UNDERSTANDING THE SACRAMENTS

Marriage

Lawrence E. Mick
What Is a Sacrament?

Most Catholics recognize that sacraments are an important part of life in the church. They see them as significant moments that mark transitions in life. They bring their babies to be baptized and send their second graders to prepare for First Communion. They come to the church to be married and ask for the anointing when someone is seriously ill.

Sacraments, however, are much more than mileposts in the spiritual life. The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) called for a renewal of the liturgy that included revising all the sacraments. The purpose of the revision was to rethink our understanding of these basic actions that shape our identity in the church. In their first document, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, issued in 1963, the council fathers spoke of the importance of the sacraments for the Christian life:

The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify people, to build up the body of Christ, and, finally, to worship God. Because they are signs they also belong in the realm of instruction. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen, and express it. That is why they are called sacraments of faith. They do, indeed, confer grace, but, in addition, the very act of celebrating them is most effective in making people ready to receive this grace to their profit, to worship God duly, and to practice charity.

It is, therefore, of the greatest importance that the faithful should easily understand the symbolism of the sacraments and eagerly frequent those sacraments which were instituted to nourish the Christian life (no. 59).

Helping people to readily understand the sacramental signs is the goal of this series of booklets.
Though this booklet focuses on the sacrament of marriage, there are basic principles that can help us to understand all the sacraments, for they share some fundamental characteristics.

**SACRAMENTS ARE HUMAN ACTIVITIES**

First, the sacraments are human activities. We often think of the sacraments in terms of the elements of creation that we use: water, oil, bread and wine, etc. Yet the sacraments are better understood as the actions that we do with those elements, and those actions are all basic human gestures. We wash bodies, anoint foreheads, eat bread and drink wine, touch and caress the sick, lay on hands as a gesture of conferring power, etc. These human actions become the means of encountering the Lord.

These actions have become rituals; we follow familiar patterns of movement and gesture and recite the official words of the rite. We perform these rituals as our ancestors did. Nonetheless, rituals are revised and updated from time to time to keep them fresh and true to their original purpose.

Our ritual actions are symbolic, giving us a real and concrete way to experience or express something that is otherwise abstract. A symbol contains the reality it expresses. A kiss, for example, somehow contains the love it expresses, though it does not exhaust that love. So, too, the Eucharistic meal contains the presence of Jesus, though it does not exhaust that presence.

All the sacraments also rely on the word of God. The prayers and formulas of the rituals have been drawn from the Bible, and the celebrations always include a formal proclamation of the word of God. The word clarifies the meaning of the symbols we use. Proclaiming God’s word in the celebration also reminds us that our actions are always a response to what God has done for us.

**SACRAMENTS ARE ACTIONS OF THE CHURCH COMMUNITY**

The ritual actions that we carry out in the sacraments are always communal actions. This may be the most important realization in our renewed understanding of the sacraments. They are the actions of the church community, not just of the presider or the recipient. As the Constitution
on the Sacred Liturgy puts it: “It is very much the wish of the church that all the faithful should be led to take that full, conscious, and active part in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy” (no. 14). Liturgy is the public worship of the church in its various forms. Though we may celebrate around an individual or a group of people receiving a sacrament, we all celebrate the sacrament together. A sacrament is the action of the church, and its meaning and effects are not limited to those around whom we celebrate.

One primary effect of any sacrament is to form us for mission. Each sacrament, in its own way, strengthens us to carry on the mission of Christ in the world today. Sacraments, then, are necessary to the life of the community and the furtherance of its mission. They make the church what Christ intends it to be, and they make each of us what Christ intends us to become.

**SACRAMENTS ARE THE ACTION OF CHRIST**

At the same time, because the church is the Body of Christ, the action of a sacrament is also the action of Christ. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy puts it this way: “By his power he is present in the sacraments, so that when anybody baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes” (no. 7).

The church has long taught that the power of a sacrament is not dependent on the ability or holiness of the priest, bishop, or deacon presiding. The sacrament is effective even if the minister is unworthy or sinful. It does not ultimately depend on the minister, for it is Christ who acts through the gathered community, which is his Body.

The encounter with Christ in the sacraments is possible only through faith. That’s why baptism is the first sacrament and the precondition for all the others. It is the sacrament of initial faith, which is a response to God’s grace calling a person to belief. The sacraments express our faith and also nourish and strengthen faith, because they bring us into contact with the living Christ.

The tradition speaks of sacraments giving grace. That is ultimately a way of saying that they bring us into contact with Christ and enable us to deep our friendship with the Lord. Grace is, at root, that relationship, and the encounter with Christ in a sacrament deepens that friendship.

