



UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

[USCCB](#) > [Beliefs And Teachings](#) > [Ecumenical And Interreligious](#) > [Ecumenical](#) > [Orthodox](#)

AN AGREED STATEMENT ON THE SANCTITY OF MARRIAGE

Introduction

At a time when the sacred character of married life is radically threatened by contrary lifestyles, we the members of the Orthodox-Roman Catholic Consultation feel called by the Lord to speak from the depth of our common faith and to affirm the profound meaning, the "glory and honor," of married life in Christ.

I. The Sacramental Character of Marriage

For Christians of both the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches marriage is a sacrament. Through the prayers and actions of our wedding rites we profess the presence of Christ in the Spirit and believe that it is the Lord who unites a man and a woman in a life of mutual love. In this sacred union, husband and wife are called by Christ not only to live and work together, but also to share their Christian life so that each with the aid of the other may progress through the Holy Spirit in the life of holiness and so achieve Christian perfection. This relationship between husband and wife is established and sanctified by the Lord. As a sacred vocation, marriage mirrors the union of Christ and the church (Eph. 5:23).

Christ affirmed and blessed the oneness and profound significance of marriage. Christian tradition, following his teaching, has always proclaimed the sanctity of marriage. It has defined marriage as the fundamental relationship in which a man and woman, by total sharing with each other, seek their own growth in holiness and that of their children, and thus show forth the presence on earth of God's kingdom.

II. Enduring Vocation

The special character of the human relationship established through marriage has always been recognized in the Christian tradition. By sanctifying the marital bond, the church affirms a permanent commitment to personal union, which is expressed in the free giving and acceptance of each other by a man and a woman. The sacrament of marriage serves as an admirable example of the union which exists between God and the believer. The Old Testament uses marriage to describe the covenant relationship between God and his people (Hosea). The Letter to the Ephesians sees marriage as the type of relationship which exists between Christ and his church (Eph. 5:31-35). Consequently both the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches affirm the permanent character of Christian marriage: "What God has joined together, let no man put asunder" (Mt. 19:6).

However, the Orthodox Church, out of consideration of the human realities, permits divorces, after it exhausts all possible efforts to save the marriage and tolerates remarriages in order to avoid further human tragedies. The Roman Catholic Church recognizes the dissolution of sacramental nonconsummated marriages either through solemn religious profession or by papal dispensation. To resolve the personal and pastoral issues of failed marriages which have been consummated an inquiry is often undertaken to uncover whether there exists some initial defect in the marriage covenant which would render the marriage invalid.

III. The Redeeming Effect of Marital Love

A total sharing of a life of love and concern is not possible apart from God. The limitations of human relationships do not allow for a giving and receiving which fulfill the partners. However, in the life of the church, God gives the possibility of continual progress in the deepening of human relationships. By opening the eyes of faith to the vision that these relationships have as their goal, God offers a more intimate union with himself. Through the liberating effect of divine love, experienced through human love, believers are led away from self-centeredness and self-idolatry. The Gospel indicates the direction that this love must ultimately take: toward intimate union with the One Who alone can satisfy the fundamental yearning of people for self-fulfillment.

Given this vision of reality, Christian tradition recognizes that the total devotion of the married partners implies as its goal a relationship with God. It teaches, moreover, that the love which liberates them to seek union with God and which is the source of sanctification for them is made possible through the presence of the Spirit of God within them.

Through the love manifested in marriage, an important witness is given to the world of the love of God in Christ for all people. The partners in Christian marriage have the task, as witnesses of redemption, to accept as the inner law of their personal relationship that love which determines the relationship between Christ and the church: "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25). Through this love which liberates believers from selfish interests and sanctifies their relationships, the Christian husband and wife find the inspiration in turn to minister in loving service to others.

IV. Theological Clarifications on Christian Marriage

In the teaching of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches a sacramental marriage requires both the mutual consent of the believing Christian partners and God's blessing imparted through the ministry of the church.

At present there are differences in the concrete ways in which this ministry must be exercised in order to fulfill the theological and canonical norms for marriage in our two churches. There are also differences in the theological interpretation of this diversity. Thus the Orthodox Church accepts as sacramental only those marriages sanctified in the liturgical life of the church by being blessed by an Orthodox priest.

The Catholic Church accepts as sacramental the marriages which are celebrated before a Catholic priest or even a deacon, but it also envisions some exceptional cases in which, by reason of a dispensation or the unavailability of a priest or deacon, Catholics may enter into a sacramental marriage in the absence of an ordained minister of the church.

An examination of the diversities of practice and theology concerning the required ecclesial context for Christian marriage that have existed in both traditions demonstrates that the present differences must be considered to pertain more to the level of secondary theological reflection than to that of dogma. Both churches have always agreed that the ecclesial context is constitutive of the Christian sacrament of marriage. Within this fundamental agreement various possibilities of realization are possible as history has shown and no one form of this realization can be considered to be absolutely normative in all circumstances.

V. Plans for Further Study

The members of the Orthodox-Roman Catholic Consultation give thanks to God for this common faith in the sanctity of marriage which we share in our sister churches. We recognize however that pastoral problems remain to be studied in depth, such as the liturgical celebration of weddings between Orthodox and Roman Catholic partners and the religious upbringing of children in such families. We continue to explore these questions out of a common vision of marriage and with confidence in the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

New York, N.Y.
December 8, 1978
19th meeting

[Back to Documents Produced by the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation](#)

©2020 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops