

THE SACRAMENT OF

# matrimony



Harris, Charles William  
The sacrament of  
Matrimony  
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Strobridge



The Sacrament of  
**MATRIMONY**

by Rev. Charles W. Harris, C.S.C.



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## Man and His Mate

When God had finished the work of the visible creation and had seen that it was good, He found one thing wanting. It was, in fact, a built-in need of His masterpiece. "It is not good for man to be alone . . . let Us make him a helpmate like to himself." Someone who was equal to him, someone who was to help and assist him. And He added the words "Increase and multiply" that they might know that they, too, were to share in some measure His own creative activity.

In these few words God named the purpose of this first family and of marriage which constitutes it. I suppose that, to Adam, Eve seemed surpassingly fair—he had seen no other woman, and she was obviously his choice for there was no other to choose.

Time, of course, remedied this limitation; and time preserved through the vagaries of human development a sense of the sacredness of this union, perhaps because it touched so immediately upon life. There was something special about the choice of a helpmate. The union was not to be haphazard but stable, and



even permanent, if they were truly to help one another and their children. There were departures from the ideal God originally outlined, but something of the ideal always remained and was cherished.

### **What Is a Sacrament?**

Our Blessed Lord restored the ideal of marriage in all its original beauty and gave it a new dignity. "It was to suit your hard hearts that Moses wrote such a command as that [that a man put away his wife]; God, from the first days of creation, made them man and woman. A man, therefore, will leave his father and mother and will cling to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. Why then, since they are no longer two, but one flesh, what God has joined, let not man put asunder" (Mark 10:5-10). And in restoring the ideal of marriage, Christ raised this contract to the level of a sacrament.

A sacrament is a special kind of thing upon which we might reflect for a moment. A sacrament has three characteristics. 1) It can be sensed: There is something that we can see or hear

or put our fingers to that indicates the kind of grace it confers, e.g., in Baptism the water poured and the words "I baptize (wash) you," etc., heard indicate a cleansing (from sin). 2) The sacrament produces or increases grace automatically: Once the external rite is performed the grace is conferred unless blocked by the deliberate act of the individual. 3) The sacrament can have been designed only by our Blessed Lord: He alone could attach to these things of sense the ability to serve as instruments in our sharing the divine life of grace.

### **Marriage Is a Contract**

In Matrimony the element that is sensed, that which externally constitutes the sacrament, is the verbal contract: the giving and accepting one another as man and wife. Thus, the sacrament is only as good as the contract. If there is no genuine or valid contract, there is no genuine or valid sacrament. Since it is a contract a certain form may be prescribed and certain conditions demanded for its validity: In civil law a valid contract cannot ordinarily

be made by one under 18 years of age; a notary public may be required as an essential witness for the contract's validity. So, too, for the sacrament of Matrimony. The contracting parties must have a certain age for the contract to be valid. It must be a genuine contract, entered into freely, not by force or fraud. Certain witnesses are required—the priest and two others—for its formality. Frequently we hear of a marriage between Catholics being annulled. This means a declaration that the original contract was null and void because some condition was wanting. And if there is no contract, there is no sacrament, there is no marriage.

Unlike many contracts, the marriage contract is already made up. It must be taken as is. I cannot take Mary as my lawfully wedded wife until such time as she needs false teeth, or for six months. The contract reads: "for better or for worse . . . until death do us part." "The sublimity of the end [of marriage]—propagation of the human race—takes away from the contracting parties the power to lay down conditions of their union."



## **“I’ll Love You Forever”**

Marriage is too important for its structure to be determined by the whim of man. We know too well the sad results when this has been attempted. So God Himself has specified that the contract must be entered into by deliberate choice, between one man and one woman, and must constitute a permanent union. To those in love this permanency never seems a difficulty. We always say, “I’ll love you forever,” not “until half-past 12.” It is when love has chilled or vanished that permanency becomes galling.

