her strand of the Stone-Campbell movement's prohibition of the use of instrumental music in worship. My grandfather, on the other hand, was a Brooklyn-born son of Italian immigrants and a nominally practicing Catholic. Soon after, they fell in love and were married before a Justice of the Peace. My grandfather moved back to Brooklyn with my grandmother and a promise that he would help her to keep in touch and visit her family down in Tennessee and Kentucky. Regrettably, early in their marriage my grandfather almost lost his life, and his family members urged my grandmother to call a priest to his side to offer him the last sacraments. Yet upon learning that my grandparents were not married with the blessing of the Church the priest called upon quickly left their home without offering any prayers. My grandfather did recover from his injuries, and then he and my grandmother approached the Church to seek a blessing on their marriage. The Catholic marriage of my grandparents did not take place with the pomp and circumstance usually associated with Catholic rituals. Instead, a very simple, quiet ceremony was held, not in the church building, but in the rectory, the office and home of the parish priests.

This was the ordinary manner in which the Catholic Church treated ecumenical couples before the expansion of horizon<sup>1</sup> precipitated by the Second Vatican Council's documents on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) and Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*) that enabled Catholics to develop a far more positive view toward relations with Christians of other denominations. Joseph Champlin, one of the most well-known authors of materials for couples preparing for their weddings in the Catholic Church,<sup>2</sup> has noted the progression of the manner in which ecumenical couples preparing for Catholic marriage have been treated, at least here in the United States.

The celebration of interreligious or mixed marriages, i.e., the wedding of a Catholic and one who is not a Catholic, has undergone significant modifications within the past half-century. For example, in the 1940s, the exchange of vows took place in the rectory or outside the church, in the 1950s, such weddings might be celebrated in the church, but outside the sanctuary; in the 1960s these moved inside the sanctuary; in the 1970s, they might include a previously prohibited nuptial Mass and blessing. This gradual change represents the church's attempt to

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Lonergan's *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for Lonergan Research Institute of Regis College, Toronto, 1971) explains the epistemological concept of "horizon" and offers an accurate description of what one could consider the shift in emphasis in the Catholic Church with the Second Vatican Council on other Christian traditions and in fact the nature of dialogue with the outside world in general: "A vertical exercise [of freedom] is the set of judgments and decisions by which we move from one horizon to another. Now there may be a sequence of such vertical exercises of freedom, and in each case the new horizon, though notably deeper and broader and richer, none the less is consonant with the old and a development out of its potentialities" (237).

<sup>2</sup> Champlin authored a book entitled *Together for Life* that laid out the Second Vatican Council's revision of the marriage liturgy and enabled the couples to choose options for Scripture readings and prayers. My parents used the earliest version of this book for their wedding in 1971 and it is still, in a form that has been updated numerous times, used frequently.

balance two pastoral concerns: the church wishes to encourage marital unions in which both share the same faith and religious practice, but it also wishes to show great solicitude for the many couples who enter interfaith marriages.<sup>3</sup>

When I consider this event from my family's history, my thoughts regularly turn to how my grandmother must have interpreted the way they were treated by clergy from the Catholic Church. In the context of her faith tradition there was nothing unusual nor immoral about being married before a civil official. The walking out of that priest during the family's hour of need must have been a perplexing and heart-wrenching experience for her. By the grace of God matters have changed, and I do not believe there are any couples today who would experience what my grandparents experienced so many decades ago. Nevertheless, undoubtedly there are still some individuals alive today who carry emotional wounds associated with similar experiences. While the likelihood of being treated similarly is practically impossible (I hope) today there is great value to other Christians coming to appreciate and understand the importance Catholics still place on couples entering into marriages that have the recognition of the Catholic Church, and in the cases of those who are baptized, sacramental marriages.

## Marriage as a Sacrament?

Admittedly, there have been moments in the historic relations between Protestants and Catholics when the notion of marriage as a sacrament was highly polemical, spanning back to the origins of church divisions in the sixteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Some of these polemics may have been rooted in distinct understandings of what constitutes a sacrament<sup>5</sup> and, despite some real theological divergences that remain (which in some

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Champlin, "Marriage," in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 800.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther repudiated the idea of marriage as a sacrament in his *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520) and in his *Small Catechism* (1529) described marriage as worldly business that the Church should not govern nor order but could subsequently bless. Meanwhile the Council of Trent declared: "If anyone says that matrimony is not truly and properly one of the seven sacraments of the evangelical law, instituted by Christ the Lord, but has been devised by men in the Church and does not confer grace, let him be anathema" and "If anyone says that the Church cannot establish impediments dissolving marriage, or that she has erred in establishing them, let him be anathema" (Twenty-Fourth Session).

<sup>5</sup> While the *Catechism of the Council of Trent* defines a sacrament, in accord with the writings of St. Augustine, as "a sign of a sacred thing" (De. Civ. Dei, lib. x. c. 5), and St. Bernard of Clairvaux as "a visible sign of an invisible grace, instituted for our justification" (Serm. De Coen. Dom. C. 2) (Rockford, IL: Tan Publishers, 1982). One should note that these definitions from Trent have undergone significant development since the sixteenth century. Philip Melancthon defined sacraments as "rites, which have the command of God and to which the promise of grace has been added" (*Apology of the Augsburg Confession*) and John Calvin defined a sacrament as "an earthly sign associated with a promise of God" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*).

cases might be more related to ecclesiology than sacramental theology), these past 500 years have brought with them greater clarity and the exposure of some merely linguistic differences as opposed to distinctions of belief. The language of marriage as “covenant” or “covenantal relationship” to describe Christian marriage is now readily accepted by most Protestant and Catholic theologians.<sup>6</sup> Instead of revisiting the controversies of the past, this section is going to develop how official Catholic teaching (limiting itself to the West although Eastern Christian theology also recognizes marriage as a sacrament) came to understand and embrace the marriage of baptized men and women as one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church.

