

## HOLINESS, HAPPINESS, AND THE MARITAL COVENANT

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A newly-engaged couple, Stuart and Jill, were picking out the bride's engagement ring. Jill had always imagined this would be a magical, romantic moment—but the reality was somewhat less enchanting than she had anticipated. Both were very busy with work and other responsibilities, so they were forced to meet at a downtown jeweler's during rush hour and quickly select the first pretty, three-diamond ring they saw. Jill was tempted to be disappointed, but told herself, "It's all right—and I'm sure Stuart will make up for the lack of atmosphere by saying something beautiful and loving and poetic when we leave here." However, when they got into the car, Stuart—with a big smile of satisfaction—announced, "Well, my darling, *that's that*." This statement left Jill more than a little let down, and even a bit hurt; the words "that's that" didn't seem very sensitive or romantic.

When they got back to the home of Jill's family, her mother was talking on the phone to a friend who happened to sell diamonds, promising that the couple would buy their engagement ring from her. Without thinking, Jill said, "Mom, we've already purchased our ring, but tell her 'Maybe next time.'" Stuart immediately spun Jill around, took her in his arms, looked her in the eye, and stated quite emphatically, "Jill, there won't be a next time. Don't you remember that I told you '*that's that*'?" Suddenly those two simple words took on an entirely new meaning for Jill, and she realized they were actually the most beautiful, romantic, and important words anyone had ever spoken to her. "*That's that*" was Stuart's way of making an unbreakable, unconditional promise to her, a firm expression of his intention to pledge his love to one other special person, once and for all. This was a promise both of them kept in a marital partnership that lasted over fifty years (*Married for Life*, Stuart and Jill Briscoe—*Just Between Us* Magazine website).

This is how God interacts with us; when He says in effect "That's that," His promise is utterly reliable. This truth is wonderfully illustrated in the Sacrament of Matrimony, or Marriage, which we refer to as a *covenant*. Marriage isn't merely a contract, for that connotes a legal arrangement with provisions for dissolution, or "loopholes." If one party violates or breaks the contract, the other party is no longer bound by it. A covenant is quite different, for it's an unconditional promise, a "that's that" arrangement calling for a wholehearted commitment from each person. Indeed, the most popular form of the marriage vows says "For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part." Those are more than just a nice-sounding set of words and phrases; that's the reality and nature of Christian marriage and of the marital covenant.

One author (Bruce Shelley, in *Christian Theology in Plain Language*) uses this analogy: "Contracts are broken when one of the parties fails to keep his promise. If, let us say, a patient fails to keep an appointment with a doctor, the doctor is not obligated to call the house and inquire, 'Where were you? Why didn't you show up for your appointment?' He simply goes on to his next patient and has his appointment secretary take note of the patient who failed to keep the appointment. . . . The Bible indicates the

covenant is more like the ties of a parent to her child than it is a doctor's appointment. If a child fails to show up for dinner, the parent's obligation, unlike the doctor's, isn't canceled. The parent finds out where the child is and makes sure he's cared for. One member's failure does not destroy the relationship. A covenant puts no conditions on faithfulness. It is the unconditional commitment to love and serve."

The Lord God has always related to His people by means of covenants. Scripture contains many examples of how God enters into such sacred agreements—sometimes with the nation as a whole, and sometimes with individuals who represented the entire people. For instance, chapter 9 of the Book of Genesis describes how, after the Great Flood, the Lord made a covenant or solemn promise to Noah, assuring him that never again would the entire earth be devastated in such a manner; He even placed a rainbow in the sky as a visible reminder of this promise (9:9-17). Later, in chapter 15 of the Book of Genesis, God made a covenant with an elderly man named Abram, whose name was later lengthened to Abraham; the Lord promised him, "Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can. Just so shall your descendants be" (15:5). Though he and his wife Sarah were both in their old age, a son was given to them, whom they named Isaac. Chapter 22 describes how God put Abraham to the test, asking him to sacrifice Isaac; when Abraham showed himself willing to obey, if necessary, God reiterated His covenant with him, saying, "In your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing—all this because you obeyed My command" (22:18).