“Liturgy” comes from the Greek meaning “work of the people” and refers to the various forms of public worship of the church.
Sacraments are a part of our relationship with God, a part of our faith life. They express what God is already doing in our lives and move us further along the road of conversion and spiritual growth. Sacraments should never be viewed as isolated moments in our lives. They depend on a process that leads up to the moment of celebration and flows from that moment into our future. Sacraments require preparation on the part of the individual and on the part of the community. Sacraments affect the life of the individual and the community far beyond the celebration itself.

Marriage
Symbol of God’s Love

The way some people talk about marriage suggests that they think things have been the same since Adam met Eve. People talk about defending “traditional marriage” as if everyone should know what that means. They seem convinced that God defined marriage once and for all at the beginning of time.

Even a brief look at the history of marriage, however, reveals a very different picture. Without even attempting to determine how early humans saw marriage or how it has been understood in multiple cultures around the world and throughout history, looking just at the Jewish-Christian tradition presents us with many variations in how marriage was understood, entered into, and lived out.

In fact, trying to describe the history of marriage is significantly complicated by the fact that it is not evident just what constituted a marriage. At various times and places, there have been many differing views. Is a marriage created by two people deciding to share their
lives or by an act of some public authority recognizing their union? Is it constituted by the couple giving each other the right to sexual intercourse or by the act of intercourse itself? Is it established by an agreement between the families of the two people or by their living together for a certain period of time? Or is it some combination of these factors that make a marriage a valid union?

Today’s questions about marriage often reflect different concerns. People contemplating marriage today are less concerned with what makes a valid marriage than with what makes a good marriage. With so many marriages ending in divorce and others seemingly unhappy and unfulfilled, couples approaching marriage often wonder if marriage can work at all, and if so, how to make it work.

The fact that creating a lasting marriage seems so difficult in contemporary times might lead us to question some assumptions our society makes about marriage. Those who seek to follow Christ might ask what makes a marriage Christian and how that can help a marriage survive and thrive. A good way to get some perspective on our contemporary issues is to explore the way Christian marriage has been understood in ages past.

The History of Christian Marriage

The history of Christian marriage is quite involved, and a full treatment is not possible here. Nevertheless, it is useful to consider a simplified account of the main historical patterns through the centuries.

To say that marriage is sacramental is to say that it is capable of revealing something about the mystery of God. This insight began long before the Christian era, with the Hebrew prophets. The prophets described God’s covenant with Israel as a marriage. The revelation shaped by this image really went in both directions. While marriage revealed the nature of God’s covenant, the covenant also revealed a deeper meaning in marriage. The prophet Hosea, for example, saw God’s faithfulness to Israel despite their frequent rejection of God as calling him to faithfulness to his wife, Gomer, despite her repeated unfaithfulness. As Yahweh never gave up on Israel, Hosea felt called to continually forgive his adulterous spouse. Prophets after
him, including Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Second Isaiah, kept alive the tradition of seeing the relationship of God and the people in terms of marriage.

Though Jesus spoke often of the command to love, his explicit teaching on marriage centers almost exclusively on the permanence of the union, in contrast to the acceptance of divorce by many rabbis of his time. St. Paul continues the Old Testament tradition of seeing marriage as reflecting the love of God for Israel. He sees marriage as linked to Christ’s love for the church (see Eph 5:25-32), which he calls a great mystery (mysterion). In 1 Corinthians 7:39, Paul also spoke of Christians living their married life “in the Lord.” Those who were baptized were to do all things “in the Lord,” so those who were married were to share their lives together “in the Lord.”

The Greek term that Paul used in Ephesians, mysterion, was translated into Latin as sacramentum, which is one reason why marriage began to be called a sacrament. It is important to note, however, that this was a broad sense of sacrament, not the carefully defined notion of later centuries. It was not until the eleventh and twelfth centuries that theologians agreed that there were seven sacraments in this limited sense, and marriage was the last to be added to the list. The early church saw many things as revealing God’s love and activity, and these were all termed sacramental in the broad sense.

The writings of St. Augustine were also influential in the development of a theology of marriage as a sacrament. He called marriage a sacramentum in two senses: as a sacred sign and as an unbreakable bond. He saw it, as Paul did, as a sign of Christ’s love for the church. He also used the term to express the permanence of the marriage commitment, drawing on the classical Latin meaning of the term sacramentum as a permanent obligation. So the word “mystery” became the word “sacrament,” which implied a legal understanding of the word as permanent obligation.

Though they saw the religious dimension of marriage (everything had a religious significance in Christ), the early Christians did not celebrate marriage in church or as a liturgical service. Marriage was celebrated according to the social customs of the time, but Christians recognized that their marriages, like every part of their lives, were to be

"Sacramentum" means mystery, but it was also used in legal settings to describe an unbreakable bond or obligation.
transformed by grace and lived “in the Lord.” Marriage was sacramental not because it was begun in church, but because it reflected the love of Christ for the church. And as Christ is always faithful, so marriage was seen to be an unbreakable commitment.

