

PART 1:

THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE MARRIAGE

IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT, A LAND LONG AGO AND FAR AWAY, where every young woman was born with a small birthmark in the shape of a heart on the inside of her right wrist and where every young man in the kingdom was born with a small arrow birthmark on the inside of his left wrist. In this land, young people took part in youth group activities, which were supported by their family and their church, while they matured physically, psychologically, spiritually and emotionally. When a boy and a girl were sufficiently matured and the girl spoke with the boy destined to be her spouse forever, the birthmarks would pulse and change color from blue to red. With this highly organized system, there was no doubt of one's destiny with the other, and, of course, there was no chance that marriage meant for a lifetime would end in divorce. Though that might sound appealing, think about what it would really mean. In that land there would be no risk of choice, no thrill of discovery.

Does that fable describe an ideal world? I think not. And God did not think so either, so we were created with free will and the responsibility of making life choices. The choice of a spouse is to be made carefully and for life. Both parties must realize the importance and the consequences of the choices made.

Unlike our throwaway society that sometimes views relationships as disposable, the Catholic Church has always highly valued marriage as the stable basis of the family unit. For the Catholic Church, marriage is not only the lifetime commitment of a man and a woman but also a holy union of which God is a part. Church teaching about marriage is very counter to our current media culture. Proper preparation for marriage is not a reality television stunt where a bachelor (or bachelorette) dates a series of willing women (or men) and dramatically selects one to wed. Marriage is not a promise to stay with this person as long as the relationship feels good.

The Catholic Church respects all marriage. When two people enter into marriage, Catholic or not, baptized or not, in a civil ceremony or a Church ritual, the spouses pledge fidelity to each other for life. Each wedding is a profound moment of lifetime commitment that should not be taken lightly. There is much to consider before scheduling the wedding, and more importantly, before beginning the lifetime commitment of Holy Matrimony. This section of the book offers some of the questions posed to the Marriage Room of OnceCatholic.org which focus on issues related to marriage preparation and weddings.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MARRIAGE

QUESTION: WHY IS IT SEEMINGLY SO DIFFICULT TO GET married in the Catholic Church? I am not married (I'm a member of a religious order) but have been disturbed for a long time regarding the marriage laws of our Church. How is it that they ever got so cumbersome?

What perseverance and determination individuals must possess to go through all of the details of marriage cases! It disturbs me to hear about someone hungry to come back to the Catholic Church, and even though we are welcoming, we lay down the "rules" of all the somewhat legal things they must do. We don't require this for any other types of things that might have drawn someone away from the Church. Why is this? We need to keep doing what we can to bring people to the place best suited for them to find their God. Sincerely, *Sister Ann*

RESPONSE: PROTECTING THE SANCTITY OF MARRIAGE IS WHAT IS truly important. I hear and share the compassion in your heart. But in that compassion, we must remember that joining or returning to the Church also means accepting the basic laws of the Church. A long-standing tradition in our Catholic Church is a profound respect for the sacrament of marriage. Like religious vows, the marital commitment should not be entered into lightly nor gotten out of lightly. The rules you find cumbersome are the Church's attempt to protect the sanctity of marriage, to respect the lifelong commitment marriage should be.

Yes, we as a Church want to welcome new and welcome back former members. However, that does not

mean there are no consequences for choices that a person may have made in the past. Rules are just part of the price of being part of a very human group that brings us to divine grace—a group of people who are sinners who have a need to repent and make restitution before moving on freely with life. You know that as I do. Sometimes we just need a reminder that there are obligations that flow from membership as well as rights. *Sister Faith*

PREPARATION FOR MARRIAGE

Q. MY DAUGHTER HAS FINALLY FOUND THE LOVE OF HER LIFE. Why does she need a priest to tell her anything about marriage? My daughter was raised Catholic, but did not want to marry. She had many problems with her “partner’s” lack of fidelity. Many times she trusted him when he said it would never happen again. She finally broke up with that man and now she has met a wonderful young man and plans to marry this summer. They want their marriage in the Catholic Church. The priest is insisting that they go through many months of preparation for marriage, which is ridiculous since she already had the experience of living as if married with an unfaithful bum but now has found the love of her life and is quite sure of her decision to marry. I don’t want to be disrespectful but I am angry, as is my daughter who is considering not bothering with the Church.

Alexis

R. MARRIAGE PREPARATION IS CRUCIAL AND NECESSARY FOR all those getting married. Your daughter’s having lived with an unfaithful man for some time is the opposite of good

preparation for choosing a spouse. She is likely to be on the rebound from that relationship, which could make the current “love of her life” seem much better than he is in reality. She needs even more preparation for marriage than if she had never cohabited before the wedding. She owes it to herself and the man she thinks she loves to do all she can to be sure they will have a lifelong marriage filled with commitment.