Being faithful or obedient to the covenant always resulted in great blessing, for God delighted in this special relationship with His people. At Mt. Sinai in the desert the Lord, having freed His people from slavery in Egypt, made another covenant with them, with Moses as their leader and spokesman; He gave them the Ten Commandments and other religious rules and regulations, promising that if the people remained faithful and obedient, He would be their God and they would be His people, dearer to Him than any other people on earth (Ex. 19:5). The Lord God later made a covenant with King David, promising to establish a royal line or dynasty, from which would come a ruler whose reign would never end (2 Sm. 7:13)—meaning, of course, Jesus. This covenant promise was fulfilled in the most wonderful way possible, even though David himself at times, and almost all of his royal successors, turned out to be seriously disobedient to God.

The Lord keeps His promises, despite our unworthiness and even infidelity. This theme comes through very clearly in the Book of Hosea. At God's command, this prophet married a woman named Gomer, only to discover that she had been unfaithful to him. Quite naturally, Hosea divorced her, and was legally and morally justified in doing so; however, he discovered his love for her was so great he could not live without her, and so he sought to win her heart once again. Hosea was willing to resume and restore their married life together, if only she would try to live up to her commitment. The Book of Hosea presents this historical incident as an allegory of God's relationship with Israel: even though His people had been unfaithful to Him, God in His mercy and love wanted them back—and even if the people were again unfaithful to Him, the Lord would remain faithful to His covenant with them, for it's His very nature to be true to His promises.

This speaks wonderfully of God, but it's not exactly what we would call a fair or even relationship. That's why Jeremiah, a later prophet, spoke of a *new* covenant which the Lord would establish: not one written on tablets of stone (meaning the Ten Commandments, which were being ignored or broken all the time), but on the hearts of His people—that is, one they would truly take within themselves in a radical and life-changing way (31:33). As Catholics, we believe this New Covenant is established by and fulfilled in Jesus Christ, for at the Last Supper Our Lord took the chalice filled with wine and said, “This is My Blood of the Covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt. 26:27).

Through the Church, Jesus offers a special relationship and an experience of unity with all who believe in Him—and according to the New Testament Letter to the Ephesians, husband and wife play a very important role in this new covenant. St. Paul speaks not only of the beauty and importance of marriage, but uses it as an image of the love Christ shares with His Church. Jesus is the Groom; the Church is His Bride (5:23-33). Jesus loves the Church with a perfect love, and the Church loves Him back in a perfect way—not that we as individual believers are free of weakness and sin, but that the Church as a whole is “without spot or wrinkle or any such thing . . . holy and without blemish” (5:27). Our Lord had promised His Holy Spirit would always be present and active within the Church (Jn. 16:13-14), and it's through the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit that the Church is able to love her Lord and Husband Jesus as He deserves to be loved.

Jesus is the Groom; the Church is His Bride, and they are united in a perfect and everlasting love. The Letter to the Ephesians also says that your love for each other as husband and wife is supposed to be a reflection and reminder of this perfect love between Christ and the Church. This is a very beautiful and noble image . . . and, when you think about it, also a somewhat scary one. *This* isn't the easiest thing to live up to—but, through God's grace, it is possible.

Husband and wife are united to each other in the marriage covenant, and a central and absolutely essential part of this covenant is fidelity. Certainly this means fidelity in the sexual sense: not engaging in any sort of sexual activity with anyone other than your spouse. However, it also means fidelity in the larger sense of not allowing anyone or anything to interfere with, or in any way undermine, your relationship, or weaken your love and loyalty to and respect for each other. So, husbands, it can never be a case of the guys at work talking about how the “old ball and chain” has really been cramping their style lately, and in response you nod and say “I know what you mean”; or wives, your girlfriends are trading stories about the stupid things their husbands have done, with you responding, “Oh, wait, I can top that,” or anything at all of that sort.

