**The Marriage Sacrament**

Many couples that come to the Church to be married don’t understand what they are asking from the Church. They have a concept of the Church’s teachings; but, often those perceptions are tainted with a secular slant that is misleading and unhealthy. This document is meant to help the deacon discuss the Sacrament in a way that assists the engaged couple to comprehend the gravity and grace that they are about to enter.

**The World View on Marriage**

The world looks on marriage as a convenience more than a lifelong commitment. Examples of this are found in same-sex relationships and pre-nuptial agreements. The world has been convinced that Marriage is not driven by the hand and law of God; rather, by the changing definitions created in civil law.

* **The Commitment of the Relationship**— In a secular marriage, a couple is not required to make a lifelong commitment. One or the other can terminate the contract by going back to the state and getting a civil divorce. There is little to no effort within state agencies to try and heal or reconcile the disagreement between the two parties. *This is particularly painful for children* that are left without a paternal or maternal relationship.
* **The State**—The State license must be signed even by those who choose to have a Sacramental wedding. This license to enter a marriage is not enforced other than post-marriage obligations levied on the parties should they decide to separate.
* **The Wedding Party**—The wedding party members, if any, are often friends and relatives of the family but have no obligation to support the couple after their wedding. Sometimes a witness can even be a stranger or a drinking buddy.
* **Justice of the Peace—**If the government witness of marriages was responsible for the success of the marriages they witnessed, there would probably be fewer civil marriages in the country. They are simply a witness on behalf of the state and authorize the marriage civilly.
* **The Contract—**A wedding by the State is simply a contract; no different than procuring an item or service to be purchased—only the terms of the agreement are different. The couple is free to set the terms (e.g. prenuptial agreement) and to honor the contract or break it.
* **Imitation of —**The State has a poor history of providing good role models for successful marriage for a couple to imitate. This is especially true when many marriages are by “common law” or can be witnessed by anyone. Indeed, with the authorization of same-sex marriages, the State has set the precedent for all sorts of other contractually established relationships under the title of marriage.
* **Consummation of the Contract—**The signing of the wedding license is all that is required to make the wedding "official", and its purpose is to document in state records the names of the married parties.

**The Catholic Church View on Marriage**

* **The Grace of the Sacrament**—The Church understands that the grace of the Sacrament does not just begin and end at the wedding. It is a life time of abundance that is poured out freely to each of them. This grace is entrusted to each of them to be given away to the other totally and completely. As they empty their self to the other; God provides more.
* **The Church**—The congregation is made up of those specifically invited to the wedding because of their relationship to the couple, to represent the Church and to witness the most important obligation the wedding couple makes--each to the other. This “Church witness” should take on the responsibility of helping the newlywed couple fulfill the vows they made to God and His Bride, the Church. The building itself, identifies the Church structurally and allows the couple to contemplate how the great Sacrament of Marriage belongs to the whole Church of which they are a part.
* **The Wedding Party**—The wedding party members have a special place in the wedding as particular witnesses to the Sacramental event. They are called and designated to be special friends to the couple—no longer to one of the individuals, but to the couple and their relationship with God. It is their responsibility to help keep the marriage healthy and strong, to the best of their ability. Thus, it is important to educate the wedding party on their obligations prior to the ceremony so they have time to replace or back out if they so desire. (A Rite of Commitment for the Wedding Party is provided in the Appendix.)
* **Jesus Christ, Present—**The couple should be fully aware of the presence of Jesus Christ in the Tabernacle, and in the lifelong covenantal vows they undertake in the ceremony. This also is a reminder to call upon God in each important decision they make regarding their future. Therefore, prayer is an important aspect of their relationship throughout their lives.
* **The Covenant—** Sacramental Marriage is a tripartite covenant which gives the couple an opportunity for an intimate relationship with God, who does not break his promises, as the third party to the Marriage. This is in contracts to a bi-lateral human contract between two people that is often broken.
* **Imitation of Christ and His Bride—**A good point of catechesis is to explain the relationship of Christ and His Church. It also helps to explain that Jesus desires unity with His Bride which is best explained in the Exsultet when the Deacon sings, that heaven is “wedded” to earth. Also, Ephesians 5 offers up an important opportunity to help the couple understands how they should respond and relate to one another as God relates to His Church.
* **Consummation of the Sacrament—**The purpose of the Sacrament is about unity of the couple and the procreation and education of children in the faith. Unity might be best experienced by encouraging them to pray together on their wedding night as the "two become one flesh" in consummating their vows to each other and God. The prayer of Tobit and his wife, Sarah is a good example to use. (Tob 8:5-8)