The Church needs to be sure there is no reason why this couple cannot marry each other so there will be a careful investigation that neither has been married before or there is no other canonical (Church law) impediment to prevent the wedding. Both intended spouses need to be properly instructed about what the Church means by marriage which is very different from the idea of marriage rampant in our culture, especially in television shows and movies as well as many novels. Good communication is essential for a good marriage, and the preparation will include opportunities for those skilled in such matters to observe this couple and advise them about respecting each other as well as determining whether they share similar values about commitment, children, permanence, etc. Marriage is a commitment for life not to be entered into without serious discernment and preparation. I hope you will encourage your daughter to cooperate and not be in a rush to wed. Have her meet with the priest at the parish where she intends to marry to begin the preparation. It is important that she resolve any issues from the past (particularly the cohabitation and experience of betrayal that infidelity was for her) before entering a new one so the new one has the best chance. I will be praying for both of you. *Sister Faith*

Q. DO MY SECOND HUSBAND-TO-BE AND I HAVE TO ATTEND pre-Cana counseling before we can be married in the Church? *Sandra*

R. PREPARATION FOR MARRIAGE (PRE-CANA) IS EVEN MORE necessary when marrying for the second time. If your first marriage is declared null (see further discussion of this process in Chapter 3), you and your intended spouse will be required to complete the requirements of your diocese for marriage preparation. Some people think that because they have been married before such preparation is not necessary. Actually, the opposite is true—preparation is even more necessary. In the U.S. about fifty percent of first marriages fail while an even higher percentage of second marriage attempts fail. It is very important that you be sure neither of you is bringing “baggage” from your failed marriage into the new one and that you are truly choosing each other for a lifetime commitment. Be patient with yourselves and the process.

In nearly all cases the priest or deacon will want to meet with you and your intended spouse for premarital discussions. The number of meetings and issues will depend on your situation. I try to tailor the premarital preparation for each unique situation. May God bless you. *Father Mike*

Q. CAN MY FIANCÉ AND I TAKE PRE-CANA AT SEPARATE parishes? I will be getting married within the next six months and I know that we have to take classes with the Church before the actual ceremony. My questions are the following: Is it mandatory that we attend those classes

together? I live three hundred and fifty miles from my fiancée, and it is not possible that we take the classes together. Can I take my preparation class here at my parish while she takes her class at her parish? Thank you for your time and God bless. *Manny*

R. I SUGGEST YOU CALL THE PRIEST OR DEACON WHO WILL BE presiding at your wedding ceremony. This would be his decision. Based on my experience, there may be some things that you could do separately, but I would suspect that there would be some things the priest or deacon would want you to do together. Some of that would be “negotiable” (that’s my word) based on the length of time you’ve been dating, how old you are, whether or not you lived for a time in the same city or town as your intended spouse, whether you are of the same faith tradition, whether either of you were married before, whether either of you has children, etc. I hope this helps. Please write if you have further questions. May God bless you both. I’ll keep you in my prayers. *Father Mike*

COHABITATION BEFORE MARRIAGE

Q. IF A MAN LIVES WITH HIS GIRLFRIEND IN THE SAME HOUSE and they intend to get married, can they receive Holy Communion during Mass or are they not allowed to until they get married officially in the Church? *Dominic*

R. LIVING TOGETHER IN THE SAME HOUSE DOES NOT LIMIT ONE in receiving Holy Communion. Having sexual intercourse before/outside of marriage, which is sometimes presumed for people who are living together, is what limits one in

receiving Holy Communion. Sexual intercourse before/outside of marriage is a mortal sin. Statistics (these are not accumulated by people hired by the Church, but by sociologists doing research) show that people living together before marriage, with or without sexual intercourse, have a much higher rate of divorce. Thanks for writing. Please know that I make no judgments of your relationship as I offer this response. You and your loved ones will be in my prayers. *Father Mike*

RULES FOR HOLY COMMUNION AT A CATHOLIC WEDDING

Q. WHAT IS THE RULE FOR NON-CATHOLICS IN ATTENDANCE at a Catholic wedding? May they participate in Holy Communion? We are getting married in May. We are both Catholic, and I have a question about Holy Communion at our wedding. I was always under the impression that a non-Catholic should not receive Holy Communion at a Catholic Mass. My fiancé says he has been to a couple of weddings at which Holy Communion was offered to all who wanted to participate. Is this true? *Marilyn*

R. THE BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES HAVE SET SOME clear guidelines on the reception of the Eucharist by non-Catholics. Usually you will find these regulations on the inside cover of the missalettes that are in most Catholic Church pews. Because Catholics believe that the celebration of Eucharist is a sign of the reality of the oneness of faith and worship, members of churches that are not fully united with the Roman Catholic Church are ordinarily not allowed to receive Holy Communion. For very rare and special

circumstances there may be permission that has to be obtained from the diocesan bishop for a Christian person to receive Communion on a particular occasion. Non-Christians may never receive Communion. *Father Francis*

VALID AND SACRAMENTAL MARRIAGE

Q. I HAVE OFTEN SEEN MARRIAGES REFERRED TO AS EITHER valid or sacramental. Is there a difference between a valid marriage and a sacramental marriage? Can you have a valid marriage that is not sacramental? *Cindy*

R. NOT ALL VALID MARRIAGES ARE SACRAMENTAL ONES. For the sacrament of marriage, the ministers are the couple themselves (the priest or deacon is an official witness necessary for Catholics) so if the members of a couple are not baptized (remember baptism is the gateway to the sacraments of the Church) then their marriage is a valid one, but not a sacramental one. *Sister Faith*

Q. WHAT KIND OF MARRIAGE (VALID OR SACRAMENTAL) would it have been if neither party was baptized? You stated that there would be a decision whether or not there was clear evidence that something essential was missing in the marriage from the moment of consent that prevented it from becoming a sacrament (for the baptized). *Carl*

R. IF TWO NEVER-BAPTIZED PEOPLE MARRY, THAT MARRIAGE cannot be sacramental because baptism is required before all other sacraments. This would be presumed to be a valid natural marriage binding for life. *Sister Faith*