No outside interest or activity—sports, the internet, the coffee and gossiping get-togethers, or the like—nor anyone you know, including close friends and family members, has the right to weaken or interfere with your relationship with your spouse. Only God Himself has a higher claim on your loyalty, love, and service—and your love for God is *not* in competition with your love for each other. They are actually mutually reinforcing—for the more you love God, the better a person you become, and the better a

person you are, the better a husband or wife you can be. By the same token, the more deeply you fall in love with your spouse, the more you can love God, plus all the other people in your life. It's as if each experience of love stretches out your heart a little bit more, giving you a greater overall capacity for love.

To further show how important this idea of fidelity is, it was when you exchanged your wedding vows and promised to be faithful that the actual Sacrament of Matrimony took place, or began—and at that moment, *you* performed your Sacrament. Not the priest or deacon—he was merely there as the Church's official witness. With any other Sacrament, the Holy Spirit works through the priest or deacon: as when he pours water on a baby's forehead in Baptism, or when the priest pronounces the words of absolution in the confessional, or says the words of Consecration over bread and wine at Mass. At those sacramental moments the Holy Spirit is powerfully active in and through the Church's representative. It wasn't that way at your wedding, however. The Holy Spirit was sacramentally present and working *through you* when you promised your fidelity to each other by saying "I do." That was probably the only time in your life that you'll ever perform or administer a Sacrament—and that helps illustrate how central and vitally important this idea of fidelity is in understanding the marriage covenant.

If God takes fidelity so seriously, then obviously He takes marriage very seriously, too—suggesting that He wants to be intimately involved in your marriage covenant, helping you love each other "until death do you part." Whenever I meet with engaged couples preparing for marriage, during this discussion on the marital covenant I ask them: "What would you say will be your most important spiritual duty to each other once you're married?" The answer, as all of you surely know, is very simple: to help one another reach Heaven (and, of course, this is also your most important spiritual duty toward your children). Indeed, in the pre-Vatican II Church it was customary to say that one of the "ends" or purposes of marriage was the "mutual sanctification of the spouses." Your spouse, and your children, should be in the process of becoming holier and more Christ-like because of knowing you (and I don't just mean in the sense of being able to practice heroic patience and charity in putting up with you, thereby making noble sacrifices on your behalf). Your influence and example should be helping your family members come closer to God—even as you allow them to help you in this same way.

Marriage offers plenty of opportunities to use and grow in God's grace—but also many spiritual pitfalls or dangers, as well. Let me mention some of them, based on what the Church calls the Seven Deadly Sins. First of all we have **pride**, the sin of having an excessively high opinion of ourselves. Within marriage, spouses will naturally have unequal backgrounds and abilities in terms of such things as education, managing financial matters, interacting with the children, decorating and caring for the home, fixing broken things, solving problems, and so forth. Prompted by pride, husbands and wives might favorably compare their strengths to their spouses' weaknesses; they might also easily begin finding fault with each other, or imagine they're heroically "putting up" with the other person's failings (while ignoring their own shortcomings).

Pride can tempt married persons to begin thinking of themselves as better than the other—and when this happens, petty arguments can quickly escalate into disastrous disagreements, in which both parties refuse to back down or take the first step toward reconciliation. (After all, why apologize if you believe you're always right?) Couples may also feel justified in making hurtful and vicious remarks (for example, "My wife is such a klutz," "My husband is good for nothing," or—directed at each other—"My parents were right: I should have married someone a lot better than you!") The only defense against pride, of course, is *humility*—the recognition that everything good we have and everything good we do ultimately comes from God, and that without Him we can achieve nothing valuable or worthwhile. As Jesus says, those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted (Lk. 14:11). Married couples who recognize this truth and who humbly rejoice in one another will find peace in this life and eternal happiness in the next.

