

Diocese of Parramatta



CATHOLIC CARE
Social Services

The Catholic Understanding Of Marriage

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This booklet has been primarily written for engaged couples who have decided to marry within a Catholic ceremony. It is hoped that married couples and single persons who read it will also find some benefit in reading it.

Love is Our Destiny

If you look deep within yourself, you will find that your most fundamental need is for love. This need for love is absolutely fundamental to being human. Our greatest moments in life come within the experience of love.

When we feel love in all its aspects, physical, intellectual emotional and spiritual, flowing from us and being received by the one we are loving, and when we feel that a similar love is being given to us by the one we love and we are receiving that love, we are truly happy. There is a sense of deep unity. Those who experience such unity are having an experience of deep *loving presence* together. Some people describe such experiences as *heavenly*.

In fact such experiences *are* foretastes of heaven. Each of us has an eternal heavenly destiny. We are made by God who wants us to be taken up into the loving life of the Trinity for all eternity. God wants each of us individually to be in a mutual exchange of love with the three Persons of the Trinity and with all other human persons forever.

In heaven we are fully alive and completely joyful in loving God and other persons. At the same time we are joyful and are fulfilled in experiencing that we are being totally loved by God and other persons. We are eternally caught up in exchanges of love.

The Life of God

Our human understanding of the life of God helps us to more fully grasp what true loving involves. The intimate life of God is clearly beyond complete human understanding. Over the centuries members of the Catholic Church have prayerfully reflected on God's self-revelation in the Person of Jesus and in the Scriptures. The following have become part of Catholic Church's doctrine and teaching.

- God is Love.
- God is a Trinity of loving Persons. There is an infinite personal loving relationship among the three Persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is understood to *proceed* (a technical theological word) from the relationship between the Father and the Son. It is as if the loving relationship between Father and Son becomes personified in the Person of the Holy Spirit.

Each of the Persons is truly God but there is only one God. Because of that unity the Father is wholly in the Son and wholly in the Holy Spirit; the Son is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Son.

- In the loving relationships which constitute the fundamental Being of God, each of the three Persons freely and totally self-reveals and self-gifts to each of the other two. Each Person totally receives the self-revelation and self-gift of each of the other two Persons. Each is totally lovingly present to the others in an eternal "now". There is no possibility of one Person being rejected in any way by another Person.
- Each Person in totally self-giving loses nothing of personal individual identity. The personal individual identity in being

received by each of the other two Persons in the eternal “now” is eternally acknowledged and affirmed as the personal individual identity it is.

- Each of the three Persons in the Trinity is totally equal to the other two.
- Whilst the loving that is the very essence of life in the Trinity is complete and the Persons lack nothing, there is sense it which They have to create other beings who can have a chance to share in the eternal love and joyfulness which is theirs. Love necessarily overflows.

The Life of God in Us

When we were baptised, God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) lovingly embraced each of us as a unique individual and began to live within us in a way which has similarities with the way in which each Person of the Trinity lives within each of the other two Persons.

As a result of our Baptism, we are able to willingly receive the Love that is God into our very being and to give ourselves over entirely to being in a loving relationship with God and with all those whom God loves. We begin the journey on which we can grow ever closer to God and continually invite Him to fill us with His love.

As we grow up and move towards adulthood, we become more and more aware of how happy we feel when we experience being loved and loving others. Our happiest times are times when we are caught up in loving embraces.

We also become aware that we have a choice about whether or not we wish to be in a loving relationship with God and those whom God loves. We find we have deeply embedded tendencies to put ourselves first, and not love God and others.

In theological terms, we have a tendency to sin. Sinfulness is the tendency to put ourselves first at the expense of the legitimate needs of other people, resulting in some kind of harm to them as individuals and to the human community as a whole. Sin causes harm.

Sin also results in deep sense of guilt and shame, even if this is not in the explicit consciousness of a particular person. There is a sense of frustration because at the deepest level the person is aware of not moving towards the fulfilment of being caught up in a community of love.

God loves us and never gives up trying to help us to really become more truly loving as persons. God is ever ready to forgive us when we recognise that we have failed in love and we resolve to try never to fail in love again.

God tries to reach us through the love given to us by other people and by assisting us to truly love other people

The Calling to Marriage

Marriage is one of the ways in which God attempts to bring us ever more deeply into the His embrace of love. Those who are called to marriage are not just called to a way of life. Each person called to marriage is called by God to be married to a specific person. This does not mean we have no choice about a marriage partner but it does mean that if we are open to listening to God, we will find that He will guide us to marry a person who will truly join in a deeply loving relationship.

God says to each of the spouses in a marriage “I am calling you to love and be loved by your marriage partner. As you grow in your love for each other, you will find that you will move ever more deeply in a loving relationship with me and with all those that I love and your life will be increasingly filled with a deep joy”.

The Trinity as the Model of Married Loving

In the marriage ceremony, the celebrant asks the couple who are seeking to receive the Sacrament of Matrimony questions:

- Have you come here freely and without reservation to give yourselves to each other in marriage?
- Will you love and honour each other as man and wife for the rest of your lives?
- Will you accept children lovingly from God, and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?

