### Marriage as a Natural Institution

Marriage is a practice common to all cultures in all ages. It is, therefore, a natural institution, something common to all mankind. At its most basic level, marriage is a union between a man and a woman for the purpose of procreation and mutual support, or love. Each spouse in a marriage gives up some rights over his or her life in exchange for rights over the life of the other spouse.

While divorce has existed throughout history, it has been rare until recent centuries, which indicates that, even in its natural form, marriage is meant to be a lifelong, union.

### The Elements of a Natural Marriage

As Fr. John Hardon explains in his Pocket Catholic Dictionary, there are four elements common to natural marriage throughout history:

1. It is a union of opposite sexes.
2. It is a lifelong union, ending only with the death of one spouse.
3. It excludes a union with any other person so long as the marriage exists.
4. Its lifelong nature and exclusiveness are guaranteed by contract.

In Genesis, God created them male and female in a natural state

To share in His procreative power with Him. Even without Grace, man and woman share in this power through the intimate act of sex in the context of marriage

Vows in a civil marriage reflect those of a sacramental marriage

Even In a civil marriage ceremony there is a recognition of the importance of permanence of marriage. The couple cannot divorce by themselves. The court’s must get involved.

Analogous to Paul’s admonition that the Law lays out the good for us, but only Grace gives the power to live it out

Paul points to the New covenant of Christ’s love for the Church as symbolized in the sacrament of marriage. Christ speaks to this in Matt 19:7 – “What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder.”

Christ must be faithful to His Bride and therefore the sacrament reflecting that love must be unbreakable.

Christ elevated the marriage contract to a sacrament of matrimony that imparts grace to the couple to fulfill the marriage vows

### Marriage as a Supernatural Institution

In the Catholic Church, however, marriage is more than a natural institution; it was elevated by Christ Himself, in His participation in the wedding at Cana ([John 2:1-11](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%202:1-11;&version=DRA)), to be one of the [seven sacraments](http://catholicism.about.com/od/beliefsteachings/p/The_Sacraments.htm). A marriage between two Christians, therefore, has a supernatural element as well as a natural one. While few Christians outside of the Catholic and [Orthodox Churches](http://christianity.about.com/od/easternorthodoxy/p/orthodoxprofile.htm) regard marriage as a sacrament, the [Catholic Church](http://catholicism.about.com/od/beliefsteachings/tp/Catholicism_101.htm) insists that marriage between any two baptized Christians, as long as it is entered into with the intention to contract a true marriage, is a sacrament.

Grace supports a natural union

In marriage, the couple is called upon to help get the other to heaven. Again, like Jesus’ job as Groom is to get his bride to heaven.

Marriage is not easy. Nor was the love that Christ has shown for his bride. It led to his death.

(Remember, a husband is called to love his bride as Christ loved the Church: Ouch!)

Little by little adjusting to one another so that the faults of one “fit in” to the perfections of the other and unity arises from the very differences of the two persons. This is a beautiful evolution, like the emergence of the butterfly from its chrysalis; but it is **not** easy.

And children. Facing the prospect of an ultimate judgment, having to answer to God for the souls of the children who have been entrusted to them is daunting.

If ever there was a state of life which called for grace, marriage is it.

The promise of grace

Having a bad day? Wondering if you mad a mistake in getting married?

Perfect time to remember that Matrimony *is* a sacrament.

Why? Because - **Each spouse has an absolute right to whatever grace may be needed in this emergency; whatever grace may be needed to strengthen human weakness and to guide to a solution of the problem.**

**God will not default on this pledge.**

Two kinds of grace

Since Matrimony is a sacrament, we know that it gives **grace**.

Like every sacrament, it gives two kinds of grace.

First of all there is the increase in sanctifying grace, imparted at the very moment that the sacrament is received. Sanctifying grace is the grace that allows to live as adopted sons and daughters of God. Sanctifying grace is God’s life living within us.

As the just-wed couple turn away from the altar, their souls are spiritually stronger, spiritually more beautiful than when they came to the altar a few moments earlier.

Matrimony’s sacramental grace

The Sacrament of Matrimony also gives its own special grace, its sacramental grace.

This consists in a claim upon God for whatever actual graces the couple may need, through the years, to make a happy and successful marriage.

*By these gifts the parties are assisted not only in understanding, but in knowing intimately, in adhering to firmly. . . giving them in fine right to the actual assistance of grace, whensoever they need it for fulfilling the duties of their state. (Casti Connubii)*

It is the special mode of Sanctifying Grace which makes the receiver a habitual connatural principle of supernatural action in Marriage — which means that the love, and love-making, and housekeeping and work and worry of marriage are all deified.