There are clear indications from as early as the dawn of the second century that Christians understood marriage to be holy and, in some way, raised up by Christ from its purely natural state.<sup>7</sup> Marriage was the last of the seven sacraments to be designated as such by the Catholic Church.<sup>8</sup> The first indication of its official recognition as a sacrament is from the Council of Verona in 1184, considerably late in the two-thousand-year history of the Church. Two particular issues proved challenging to the Church’s officially embracing marriage as a sacrament. The first was the influence of

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<sup>6</sup> Catholic theologian Michael Lawler highlights the Catholic Church’s official acceptance of the language of covenant in reference to marriage in its document on the Church in the modern world (*Gaudium et Spes*) in his book *Secular Marriage—Christian Sacrament* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992): “Marriage is described in that Constitution as a ‘community of love’ (n. 47), an ‘intimate partnership of conjugal life and love’” (n. 48). The council’s position could not be clearer. In the face of strident demands to downplay the conjugal love of the spouses, it declared that love to be of the very essence of marriage. The intimate partnership of life and love is rooted in a “conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent” (n. 48). Again, when faced with demands to retain the juridical and Gasparian word *contract* as a precise way to speak of marriage, the council demurred, and chose instead the more biblical word *covenant*. This choice firmly locates marriage as a personal, rather than an exclusively legal, reality and brings it into line with the covenant relationship between Christ and his church. The interpersonal character of the marriage covenant is further underscored by the choice, again in the face of a chorus of demands to the contrary, of a way to characterize the formal object of the covenanting.” Given the language of marriage as covenant is biblically rooted it is ubiquitous in Protestant scholarship. Protestant authors who have written on marriage as a covenant include Paul F. Palmer, “Christian Marriage: Contract or Covenant,” *Theological Studies* 33:4 (1972), 639–65; Jack O. Balswick and Judith K. Balswick, *A Model for Marriage: Covenant, Grace, Empowerment and Intimacy* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006); Gary D. Chapman, *Covenant Marriage: Building Communication and Intimacy* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003); and the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979) states “Christian Marriage is a solemn and public covenant between a man and a woman in the presence of God” (422).

<sup>7</sup> “From the beginning the Fathers regarded marriage as a religious affair. St. Ignatius of Antioch (+ about 107) demands the cooperation of the Church in the contracting of marriage. ‘It befits the bridegroom and the bride to enter the nuptial relationship with the approval of the bishop so that the marriage may be according to the Lord and not according to concupiscence’ (Pl. 5, 2). Tertullian also attests that marriage was contracted before the Church: ‘How shall I be able to describe the happiness of a marriage which the Church performs, the offering of the sacrifice ratifies, and the blessing seals, to which the angels assent, and which the Heavenly Father recognizes?’” (*Ad Uxorem* II 9), taken from Dr. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford, IL: Tan Publishers), 401.

<sup>8</sup> A. M. Roguet, *Christ Acts through the Sacraments* (Melbourne, Australia: Hassell Street Press, 2021), 126.

schools of thought that denigrated the material and flesh and the second was the question of whether or not Christian marriage actually involves a conferral of grace (which, to Catholics, is an essential quality of each of the seven sacraments).

Matthew Levering has acknowledged that a significant factor in the Church's discernment of the sacramentality of marriage "was the Church's reaction to the twelfth century spread of Catharist and Albigensian rejection of the goodness of marriage."<sup>9</sup> For those who reject the value of materiality, the goodness of an institution, which many times results in the co-creation of new, enfleshed life, is problematic. There were also strains of thought prior to the twelfth century that questioned the inherent goodness of marriage, such as St. Jerome's notion that marriage was established subsequent to the fall<sup>10</sup> and interpretations of 1 Corinthians 7 that taught Christian marriage is meant to be a kind of "concession" for those who are unable to control their concupiscence. Abstinence, therefore, was understood to be a more "spiritual," and hence, holier state.<sup>11</sup> Thus, inclusion of marriage among the sacraments of the Church emphasizes its divinely ordained goodness and combats Gnostic tendencies to reject the sacredness of the material. As David William Antonio has written, ". . . Matrimony is a way of cooperating in the love and work of God, the Creator. This theological concept has very important implications. It is a break with theology's earlier insistence on the tainting of marriage with sin."<sup>12</sup>

Peter Lombard (1096–1160) included marriage in his own account of the sacraments and defined it in this way: "the marital union [*coniunctio*] of a man and a woman, between legitimate persons, holding together an indivisible way of life."<sup>13</sup> In

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Marriage: Human Marriage as the Image and Sacrament of the Marriage of God and Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2002), 200.