A second deadly sin is **lust**—which is not the same thing as legitimate sexual desire for one's spouse; rather, it involves using the other person in marriage for one's own selfish pleasure, without truly respecting his or her dignity and value as a person, and without being open to the possibility of new life being conceived during marital intercourse. A contraceptive mentality, which manifests selfishness and fear, instead of generosity and trust, prevents God's blessing from descending upon that marriage. Other dangers in this area of sexual morality include, obviously, adultery, which is an extremely grave sin; pornography; self-abuse; and immodesty in speech and dress. To avoid the sin of lust in all its many forms, it's necessary to practice *chastity*—which for married couples means using sex only as a true expression of mutual love and commitment, while remaining open to God's will, should He desire to bless them with additional children.

**Sloth** is a condition of spiritual laziness or boredom, in which we neglect our religious and moral duties. Once a married couple has settled into a routine, it's very easy for them to become lazy or complacent. They may become too busy or lazy to pray or attend Mass; husbands may become sports addicts with little time or energy for anything else; wives may glue themselves to the TV for their favorite shows, thus short-changing their husbands and families. In these and similar ways, important responsibilities, or opportunities for personal and marital growth, may be spurned or neglected.

Perhaps a man immediately drops into his easy chair after getting home from work, and does nothing to help his wife—even though she too is tired after a full day working at her job. Maybe a woman's failure to appreciate her husband's efforts to earn a living, and her failure to keep up their home and to make herself attractive to him, causes him to adopt a "What's the use?" attitude. Also, parents who are too lazy to correct or discipline their children, or who neglect their religious education and moral upbringing, are failing in one of their most important responsibilities (and quite likely planting seeds of future bitterness, disappointment, and regret). Sloth must be combated by the virtue of *diligence*, which means using God's grace to do everything in its proper time and manner. In particular, it's helpful to begin every activity—especially the unpleasant or challenging ones—with a prayer, asking God's help in fulfilling our duties. We can also

recall Christ's sacrifice for us—dying on the Cross—and then offer our efforts as an expression of gratitude, and as a sacrifice of our own on behalf of our loved ones.

A fourth deadly sin is that of **gluttony**: the sin of excessive eating and drinking, or of being inordinately concerned with the physical needs and comfort of our bodies. Not only is this physically dangerous (for heart disease, diabetes, and other serious illnesses can result from such a life-style); our spirits may also be enslaved and become languorous and weary of prayer and other moral duties. Food and drink are intended to be only a means to an end; problems arise when they become ends in themselves. God wants us to eat in order to live; turning this around—living in order to eat—is sinful. A husband who needs two or three beers every evening in order to “relax,” or a wife who's constantly nibbling on chocolates or pastries, may actually be running away from serious problems, or using food and drink in an attempt to compensate for something else. Organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Overeaters Anonymous exist because they're needed; these problems are real, and—particularly in the case of alcoholism—they can damage or destroy marriages and the lives of family members. Other forms of substance abuse (ranging from an over-reliance on sleeping pills to the deliberate, “recreational” use of drugs) can also have disastrous results.

Gluttony must be counteracted by the virtue of *temperance*, which provides balance in our use of created goods. One way of practicing this virtue is by occasionally fasting or abstaining from meat, or skipping dessert; we can then donate part of the money saved to a charity helping those who suffer from hunger. When husbands and wives make this effort together, they can encourage and support each other's commitment, while at the same time growing in their appreciation and respect for each other.

**Envy** is defined by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as “sadness at the sight of another's goods and the immoderate desire to acquire them for oneself, even unjustly” (n. 2539). Oftentimes envy or jealousy is rooted in pride, which causes us to think ourselves more worthy of success than others (for example, “Why does *he* get all the good luck?,” or “*I* deserve this honor more than her”). Envy can be present in any relationship; within marriage, it can easily cause feuds and divisions. Maybe a wife feels her husband doesn't appreciate her or even deserve her—especially after her friends describe the wonderful, romantic things their husbands are doing for them. Perhaps a man is tempted to resent his wife's popularity with family and friends, and responds by withdrawing into a shell—which highlights their differences in personality even more. These and similar situations can lead to resentment, an accumulation of unspoken grudges, real or imagined grievances, a refusal to compromise, and bitter arguments. Left unchecked, envy could eventually lead to separation and divorce, or at least a profound sense of unhappiness.