To be more specific, the sacramental grace of Matrimony:

* Perfects the natural love of husband and wife;
* Elevates this love to a supernatural level which far surpasses mere mental and physical compatibility;
* Gives to marital love a sanctifying quality, making it an instrument for growth in holiness and marriage a path to sainthood;
* Imparts conscientiousness in the begetting and rearing of children;
* Gives prudence in the innumerable problems consequent upon family life;
* Enables husband and wife to adjust to one another’s shortcomings and to bear with one another’s faults.

This is only a **little** of what the grace of Matrimony will accomplish for those who, by their cooperation, give God a chance to show what he can do.

Grace merited by Christ’s Passion

Four hundred years ago the Council of Trent, in propounding the Catholic doctrine on the sacrament of Matrimony, said:

The grace which would perfect that natural love (of husband and wife) and confirm that indissoluble union and sanctify the married, Christ himself merited for us by his Passion; as the Apostle St. Paul indicates, saying, ‘Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church.’

Think of this, as Christ hung on the cross, He was thinking of you and your spouse and the grace you will need over your lifetime.

He knew that He was earning that very grace you would need to live out your marital commitment.

Unity

By the **unity** of marriage is meant that a man can have only one wife, and a woman only one husband. They are two in one flesh, not many in one flesh. Each is called to himself or herself to the other totally and completely. In this sense, unity is essential for marriage to symbolize the love of Christ for his Church. *The sacrament of marriage is the imprint of God on the souls of the married couple, not merely in order to deify their life in general, but in order to deify their union*

Indissolubility

Sacramental marriage is a permanent union.

Once a man and woman are completely united in a consummated Christian marriage, there is no power on earth, not even the Pope, who can dissolve the bond.

The Church does have the power, under very special circumstances, to dissolve a marriage that was **not** a sacramental marriage (for example, the marriage of two unbaptized persons when one of the parties has later been baptized), and to dissolve a sacramental marriage that never has been consummated.

But even the marriage of two validly baptized Protestants is a sacramental union which, once consummated, the Church herself cannot break.

The reality of hardship in some cases

Why, then, with all the tremendous beauty and power of Matrimony's sacramental grace, do so many Christian marriages fade so far from the ideal?

Because "fruitful reception of a sacrament does not conclude the Christian's duty — it is still up to him to cooperate with the power the sacrament gives . . ."

Pius XI notes very strongly: "Since men do not reap the full fruit of the sacraments . . . unless they cooperate with grace, the grace of matrimony will remain for the most part an unused talent hidden in the field unless both parties exercise these supernatural powers . . ."

Husbands and wives must carefully cooperate with sacramental grace by prayer, by frequenting the other Sacraments, by meditating on the nobility of their state, by constantly reminding themselves and each other to depend upon this supernatural reality in their lives.

There are times when the unbreakableness of the marriage bond seems to result in a great hardship.

We are thinking of such instances as that of a husband whose wife becomes mentally ill, or the wife who must flee from an abusive husband, or the husband or wife who is deserted by a spouse.

It is a case where an individual (an innocent deserted mother, for example) is sometimes called upon to suffer for the common good. Those who say that the innocent should not have to suffer are saying in effect that virtue should be practiced only when virtue is easy. By this principle it would be quite all right for a Catholic caught in a Communist land to deny his Faith if it would keep him out of prison. By this principle martyrs would be fools, and goodness would simply depend upon how low the pressure was.

As the [Catechism’s section on the Catholic marriage sacrament of Matrimony](http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p2s2c3a7.htm) says:

The deepest reason is found in the fidelity of God to his covenant, in that of Christ to his Church. Through the sacrament of Matrimony the spouses are enabled to represent this fidelity and witness to it. Through the sacrament, the indissolubility of marriage receives a new and deeper meaning.

(*Catechism*, 1647)

As for the deserted wife or lonely husband, God knows their problems better than anyone else. He can be depended upon to give the needed courage and strength and help if given the chance. The abandoned children need a father, yes; but they do not need a stepfather more than they need God. God will be doubly a Father to them.

A special blessing for a successful marriage

The bride and groom who are seeking all the grace they can obtain for the fulfillment of their vocation will want to exchange the vows of Matrimony within a Nuptial Mass. The Nuptial Mass is a special Mass with a very special blessing which the Church provides in her liturgy for those who are embarking upon the holy vocation of marriage.

It is a measure of the **importance** which the Church attaches to the sacrament of Matrimony.

A Catholic couple, both esteeming marriage as a vocation under God, receiving the sacrament of Matrimony after a chaste courtship in which prayer and the sacraments have kept God close, kneeling together to receive Holy Communion at their Nuptial Mass—there is a marriage upon which they, and all who love them, can pin their hopes.

Sources:

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