<sup>10</sup> St. Jerome would explain in his letter to Eustachia: "For you know that virginity is natural to man while marriage is a result of the fall, consider that marriage produces virgins, returning in the fruit what it has lost in the root" (Available at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001022.htm>). "Under the influence of Platonic spiritualism, St. Gregory of Nyssa (*De opif. Hom.* 17) declared the sexual differentiation of mankind, and the marriage which is founded on it, to be a consequence of sin, foreseen by God. St. Thomas rejected the teaching of St. Gregory (*S. th.* I 98, 2)." (Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* [Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 2013], 460).

<sup>11</sup> For example, "Tertullian does not understand 7:2 to be an approval of marriage but rather an indulgence. He argues the 'good' of marriage is undermined because it is preferable only in comparison to burning (7:9)." Meron Tekleberhan, "The Reception and Appropriation of 1 Corinthians 7:1–9 in Selected Ethiopic Texts," *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 12 (2015), 235. Contrast these negative views of marriage with the official Catholic teaching articulated by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "Both the sacrament of Matrimony and virginity for the Kingdom of God come from the Lord himself. It is he who gives them meaning and grants them the grace which is indispensable for living them out in conformity with his will. Esteem of virginity for the sake of the kingdom and the Christian understanding of marriage are inseparable, and they reinforce each other" (1620).

<sup>12</sup> David William Antonio, *An Inculturation Model of the Catholic Marriage Ritual* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 8.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Lombard, "Treatise on Marriage," *Sentences*, Book IV.

the sixteenth century the *Catechism of the Council of Trent* would define the Sacrament of Marriage as “the conjugal union of man and woman, contracted between two qualified persons, which obliges them to live together throughout life.”<sup>14</sup> Conspicuously, there is no mention of the conferral of grace in either of these definitions. This should lead one to ponder, why was there a struggle in the Church’s history with understanding marriage as bearing Christ’s grace to the couple and how was the ambiguity resolved?

An aspect of marriage that sets it apart from the other sacraments offers a reason why its grace has not always been at the forefront of the minds of theologians, which even led to some classifying marriage as a “lesser sacrament” than the rest.<sup>15</sup> This is the fact that marriage, unlike all of the other sacraments of the Church, is not a purely Christian phenomenon. Marriage existed before there were Christians and still exists in various forms in every human society. Theologian Bernard Häring once wrote, “I recognize marriage, then, first of all as a secular, earthly reality which Christians have in common with the inhabitants of our pluralistic world, even if we have not the same ideas about its origin and ultimate good.”<sup>16</sup> Originally, the rituals Christians used to enter into marriage were officiated at by the civil authorities just like all other marriages of the time, and subsequently blessed by the clergy.<sup>17</sup> The Catholic Church has always recognized the legitimate rights of the state to regulate and register marriages due to their public, legal ramifications, such as the right to inherit property or access to health care information.<sup>18</sup> While acknowledging the secular dimensions of marriage, it would be incorrect to assume that Catholics believe that marriage was totally conceived and developed by human beings alone. *Gaudium et Spes* articulates this clearly:

The intimate partnership of married life and love has been established by the Creator and qualified by His laws, and is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent. Hence by that human act whereby spouses mutually bestow and accept each other a relationship arises which by divine will and in the eyes of society too is a lasting one. For the good of the spouses and their offspring as well as of society, the existence of the sacred bond no longer depends on human

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<sup>14</sup> *Catechism of the Council of Trent* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1982), 362.

<sup>15</sup> Philip L. Reynolds, *How Marriage Became a Sacrament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 8.

<sup>16</sup> Bernard Häring, *The Sacraments in a Secular Age: A Vision in Depth on Sacramentality and its Impact on the Moral Life* (Boston: St. Paul Publications, 1976), 185.

<sup>17</sup> As Häring observed, “Before the Council of Trent, the validity of a marriage between Christians was never made dependent on a certain canonical celebration. When the Church evangelized the ancient world, she did not change the customary form of marriage, but she was present with the light, the comfort and the pedagogy of the Gospel, and with her prayer and support” (*Sacraments in a Secular Age*, 198).

<sup>18</sup> “The state is entitled to regulate the purely civil legal consequences of the contract of marriage (right of name and state, marital rights of property, right of inheritance), and to settle disputes about these matters” (Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 469). Refer to the 1917 *Code of Canon Law* canon 1016.

decisions alone. For God Himself is the author of matrimony, endowed as it is with various benefits and purposes.<sup>19</sup>

The Creator authored marriage as a means whereby husband and wife are invited to live more fully in the image and likeness of their Creator: “In the design of the Creator, matrimony has always, in all time and all places, had this fundamental sacramental value of freeing the human person from isolation, from imprisonment in selfishness, and committing him or her to the main dynamic of history, which is the growth of love and discernment.”<sup>20</sup>

How did the Catholic Church come to understand that through the Sacrament of Marriage Christ confers grace on the couple? Scripturally, Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, chapter 5, has been claimed as a foundational text to understanding marriage as a sacrament, especially given Paul’s use of the word *μυστήριον*, translated into the Latin *sacramentum*. While it is true that prelates like Cardinal Donald Wuerl have gone so far as to claim that St. Paul referred to marriage as a “sacrament,”<sup>21</sup> at the same time one should be cautious about assigning contemporary understandings of terms to ancient texts. Catholic theologians of the past many times emphasized the term “mystery” as referring to marriage itself, while Protestant theologians instead emphasized the term referring to the relationship of Christ with the church. Scripture scholar Margaret Y. MacDonald reminds us that such interpretations need not be mutually exclusive:

There is some uncertainty as to what exactly constitutes the mystery here. Does it refer to marriage between man and woman, only to Christ and the church, or to both? The apparent lack of clarity may be due to the close association between the two in the author’s own mind. Given the use of the marriage metaphor throughout 5:22–33, it seems best to assume that the term “mystery” encompasses both human marriage (seen as a reflection of divine reality) and the relationship between Christ and the church.<sup>22</sup>

Paul, more than likely influenced by the plethora of marital imagery in the Old Testament related to the Lord’s relationship with Israel, believed that married Christian couples are called to symbolize and proclaim with their lives the relationship of Christ with the church. Undoubtedly, it would be impossible for human beings to fulfill this calling without an abundance of God’s grace.<sup>23</sup> Jesus’ prohibition of divorce in

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<sup>19</sup> ¶ 48.