The 4th century bishop St. John Chrysostom wrote, “Would you like to see God glorified by you? Then rejoice in your brother's progress and you will immediately give glory to God. Because His servant [meaning you] could conquer envy by rejoicing in the good of others, God will be praised.” In addition to learning to rejoice in the good fortune of others, we must overcome envy by the virtue of *gratitude*. When we appreciate all that God has given us—blessings far beyond what we could ever merit on

our own—we'll be less likely to be jealous of others. Moreover, thanking God for His gifts to us can bring peace to our hearts and our relationships. As someone once said, if we think about all the things we want but don't have, we'll be envious and sad; if instead we think about all the things we have but don't deserve, we'll be grateful and happy.

A sixth Deadly Sin is that of **avarice** or greed, which is an excessive desire for material possessions and earthly honors. Avaricious persons are so busy seeking worldly treasures that they downplay or ignore their spiritual needs and duties. Furthermore, this spiritual danger or temptation can easily affect married life. Many couples are caught up in the game of “keeping up with the Joneses”—but are they truly happier when their possessions increase? Not only is “the love of money the root of all evils” (1 Tim. 6:10), but more arguments within marriage seem to be about money than any other subject. Imagine a hard-working man who makes an honest living. Is it fair to him if his wife, wanting the same expensive items some of her friends have, criticizes him for not being more successful? Where is justice for the wife and mother struggling to make ends meet each month because her husband, hoping to “get lucky” and retire early, blows much of his paycheck at the racetrack? What message do parents give their children when they quarrel with relatives over their share of a family inheritance, or cheat on their taxes, or spend freely on vacations and entertainment, but then never find more than a dollar or two to drop into the Sunday collection basket? How do spouses benefit if they're so busy working for worldly wealth that they don't have time for each other and their children?

Greed and selfishness must be combated by the virtue of *generosity*. Some people have adopted the biblical standard of tithing—that is, giving 10% of their income to God by contributing to the Church and to charity. Invariably, they find that after making this profound sacrifice and act of faith in God's care, money—even if tight—is never again a problem. For a couple to prayerfully decide together to try tithing, even if just for a month, and then evaluate the results, is a tangible expression of their trust in God, and a way of spiritually “investing” in their marriage. Matrimony is meant to be a total giving of self by husband and wife—and if they involve God in this exchange, truly wonderful things can happen, for it is certainly the case that the Lord is never outdone in generosity.

The final Deadly Sin is that of **anger**, which is experienced at some point in virtually every serious relationship—especially marriage. There are, of course, some legitimate reasons for anger; this emotion becomes sinful, however, when it involves a thirst for revenge, a strong desire to inflict pain or suffering on the other person, and a refusal to “bury the hatchet” or forgive the wrongdoer. This sort of anger is self-destructive, and it poisons our relationships with God and with others. Married couples in particular must be alert to anger and, when it occurs, be able to acknowledge it and resolve it fairly and constructively. This means relying on good communication instead of assumptions (which are often mistaken). For instance, a man may come home from work angry about something that happened on the job, and brusquely tell his wife he doesn't want to talk to her. Feeling hurt and upset, she wrongly but understandably assumes he's angry at her—and in turn becomes angry at his insensitivity and unwillingness to discuss the situation. When she expresses this, his festering anger is shifted from his boss and co-workers to her—and an angry fight ensues. In such a case, a bitter argument could have been

avoided at the outset by timely communication (for example, “Dear, I’ve had a rough day at work, and need some time to myself to unwind”). Anger can also be harmful in a marriage if a couple fights unfairly (by bringing up the past, trying to hurt the other person, using unnecessarily harsh criticism, applying a double standard, and so on), or if the couple holds onto grudges instead of truly and completely forgiving one another.