You can see how these questions relate to the nature of love as revealed in the life of the Trinity:

- Each of the couple is asked if they truly want to make a gift of themselves to the other, if they are willing to reveal all the truths about themselves to the other.

They are asked, in effect, do they want their relationship of love to become ever more like the loving relationships in the Holy Trinity. Do they have as their aim a total loving presence to each other?

Because of human limitations, the affirmation that they wish to be totally self-gifting and self-revealing is a statement of a willingness to continue the journey of ever deeper self-gifting and self-revelation which will only be completed in heaven.

- Each of the couple is asked if they intend to remain in the mutually self-gifting and self-revealing relationship of love, regardless of whatever happens in the course of the marriage.

When each of the couple affirms the intention to remain in the loving relationship no matter what, each is implicitly acknowledging that, because of their individual imperfections

and tendencies to sin, there will be times when the exchange of love will be reduced and there will be feelings of rejection, being misunderstood, of being frustrated and of hurt.

Each is saying in effect “I am aware that there will be times when I will experience being hurt by you. I will do my best to understand and forgive you, and to help you overcome your weaknesses.

There will be times when you will experience being hurt by me. I am trusting that you will do your best to understand and forgive me, and to help me overcome my weaknesses.”

Each is implicitly acknowledging that repentance and forgiveness are essential aspects of a loving married relationship. When we acknowledge our faults and experience that we are loved in spite of them, we gain in strength and courage in our attempts to overcome them. We grow as loving persons.

These attitudes mirror God’s attitude to us. God is ever willing to forgive us and to help us to grow in relationship with Him and with other people, if we are willing to admit our sins and to resolve, with His help, to live more loving lives.

The more each of the spouses grows in individual love of God, and experiences His forgiveness and strengthening love, the greater will be the capacity to bring love and forgiveness into their married relationship. The couple’s love for each other is empowered by the love of God in each of them.

There will, in the course of the marriage be times when one spouse will have to draw the other’s attention to a fault or weakness in the other, because that fault or weakness is blocking the exchange of love. Drawing of attention to faults and weaknesses must be done with love and have as its main

aim helping the other person to increase their capacity for truly loving and hence increase their capacity for individual peace and happiness

- The relationship between the spouses is one of two equal persons. Each will have individual strengths and weaknesses but, as persons they are equal in dignity. One is not in charge of the other. They may agree, on occasion, that one will take the lead in dealing with a particular issue because of greater knowledge and experience relating to the issue. Such an agreement does not diminish the fundamental equality of the spouses.

- The openness to being parents and to ensure that any children are introduced to God's love for each of them as individuals is an essential part of married loving.

The very nature of love is that it cannot be self-contained within the lovers. The loving relationship between the Father and the Son in the Trinity produces the Holy Spirit. The Trinity of Persons wants to share love with us. Love is not selfish.

The Catholic Church regards the use of contraceptives as wrong basically because their use is a denial of the full self-gifting which is the essence of true love.

In contraceptive sexual intercourse those using contraceptives are saying "I do not give my entire self to you. I deliberately withhold my fertility. I will not allow the love of God to flow freely between us and create another person. I deliberately inhibit the natural flow of true love which seeks to flow from the lovers to other persons

The love that flows within a family is not meant to be confined to just the members of that family. It is meant to flow out to

others, relatives, to neighbours and to the general community. Members of a family are meant to be open to receive the love of others outside of the immediate family.

The result is that the family members contribute to building up a general community of love which will be perfected in heaven.

The Presence of God in the Relationship between the Married Couple

Unless we have rejected God by committing a serious sin and have not been truly repentant, we live in a truly loving union with God and are, in a mysterious way, caught up in the very life of the Trinity.

In deciding to receive the Sacrament of Matrimony within the Catholic Church, the couple is explicitly asking God to be present within their loving married relationship. They want the love which flows between them to be caught up in the flow of love among the Persons of the Trinity. When they are loving each other, that loving is infused with the love of the Trinity.

The embrace of spousal love in sexual intercourse is the greatest possible intimacy in marriage. The two not only are united physically becoming, as it were, one flesh. They are united psychologically, emotionally and spiritually. The embrace can include not only the experience of receiving and giving of physical pleasure but also the joy of feeling loved, of giving love, of acceptance and of forgiveness. Loving presence is experienced very deeply.

Now if God is, in some mysterious way, present in each of the spouses, he must be present within the physicalness of married sexual loving. God must have some kind of presence in the hands which caress, the lips which kiss and the genitals which unite. There are married couples who tell of the having, on occasion, an

awareness of the presence of God whilst they were engaged in passionate love-making.

The afterglow of God-filled sexual loving gives strength to cope with the challenges and stresses that life inevitably brings. Even when they are not physically in the same place, spouses can feel spiritually in touch with each other and with God.

Conclusion

The aim of this booklet has been to articulate the theological/spiritual vision which underpins the content of CatholicCare Parramatta's Pre-Marriage Course.

The aim of the course is to provide information so that couples will have awareness of the types of problems which are likely to arise in the course of a marriage, and have awareness of how such problems might be prevented from developing, and how such problems can be resolved should they occur.

It is our belief that the awareness of how to prevent problems arising and of how to deal with them should they arise is enhanced by placing that awareness within a spiritual context.

Ray Reid 2011

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