<sup>20</sup> Häring, *Sacraments in a Secular Age*, 188.

<sup>21</sup> Donald Wuerl, *The Marriage God Wants for You: Why the Sacrament Makes all the Difference* (Frederick, MD: Word Among Us Press, 2015), 39.

<sup>22</sup> Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians/Ephesians*, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 331.

<sup>23</sup> Cardinal Ouellet offers this fine explanation: “. . . because the sacraments effect that of which they are made signs, one must believe that in this sacrament a grace is conferred on those marrying, and that by this grace they are included in the union of Christ and the Church, which is most especially



Matthew 19:10 is another indication of the special grace necessary for Christian marriage:

The alarmed protest of Jesus' disciples against his strict doctrine (Matt 19:10) shows that a special grace is needed for people to live out the truth of Christian marriage. This special grace, Jesus implies, will come to those who have married each other as Christians, that is, within the context of the inaugurated kingdom, the Church. Since people will need a special grace to live out marriage in the way that Jesus intends it to be, Christians who marry will receive this grace.<sup>24</sup>

How exactly does this grace work in the lives of the couples? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes it in this way: "Christ dwells with them, gives them strength to take up their crosses and so follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another's burdens, to 'be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ,' and to love one another with supernatural, tender and fruitful love."<sup>25</sup>

The Catholic Church's marriage rituals have undergone numerous revisions throughout recent centuries amidst calls for the grace of the sacrament to be clearly signified and the duties of the spouses to be more emphasized.<sup>26</sup>

In the judgment of the [Second Vatican] Council Fathers, the Roman Rite promulgated by Pope Paul V in 1614 and still in use before the council did not adequately express the grace of the sacrament and the obligation of the spouses in spite of the modifications introduced by Popes Benedict XIV (1752), Pius IX (1872), Leo XIII (1884), Pius XI (1925) and Pius XII (1952). It was considered too juridical in orientation since it viewed marriage primarily as a contract.<sup>27</sup>

One of the recent developments in theology that precipitated a more explicit connection to the conferral of grace in the ritual has been a greater emphasis on the importance of pneumatology in our understanding of the sacraments:

... the rediscovery of the Holy Spirit in Western theology opens new perspectives for sacramental theology in general and the theology of marriage in particular. The concern to establish the divine institution of the sacrament in the explicit, historical will of Christ in fact resolves a forgetfulness of the Spirit that has impoverished the theology of the sacraments in the West. The Holy Spirit's role is

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necessary to them, that in this way, in fleshly and earthly things, they may purpose not to be disunited from Christ and the Church." See Marc Ouellet, *Mystery and Sacrament of Love: A Theology of Marriage and the Family for the New Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 50.

<sup>24</sup> Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Marriage*, 205.

<sup>25</sup> ¶ 1642.

<sup>26</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, "The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy," *Documents of the Second Vatican Council*, 77.

<sup>27</sup> Antonio, *An Inculturation Model of the Catholic Marriage Ritual*, 1–2.

precisely that of confirming and universalizing the whole truth of Christ. This mission of the Spirit consists in causing the Church, Christ's body and bride, to co-exist as his "helpmate" in giving life to the world.<sup>28</sup>

Liturgically, at the nuptial Mass, which is the rite clearly preferred by the Church for Catholics to enter into the Sacrament of Marriage,<sup>29</sup> a triple epiclesis is invoked. The first and second, which occur at every Catholic Mass, are the invocation of the Holy Spirit over the gifts of bread and wine, that "they may become for us the Body and Blood of Christ," and another over the people, that by partaking of the gifts they might also be transformed into the Body of Christ, bringing his presence to the world. These are found in the Eucharistic prayers. The third epiclesis, which is particular to the nuptial Mass, is invoked over the husband and wife during the nuptial blessing. David William Antonio notes:

In speaking of the modifications introduced in 1991 on the formulas of the nuptial blessing . . . [the] more significant change is the addition of an epiclesis, not only to underline the indispensable role of the Holy Spirit but also to transform this formula into a genuine epicletic prayer. This is intensified by the kneeling posture of the spouses and the extension of hands by the ordained presider over them.<sup>30</sup>

The epicletic elements of the nuptial blessing are expressed in the prayers of the rite in these ways:

Look now with favor on these, your servants, joined together in Marriage, who ask to be strengthened by your blessing. Send down on them the grace of the Holy Spirit and pour your love into their hearts, that they may remain faithful in the Marriage covenant. May the grace of love and peace abide in your daughter (n), and let her always follow the example of those holy women whose praises are sung in the Scriptures. May her husband entrust his heart to her, so that, acknowledging her as his equal and his joint heir to the life of grace, he may show her due honor and cherish her always with the love that Christ has for his Church.<sup>31</sup>

May your abundant blessing, Lord, come down upon this bride (n), and upon (n), her companion for life, and may the power of your Holy Spirit set their hearts aflame from on high, so that, living out together the gift of Matrimony, they may be known for the integrity of their conduct and be recognized as virtuous parents.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ouellet, *Mystery and Sacrament of Love*, 27.