This is the kind of thing the sacrament of Matrimony is. But the ingredients need to be thought about more than we may possess them for ourselves in an intimate and personal way.

We may think of the sacraments in a twofold way: There are those that heal and nourish the divine life of grace—Penance, Extreme Unction, Holy Eucharist. And those that consecrate—Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Orders, Matrimony — that is, they dedicate us for a supernatural purpose and assign

to us a certain rank in the Mystical Body of Christ. The supernatural purpose of Matrimony is not diverse from that indicated by God at the beginning of time when He said "It is not good for man to be alone" and "Increase and multiply."

### **Purposes: Basic and Final**

Moral theologians frequently speak of the primary purpose and secondary purpose of marriage—the begetting of children and mutual companionship. This is a useful distinction for moral theologians, who must be concerned about the reason for actions being right or wrong. But I do not like these words "primary" and "secondary," for when we say a thing is secondary it seems to imply being unimportant or second-rate. I would rather like to use the words basic purpose and final purpose. The foundation is essential, basic, for a house, but anyone who has sat on a foundation during the rain has a strong feeling that the roof, that which finally completes the house, is mightily important, too. And in the last analysis

neither the foundation nor the roof is the house but a certain combination of the two.

So, too, we will speak about the basic and final purposes of marriage, but we shall not imply that either is adequate alone, only both taken together. Even more accurately, there is only one purpose of marriage with two aspects. The basic purpose of marriage is children: This simply means that the difference between the sexes has this fact basically in mind. This does not mean that man and woman are to function as a kind of impersonal, co-operative machine for producing babies. Yet one may get this implication if basic and final purposes are divorced.

The final purpose of marriage is the extension and development of the human personality through mutual love. "It is not good for man to be alone" implies a profound need to love and be loved, if he is to be a good man; and since God created woman to satisfy this need, it is ordinarily through one another that this perfection of personality takes place.

## What Is "Love"?

There are probably no two words more distorted and misused in our language than "love" and "sex." The passing attraction, sentiment, infatuation—all have been called love. There are even Ph.D. theses on the love-life of fish. Love of its nature is a spiritual thing. Only one who has some entrée into the world of the spirit can love: Human beings can love, angels can love, God is Love. But not fish!

Sex has come to have a highly restricted meaning, essentially mating and the mating instinct, whether it occurs among people or rabbits. In this narrow sense of the word it has become an obsession of the American civilization. Older civilizations wonder at our fascination with the physical side of sex. To them there seems something immature and not quite grown-up about this attitude.

Love between man and woman almost inevitably involves sex; in fact, it is love that imparts to sex its full meaning and beauty. Lest this remark be misunderstood, let us say right off there are two kinds of love: love of self-in-

terest or with an angle, and unselfish love or friendship. When the love of self-interest is dominant, the person loved is sought or desired because of the pleasure or convenience that comes to us. What is really loved is ourselves, and the person is loved for our own sake.

### **From Infatuation to Love**

It's somewhat like the kind of attraction a *thing* has for us. I like Haig and Haig whiskey. It's smooth. It relaxes me. I don't like Haig and Haig for its own sake. I never ask whether it prefers to mingle with soda, water or just "on the rocks." I like it for what it does for me and I consult only myself. When we love persons this way — and most love begins this way — we call it love of self-interest. Infatuation is this kind of love. It is excessively bound up with emotion and feeling and is the kind of thing which may deteriorate into lust. Then the person is exploited for sheer physical pleasure.

The other kind of love, love of friendship or unselfish love, prompts us to love a person for his own sake, not for

what we get out of him. A young man loves Sue or Linda or Mary, not because she is beautiful, not because she is kind or thoughtful, but simply and solely because she is Sue. The direction of this love is from ourselves to another, and is so forgetful of self that it tends to put self at the service of the one loved.