In any relationship, and especially in marriage, the practice of *forgiveness* is essential. As the Letter to the Ephesians tells us, “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun set on your anger” (4:26). In addition to reconciling with one another before going to sleep, married couples should try to keep the situation in perspective (by not making a mountain out of a molehill), remember each other’s good qualities, and reflect on the fact that they too are far from perfect, and are constantly in need of divine mercy. Our willingness to forgive others (even if we still believe they were wrong and we were right) is an absolutely vital element in experiencing inner peace, satisfaction in our relationships with those around us, and harmony in our relationship with God.

The Seven Deadly Sins represent some of what I call the “minefields” of marriage—that is, potentially dangerous situations that can explode on married couples if they’re not careful. However, in each case God has provided them with a safe path to follow, while making His grace and assistance readily available to them. Practicing the virtues of humility, chastity, diligence, temperance, gratitude, generosity, and forgiveness allows couples to strengthen their marriage covenant and experience an ever-greater sense of peace in this life, even as they prepare themselves for the life to come. The Letter to the Ephesians calls upon husbands and wives to “be subordinate to each other out of reverence for Christ” (5:21). This sort of mutual respect and concern is truly a way of pleasing God and obtaining His blessing, and it will help married couples fulfill their most important duty toward one another and their children.

In his book *Mere Christianity*, the great English author C.S. Lewis has a lengthy but important quote on the experience of falling in love and what it means for marriage:

What we call “being in love” is a glorious state, and, in several ways, good for us. . . . It is a noble feeling, but it is still a feeling. Now no feeling can be relied upon to last in its full intensity, or even to last at all. Knowledge can last; principles can last; habits can last, but feelings come and go. And in fact, whatever people say, the state of “being in love” usually does not last. If the old fairy-tale ending “They lived happily ever after” is taken to mean “They felt for the next fifty years exactly as they felt the day before they were married,” then it says what probably never was nor ever could be true, and would be highly undesirable if it were. Who could bear to live in that excitement for even five years? What would become of your work, your appetite, your sleep, your friendships? But, of course, ceasing to be “in love” need not mean ceasing to love. Love in this second sense—love as distinct from “being in love”—is not merely a feeling. It is a deep unity, maintained by the will and deliberately strengthened by habit, reinforced by (in Christian marriages) the grace which both parties ask, and receive, from



God. They can have this love for each other even at those moments when they do not like each other, as you love yourself even when you do not like yourself. They can retain this love even when each would easily, if they allowed themselves, be “in love” with someone else. “Being in love” first moved them to promise fidelity: this quieter love enables them to keep the promise. It is on this love that the engine of marriage is run: being in love was the explosion that started it.

This quote wonderfully expresses what love is supposed to be within marriage: not primarily a feeling, but a decision. Husbands and wives may fall out of love, but they can *choose* to continue loving each other—and acting in a loving way toward one another is many times the first step in reigniting the feelings. As one older woman said, “When I first married my husband, I was deeply in love with him. One day I realized that, while I still loved him, I was no longer ‘in love’ with him. However, as more time passed, I fell back in love with him—and the marriage then was even better than at the beginning.”

Being always open to the possibility of a more loving relationship is part of the marriage covenant. As one author (Mike Mason) states, keeping your vow of marital fidelity “means not [just] to keep from breaking it, but rather to devote the rest of one’s life to discovering what the vow *means*, and to be willing to change and to grow accordingly.” Personal growth, and growth as a couple, is an ongoing requirement for a healthy and happy marriage; as another author (Michael Green) notes, “Even if marriages are made in Heaven, human beings are still responsible for their maintenance.” To put it another way, “Marriage is not so much finding the right person as it is *being* the right person.” This process of being the right person involves, of course, honesty, humility, openness, a certain amount of courage, and a willingness to change, if necessary.