<sup>29</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 78.

<sup>30</sup> Antonio, *An Inculturation Model of the Catholic Marriage Ritual*, 68.

<sup>31</sup> *Order of Celebrating Matrimony*, 73.

<sup>32</sup> *Order of Celebrating Matrimony*, 209

Graciously stretch out your right hand over these your servants (N. and N.)  
we pray, and pour into their hearts the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>33</sup>

It is also interesting to note that in the case of the ritual used in what is considered a non-sacramental marriage, the Holy Spirit is still invoked upon the couple: “. . . may the power of the Holy Spirit set their hearts aflame from on high . . . .”<sup>34</sup> Hence just because a marriage might not be considered “sacramental” does not mean Catholics believe that the Holy Spirit is necessarily absent from it. This brief survey into the challenges to the Catholic understanding of marriage highlights how through the centuries the Church has come to more clearly understand and express it as a sacrament.

## The Essentials of the Sacrament of Marriage

Although the emphasis on the Holy Spirit just mentioned is a welcome addition to the rite that more clearly articulates how marriage is grace-filled, the decision to incorporate an epiclesis into the nuptial blessing was not devoid of some controversy. Liturgical theologian Adrian Nocent wrote about his concern that this incorporation of an epiclesis into the nuptial blessing might make it appear as if the nuptial blessing is an essential moment in the Rite of Marriage for the sake of its validity.<sup>35</sup> Such an idea would be a departure with Western Christianity’s understanding of what to Roman Catholics is the essential matter and form of marriage. This begs the question, what to the Catholic mindset is essential for the Sacrament of Marriage?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* succinctly describes what is essential for the couple to enter into a marriage: “The Church holds the exchange of consent between the spouses to be the indispensable element that ‘makes the marriage.’ If consent is lacking there is no marriage.”<sup>36</sup> While the blessing of a member of the clergy and the expression of the outpouring of grace by the Holy Spirit are cherished by Catholics, ordinarily sought out and not to be omitted in Catholic rites,<sup>37</sup> what is essential for a marriage to take place in the Roman Catholic Church is the expression of consent of the couple. Of course, this consent needs to be freely given. Any form of coercion would render the marriage invalid. Another important point for validity is that the individuals who contract marriage must be free to marry. The canonical basis for determining freedom to marry is outside of the scope of this article but could certainly be included in further discussion.

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<sup>33</sup> *Order of Celebrating Matrimony*, 207.

<sup>34</sup> *Order of Celebrating Matrimony*, 139.

<sup>35</sup> Adrian Nocent, “La nouvelle edition du rituel du mariage,” *Ecclesia Orans* 8 (1991), 330–34.

<sup>36</sup> ¶ 1626.

<sup>37</sup> *Order of Celebrating Matrimony*, 24, 34, 42.

Catholics understand that while some marriages are sacramental there are other marriages that are certainly legitimate unions yet not sacramental. What is it that Catholics understand makes marriage a sacrament? The *Code of Canon Law* specifies it:

The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life and which is ordered by its nature to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring, has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament between the baptized. For this reason, a valid matrimonial contract cannot exist between the baptized without it being by that fact a sacrament.<sup>38</sup>

Hence, when a man and a woman, as baptized Christians, choose to enter into the covenant of marriage, should they do so in a valid manner, Catholics understand their marriages to be a sacrament. “Since they have already been baptized, they already participate in Christ’s filiation in the Spirit; but now they participate as a couple, as the union of man and woman, in the community of the Trinity, which is essentially one, fruitful and indissoluble.”<sup>39</sup> A baptized person and an unbaptized person, or two unbaptized persons, can certainly enter into a legitimate marriage but given Catholics understand baptism to be the gateway to the other sacraments those marriages are not technically considered sacramental.<sup>40</sup>

Contemporary society espouses a multiplicity of views on forms of family life and definitions of marriage. In the above quotation Cardinal Ouellet makes note of the three Augustinian principles about marriage that have been maintained as a part of the Catholic Church’s understanding of marriage for many centuries. Augustine’s treatise, *On the Goods of Marriage*, describes three necessary elements: *proles, fides, and sacramentum*—procreation, fidelity, and the sacrament.<sup>41</sup> More contemporary language used by Catholics renders these terms as: openness to children, unity, and indissolubility. In the *Rite of Marriage*, before the bride and groom offer their consent, they are ceremonially asked if they agree to accept Augustine’s three elements of the “good of marriage”:

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<sup>38</sup> Canon 1055.

<sup>39</sup> Ouellet, *Mystery and Sacrament of Love*, 63.