Marriage ceremonies varied from place to place, often celebrated in the home. Marriage was generally seen as a domestic matter, handled by the parents of the bride and groom and celebrated in domestic settings. Drawing on Jewish, Roman, Greek, and other ancient civilizations, the celebration of a marriage often included elements such as veiling or crowning of the bride and groom, the father’s handing the bride over to the groom, a procession to the new home and the bridal chamber, or the giving of a ring. Many marriages were celebrated in stages, with a betrothal ceremony some time before the actual wedding celebration. Though marriages were not celebrated in church, nor did the church conduct the ceremonies, the Christian community always manifested concern and pastoral care for those members being married. There were reminders, for example, not to engage in sacrifices to false gods and to avoid the excesses common at wedding feasts.

Around the fourth century Christians began to celebrate a service of prayer and blessing after the legal marriage. This practice may have developed from the custom of the bishop or priest going to the home to congratulate the newly married couple. The service took various forms, such as blessing the couple, veiling the bride, or blessing the nuptial chamber. This was not a church marriage, nor was it required for all Christians. Soon members of the clergy were required to have their marriages blessed after the legal ceremony, though this was not expected of the laity. As early as the fifth century in Rome, there is evidence of weddings in the context of the Eucharist, though it is not clear how common this was. For centuries the actual form of the marriage varied according to local customs and traditions, as did any religious blessings after the wedding.

---

1 At this time, most clergy were married. Universal celibacy for the clergy was not required until later centuries.
Gradually, from the ninth to the eleventh centuries, the legal control of marriage itself passed from the state to the church, and marriage began to be celebrated regularly in the context of a church liturgy. The priest now played a much more important role in the celebration, often handing over the bride to the groom or giving the partners to each other.

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries theologians struggled to develop a theology of sacraments and to determine which church celebrations were sacraments in the strict sense. Marriage was included in the list of seven, perhaps because there was such a long tradition of calling marriage a sacrament and because it was recognized as essential to the ongoing life of the church. Yet it was not until later that marriage was really accorded full sacramental status, since the medieval theologians had difficulty seeing marriage as a source of grace. This was partly because of a negative view of sexuality that has plagued the church for centuries and partly because marriage obviously preceded Christ, while the other sacraments were seen as coming from Christ.

The Council of Trent in the sixteenth century defended marriage as a sacrament in the strict sense against some of the reformers who rejected its sacramentality. Largely in an attempt to regulate secret marriages, this same council also required Catholics to be married before a priest and two witnesses. This requirement has been in force ever since, though exceptions have been made when a priest is not available (as in some mission situations) and when there is sufficient reason for the marriage to be celebrated in another Christian church or a different religion or even in a civil ceremony.

The twentieth century saw some significant developments in the theology of marriage. The Code of Canon Law, issued in 1917, for example, saw marriage primarily in terms of a contract between the two parties. The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) and the subsequent revision of the Code of Canon Law, issued in 1983, saw marriage more as a covenant between the spouses that reflects the covenant between God and humanity.

This shift has numerous consequences. A contract is a legal reality that confers certain rights and imposes
certain responsibilities. Both parties to the contract must be of legal age and are bound to fulfill the terms of the contract. Contracts can be made between friends, but in itself a contract is a very impersonal agreement.

A covenant, on the other hand, is intensely personal, a bond of love between the parties. Like a contract, it also involves certain rights and responsibilities, but it goes far beyond a contract, since it includes a personal commitment of both parties to the welfare of the other. While a contract is clearly limited in its scope, a covenant establishes a relationship that cannot be so easily defined. The covenant relationship is open-ended. It is the relationship itself which is central, not the rights and duties that are specified, and the growth and development of the relationship may make demands that were not even envisioned at the beginning. This is a much more personal image, and the Second Vatican Council put more emphasis on the personal relationship between the couple than earlier ages did. A covenant theology of marriage also focuses attention on the ongoing relationship rather than primarily on the wedding ceremony in which the contract is accepted. Covenant theology also helps us remember that Christian marriage is a matter of concern for the whole church community, which is bound together in covenant with God.

The Second Vatican Council also took a significant step in discussing the purposes of marriage. Earlier tradition had spoken generally of the procreation of children as the primary purpose of marriage. While still holding that openness to children is essential to a marriage, the council placed the mutual relationship between the spouses on an equal footing with procreation as joint purposes of marriage.

Secular Reality—Saving Mystery

This all too brief survey of the history of Christian marriage indicates the difficulty the church has had in trying to define marriage as a sacrament. It also reveals, however, that Christians from the time of St. Paul have consistently seen the social or secular reality of marriage as a revelation of Christ’s love for the church. The love of husband and wife is a powerful symbol of God’s love for us. If we understand Christ’s saving work as primarily a process of