Marriage often calls for compromises and adjustments—and these sacrifices, while not always easy, can be highly rewarding and worthwhile. One author (Michael Green) writes, “All of us have seen two rivers flowing smoothly and quietly along until they meet and join to form one new river. When this happens they clash and hurl themselves at one another. However, as the newly formed river flows downstream, it gradually quiets down and flows smoothly again. And now it is broader and more majestic and has more power. So it is in a marriage: the forming of a new union may be tumultuous—but, when achieved, the result is far greater than either alone.” Another example from nature is that of two porcupines in Alaska. If they cuddle together to stay warm, they poke and sting one another. They’re uncomfortable, but being apart in a cold world makes them even more uncomfortable, so they learn to adjust to one another—very carefully.

Still another analogy or image of marriage involves human hair. According to one commentator (Craig Larson), “A braid appears to contain only two strands of hair. But it is impossible to create a braid with only two strands. If the two could be put together at all, they would quickly unravel. Herein lies the mystery: What looks like two strands requires a third. The third strand, though not immediately evident, keeps the strands tightly woven. In a Christian marriage, God’s presence, like the third strand in a braid, holds husband and wife together.”

A little girl was attending her first wedding, and she whispered to her mother, “Why is the bride wearing a white dress?” The mother whispered back, “Because white is the color of happiness, and today is the happiest day of her life.” To this the child responded, “Then why is the groom wearing black?” Marriage does have its share of joys and sorrows, and also sufferings and blessings—and all these things can take on a special holiness and significance when rooted in God’s love and nourished by the Sacraments of the Church. I once asked a student to name the seven Sacraments, and he began, “Well, let’s see: there’s Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation, and—um, what’s that Sacrament for people who are sick and suffering? Oh, yeah, Matrimony.” That’s not exactly what the Church teaches, but as spouses, you are supposed to have a mutually healing and life-giving effect upon each other.

A strong, self-reliant man who rarely expressed his feelings had to rush his wife to the hospital for an emergency appendectomy; however, even though the surgery was a success, instead of recovering, the woman’s condition grew worse. The only explanation the doctors had was that the woman didn’t want to get well. One of them said to her, “I’d think you’d want to be strong for your husband,” only to have her say “John is so strong he doesn’t need anyone.” When the doctor passed along this remark to the husband, he rushed to his wife’s bedside, took her hand in his, and exclaimed, “You’ve got to get well!” Without opening her eyes, she asked, “Why?” He answered, “Because I need you!” The nurse monitoring the patient noticed an immediate improvement in her blood pressure and vital signs; the wife opened her eyes and said, “John, that’s the first time you ever said that to me.” A few days later the patient was released, fully recovered.

Rather than going it alone, or giving the impression that they’re self-sufficient, husbands and wives are supposed to be there for one another, acknowledging their need for each other, and above all, their need for God—meaning their personal need for Him, and their need for His blessings upon their marriage and their family life. All of us are dependent upon God, and we might say that married couples have also chosen to be dependent upon each other—for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health. Marriage is a covenant, an unconditional promise, and a pledge of mutual fidelity—and if it becomes anything less than that, one or both of the spouses will quite likely fail in their duty of helping each other reach Heaven.

A teenage girl was examining her grandmother’s wedding ring, and remarked, “Wow, what heavy and cumbersome rings you had fifty years ago.” The grandmother answered, “Yes, that’s true—but don’t forget, in my day they were made to last a lifetime.” Contrary to what many people today think, and despite the values our society now promotes, fidelity, commitment, and the marital covenant have not gone out of style. It may be harder to maintain a loving and lasting marriage today than it was in the past, but it can still be every bit as spiritually and emotionally worthwhile and rewarding—for Jesus looks with great joy and favor upon all those who, whatever their vocation or calling, try to imitate His example of faithfulness and love. Through the grace of God, you have made your promise to Him and to each other—and *that’s that*.