<sup>40</sup> Antonio also offers a good explanation of the importance of the baptismal identities of those entering into marriage: “By reason of baptism, the sacrament of faith, a man and a woman are once and for all brought into the covenant between Christ and the Church, so that their marital communion is assumed into Christ’s own love and enriched by the power of his sacrifice. As a sacrament of initiation, baptism radically inserts us into the mystery of the covenant relationship between Christ and the Church. In marriage the couple acts out of the covenantal relationship already established in baptism. This is the so-called baptismal foundation of marriage. The reason why marriage is a sacrament is that it is the act of two persons who through baptism have already entered the paschal and covenantal relationship with Christ. The universal call to holiness is given concrete expression in marriage” (*An Inculturation Model of the Catholic Marriage Ritual*, 9–10).

<sup>41</sup> Augustine, *De bon. coni.* 28.32.

N. and N., have you come here to enter into Marriage without coercion, freely and wholeheartedly? [unity – the couple is freely choosing to unite]

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

Are you prepared to accept children lovingly from God and to bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church? [openness to children]<sup>42</sup>

These questions, publicly asked by the officiant during the liturgy, would have already been asked privately when the bride and groom were given their mandatory prenuptial investigation to determine their freedom to marry. That moment of preparation is an opportunity not only to engage in a technical interview but is also a pastoral outreach to the couple, an attempt to aid its discernment of entering into such a serious, lifelong commitment. The questions manifest a Catholic view of the nature and purpose of marriage to all present and a public testimony of the couple's personal belief in the nature of Christian marriage.

### **Three Aspects of Marriage That Make It a Unique Sacrament**

One of the ways in which one can come to better understand a Catholic view of marriage as a sacrament is to isolate those qualities that make marriage unique from the other six. While this is not an exhaustive list, and the Catholic theologians present might wish to bring up others in the conversation, this article will confine itself to three distinct aspects of marriage as a sacrament.

#### **1. From the Secular to the Sacred**

It was previously acknowledged that marriage stands out from the other sacraments in as far as it existed as a non-sacramental reality since the dawn of creation. How, therefore, did this pre-Christian reality take on a sacramental character? To begin with an image, directly across from St. Peter's Basilica in Rome one finds an Egyptian obelisk brought to Rome by the Emperor Caligula in AD 37. The obelisk is crowned with a metal cross that an old tradition says contains relics of the true cross of Christ. This method of taking realities and/or traditions outside of Christianity and "Christening" them was a regular part of early church life. Some scholars suggest that traditions such as the celebration of Christmas at the end of December may have had their roots in pagan festivals. The basilicas of ancient Rome like the Pantheon, which were formerly used to honor pagan gods and goddesses, were transformed into places of Christian worship. The sacraments have in and of themselves this principle of the ordinary being transformed for a far higher purpose. Water is consecrated and used in baptism and

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<sup>42</sup> *Order of Celebrating Matrimony*, 60.

bread and wine in the Eucharist. Marriage falls in line with a civil union becoming something far more meaningful and sanctifying in light of Christ's presence in the lives of the couples.

One can discern how the Church came to recognize that Christ instituted the state of marriage as a sacrament, taking a former reality and transforming it into something renewed, through a brief survey of some of the Scripture texts of the New Testament related to marriage. A text that is frequently used at Catholic marriage liturgies describes the sign of the changing of water into wine by Jesus at the wedding feast of Cana.<sup>43</sup> Through the transformation of the water used for Jewish ceremonial washing into the festive wine, which could be understood as an allusion to the Eucharist as well as the festive rejoicing to be found in the kingdom of God, one could find an intimation to how Christ builds upon the Jewish roots of marriage to create a Christian institution. This brings to mind a related passage of Scripture when Jesus was challenged by the Scribes and Pharisees about the legality of divorce.<sup>44</sup> In this passage Jesus says: "Because of the hardness of your hearts Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) and marries another commits adultery." There has been a longstanding interpretation of this passage in the Catholic tradition related to Jesus returning marriage to what God originally designed marriage to be. Cardinal Ouellet explains:

As a consequence of sin, the sacred institution of marriage was not always respected in the history of the Old Testament. From the time of the patriarchs and the spread of polygamy, Scripture records innumerable transgressions against the holiness of marriage (Gen. 16:1–4; Sam. 1:6; Deut. 21: 15–17). King David, though highly praised in the Bible, had his harem (2 Sam. 16: 20–22) as did Solomon (1 Kings 11:1–13).<sup>45</sup>

Catholic teaching contends that Jesus fully restored marriage to its original dignity and instituted it as a sacrament.<sup>46</sup> John Paul II described it in this way:

The communion between God and his people finds its definitive fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom who loves and gives himself as the Savior of humanity, uniting it to himself as his body. He reveals the original truth of

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<sup>43</sup> John 2:1–12.

<sup>44</sup> Matt 19:1–10.

<sup>45</sup> Ouellet, *Mystery and Sacrament of Love*, 34.

<sup>46</sup> Regarding the idea of Christ instituting the Sacrament of Marriage, Cardinal Ouellet makes this important point: "Vis-à-vis the scholastic tradition, contemporary theology understands the institution of the sacraments from a new angle. Christ is the author of the sacraments, but not because he specified in detail the matter and form of each sacrament. The institution of the particular sacraments appears today, rather, as fundamentally present in the birth of the Church from the paschal mystery" (Ouellet, *Mystery and Sacrament of Love*, 27).

marriage, the truth of the “beginning,” and, freeing man from his hardness of heart, he makes man capable of realizing this truth in its entirety.<sup>47</sup>

Christian marriage becomes distinct from any other form of marriage, because the first relationship husband and wife enter into, through their baptisms, is their relationship to Christ. Subsequent to receiving the Sacrament of Marriage, they relate to Christ, not as individuals, but together as a couple united in him.

## **2. Marriage Can Become Sacramental without Use of the Marriage Ritual**

Catholic marriage rites are used when at least one member of the couple is a baptized Catholic. As was previously mentioned, any validly contracted marriage between a baptized man and a baptized woman is considered by Catholics to be sacramental. In those instances when a baptized person and unbaptized person marry, or two unbaptized persons marry, the marriages they enter into are not considered sacramental. However, should the unbaptized persons choose Christ and become baptized, even without the use of a marriage ritual, their marriages instantaneously become sacramental. This is a very unique quality of the Sacrament of Marriage that demonstrates its connection to the Sacrament of Baptism.

## **3. Bride and Groom as Ministers of the Sacrament**

Quite particular to the Sacrament of Marriage in Roman Catholic theology is the notion that the proper minister of the sacrament is not the clergy who officiate but the husband and wife. The officiant functions in the role of an official witness of the Church. One of the reasons for the Catholic Church becoming involved in regulating and recording marriages was to remedy the problems associated with widespread clandestine marriages before the Council of Trent, which led to individuals, particularly women, being deprived of rights to property and inheritance, and the legitimacy of children being questioned, due to no proof of the marriages taking place.<sup>48</sup> The liturgy is a public event<sup>49</sup> filled with witnesses. The responsibility of the officiant is, on behalf of the Church, to “receive the consent,” in other words, to ensure that the couple freely and properly offers their consent to enter into what bride and groom understand to be a

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<sup>47</sup> *Familiaris Consortio*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> More information on this can be found in Jutta Sperling’s article “Marriage at the Time of the Council of Trent (1560–70): Clandestine Marriages, Kinship Prohibitions, and Dowry Exchange in European Comparison,” *Journal of Early Modern History*, January 8:1–2 (2004), 67–108.

<sup>49</sup> Although there are certain rare circumstances in which Canon Law allows for the “secret celebration of marriage” there are still requirements for the recording of the marriage so that there is some type of proof that it was contracted.

Christian marriage. No one else has the right to give the bride's or groom's lives to anyone else; husband and wife must do so themselves. Given that the husband and wife are the ministers of the Sacrament of Marriage, the Catholic Church even permits them, under extreme circumstances (including the absolute impossibility of securing a member of the clergy or laity authorized by the bishop) to marry each other without an officiant, provided that at least two witnesses are present.<sup>50</sup> This is in major contrast with Eastern Christianity, which understands the minister of the Sacrament of Marriage to be an ordained priest.

These three points, marriage has been transformed by Christ into a sacrament, marriage can become sacramental without use of the marriage ritual, and the bride and groom are the ministers of the Sacrament of Marriage, make Holy Matrimony a unique sacrament in the life of the Catholic Church.

## Challenges

As we conclude this consideration of the Sacrament of Marriage from a Catholic perspective, this article will present four contemporary challenges. Once again, this is not an exhaustive list, and our discussion could expose other areas that some might consider to be even more important challenges than the ones I will bring up to conclude this brief survey.

### 1. Helping Couples Understand Marriage Is Not Just a Day, It Is a Lifetime

Although one can clearly observe that the Rite of Marriage is sacred, most especially because it is conferred in a church setting, couples should recognize the entirety of their married lives as sacred. The Sacrament of Marriage is not only meant to be received, it is meant to be lived by both husband and wife. John Paul II described the importance of this contention well:

. . . the gift of Jesus Christ is not exhausted in the actual celebration of the sacrament of marriage . . . just as husbands and wives receive from the sacrament the gift and responsibility of translating into daily living the sanctification bestowed on them, so the same sacrament confers on them the grace and moral obligation of transforming their whole lives into a "spiritual sacrifice."<sup>51</sup>

The faithfulness and fidelity of married couples signifies the faithfulness and fidelity of Christ to his bride, the Church. Marriage is a sacrament that is "lived into," one in which the couples continue to grow in holiness as they exchange self-sacrificial,

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<sup>50</sup> Canon 1116.

<sup>51</sup> *Familiaris Consortio*, 56.



Christ-like love with each other. Husband and wife carry the graces of the sacrament with them every day of their married lives. Cardinal Ouellet points out how Pope Pius XI compared the grace of the Sacrament of Marriage, which remains with the couple throughout their married lives, to the Eucharist, which, according to Catholic belief, remains the Body and Blood of Christ well after the celebration of the liturgy:

Bellarmino was cited in a key passage of *Casti Connubii*, where Pope Pius XI compares the visible sacramental sign of marriage to the Sacrament of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, the real presence continues under the sacred species, even after the celebration of Mass; similarly, the grace acquired during the wedding celebration continues under the species of the married life even after the celebration is over.<sup>52</sup>

This invocation of a relatedness to the Eucharist is a powerful reminder of the presence of God in the Sacrament of Marriage. Hence it is most appropriate that after the consent of two baptized Catholics in which they become husband and wife, the first action of the newly married couple is sharing at the table of the Lord in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the food for their journey together as husband and wife as they live out the Sacrament of Marriage.

## 2. The “Baptized Unbeliever”

At times Pentecostals might find it perplexing that some Catholics lack fervor or knowledge of even the basics of the faith. A situation that poses a particular quandary for Catholic theology, what one might even call a theological oxymoron, is the “baptized unbeliever.” There are Catholics who consider the faith as an element of their cultural identity as opposed to a phenomenon that is meant to offer direction to their whole lives. While many have different theories as to why this is such a widespread reality in Catholic circles there is none who can question this fact. These individuals who are baptized, and yet may not actively practice their faith or find meaning in it, unless they formally renounce their faith, have an obligation to be married in the Catholic Church (as was mentioned at the beginning of this article). At the same time, however, there is an important sacramental principle that it is essential to have faith in order to receive God’s grace.<sup>53</sup> When the bride and groom approach the Church for

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<sup>52</sup> *Familiaris Consortio*, 68.

<sup>53</sup> A good exploration of this issue was made by the International Theological Commission, “The Reciprocity Between Faith and the Sacraments in the Sacramental Economy,” 3 March 2020, [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va). Pope Benedict XVI said: “Marriage is linked to faith, but not in a general way. Marriage, as a union of faithful and indissoluble love, is based upon the grace that comes from the triune God, who in Christ loved us with a faithful love, even to the Cross. Today we ought to grasp the full truth of this statement, in contrast to the painful reality of many marriages which, unhappily, end badly. There is a clear link between the crisis in faith and the crisis in marriage. And, as the Church has said and witnessed for a long time now, marriage is called to be not only an object but a subject of the new evangelization.” “Holy

marriage, if they are baptized, it is presumed that they have some type of faith. Unfortunately, it is sometimes due to social pressure that they choose to have their weddings in the Church. I am not suggesting that one should judge the faith of the couples, but there have been some who have been honest enough to openly admit this to their clergy. Perhaps it would be wise at some point to include in marriage preparation a greater emphasis on the central role of faith and one's relationship with Christ to Christian marriage. To assist with this, in addition to the usual marriage preparation, the priest or deacon might inquire about their views of the faith and its importance in their lives, as well as make greater efforts to evangelize those couples who find the gospel foreign to their experience.

### **3. “Lack of Due Discretion”**

The third challenge I offer for our reflection is that at this point approximately 50 percent of Catholic marriages, in line with the rest of society, do not end with the death of one of the spouses. When those who seek to remarry in the Catholic Church appeal to church tribunals in order to secure an annulment, the vast majority of declarations of nullity are granted due to a “lack of due discretion” on the part of the groom, the bride, or at times both. This situation should cause the Catholic Church to pause and discern how to better educate couples on the rights, duties, and obligations of marriage. It may be that secular mentalities about marriage, especially questioning the possibility of making a life-long commitment, are so ubiquitous in our society that they are having an influence on couples preparing for marriage who may not even be conscious of this reality. Perhaps a greater emphasis on the theology of marriage, more time to discern with the couple the obligations they are about to undertake, and even a more vigorous insistence that couples delay their marriages until they demonstrate the necessary maturity to enter into marriage, could assist with this challenge. An effort has been made by the Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life to facilitate such an emphasis. In June 2022 it released a document entitled “Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life,”<sup>54</sup> which models marriage preparation after the process of Christian initiation. It suggests the use of three stages in the preparation of couples for marriage: evangelization and discipleship, accompaniment, and catechesis. While such practices might not be popular with couples preparing for marriage due to the commitment of their time

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Mass for the Opening of the Synod of Bishops and Proclamation of St. John of Avila and of St. Hildegard of Bingen as ‘Doctors of the Church,’” 7 October 2012, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2012/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20121007\\_apertura-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20121007_apertura-sinodo.html)).

<sup>54</sup> Available at [http://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/dam/laityfamilylife/amoris-laetitia/OrientamentiCatecumenatrimoniale/Catechumenal%20Pathways\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/dam/laityfamilylife/amoris-laetitia/OrientamentiCatecumenatrimoniale/Catechumenal%20Pathways_ENG.pdf).

during an already busy moment of their lives it could save them a great deal of pain later.

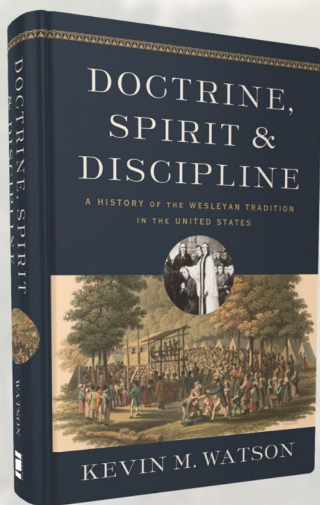
#### 4. Ecumenical and Interreligious Marriages

The final challenge for our reflection brings us back to the beginning of the article, the greater frequency of “mixed marriages”—marriages between Christians of different denominations or even between Christians and individuals of other faith traditions. The Catholic Church, as a faithful mother to her children, requires Catholics to exchange consent in a certain way. As has been demonstrated, this is because as the baptized, their commitment to each other impacts their commitments to Christ. They are called to relate to Christ as a couple. Due to challenges in the past, i.e., clandestine marriages, this requirement is taken most seriously. Yet for those who are not in the Catholic Church this can seem a foreign concept. Catholics should seek to better educate themselves and their non-Catholic partners on these practices and help them to understand the reasoning and history behind it. Doing so will only help to make the Sacrament of Marriage a truly grace-filled pathway to richer discipleship in Christ. Perhaps couples who live out their relationships to Christ together, as Pentecostal and Catholic wife and husband, might offer our faith communities the riches of their experiences to give even greater depth to dialogues like this one.



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