The young man now does things from the sole motive of pleasing his Sue. He goes to movies that he detests because she likes them. He begins to eat raw oysters because she does. This is love for her as a person. Self has gotten rather thoroughly out of the picture. He may even begin to think of marriage, wonder whether he is worthy of her, whether she will have him. Love begins to develop overtones of reverence. This is deep, true love that takes us out of ourselves and because it does, enriches our personality immensely.

### **The Impulse to Give**

Such is conjugal love, a love of friendship, a love directed toward one another precisely because of one another. Each is wholly for the other; each seeks to share not simply in the actions and

thoughts of the other but in the very being of the other. Because the object and basis of this love is the person and because the person is indefinitely knowable and lovable, this love persists, and even grows and intensifies, long after sensible attraction disappears. For this kind of love is essentially a thing of the spirit which engages the spiritual part of man — intellect and will — at its highest level. This is the love essential to marriage, for it has about it the indestructibility of the spirit, not the perishableness of matter.

Such a love, of course, is not divorced from feeling or sentiment. In human beings there is no intense engagement of the will without accompanying emotion. We love as human beings, not as angels, and love, therefore, engages the whole of us. Hence we find that love tends to external expression, and because love takes us out of ourselves and toward the person, its natural impulse is toward union and the gift of self.

We find a young man and a young woman hold hands, a symbol of union; they kiss, a sign of devotion; they em-

brace, a sign of love. Ordinarily, the natural impetus of love between man and woman is to a complete donation and self-surrender, to an ultimate, exclusive and irrevocable gift of self in marriage.

### **Marriage vs. Mating**

Seen thus, there is about marriage a dignity that lifts it as much above purely animal mating as spirit is above matter. For, as one Father Scheeben put it, Christians "dispose of their bodies as generative principle only with the approval of Christ and according to the mind of Christ. They belong to Christ and they unite with each other on the basis of their oneness with Christ; the union of each with the Divine Head is carried over into the union which they contract with each other."

Union means giving up one's self, and in marriage there is not only a taking of possession but a surrender. Sexuality implies not only attaining satisfaction but giving something away. Each surrenders himself physically to the other as they have surrendered themselves spiritually. When sex, there-



fore, is separated from the love it symbolizes, there is evidently an element of profanation. St. Paul is most emphatic about this. He writes to the Christians in the dissolute port of Corinth: "Have you never been told that your bodies belong to the Body of Christ? And am I to take what belongs to Christ and make it one with a harlot? God forbid. Or did you never hear that the man who unites himself to a harlot becomes one body with her?" (I Cor. 6:15-17).

### **Love Is Creative**

As the marriage act by which husband and wife become one principle of life is the exterior symbol of their interior union, so, too, the fruit of this act is a new life in which each discovers both himself and the other as the concrete manifestation of their common union. Love is both unifying and creative, and one cannot divorce from the act of love its creative implication. So perfectly, therefore, do the basic and final ends of marriage complement one another that the marriage act cannot, ordinarily, remain an act of love or con-

tribute to the growth of love, if its creative aspect is positively excluded.

The form a sacrament takes suggests the grace it confers; if the sacrament consecrates, it suggests as well the spirituality of that state. The form of the sacrament of Matrimony is that of a gift, offered and accepted, and the ministers of the sacrament are the parties entering into this union. Because they form the contract and the contract is the sacrament, they are ministers of the sacrament as well. The priest is there, not to make the marriage holy, but because it is holy and to demonstrate that holiness.

### **Marriage, a Symbol**

In the very first moment of their married life husband and wife become instruments of grace for one another, and this is indicative of what their entire married life should be — a constant sanctification of each other through the selflessness of their love. That is why marriage in its sacramental form has been set as the symbol of the fundamental mystery of Christian-

ity, the relationship between Christ and His Church.

“The man is the head to which the woman’s body is united, just as Christ is the Head of the Church, He, the Saviour, on Whom the safety of His Body depends. . . . You who are husbands must show love to your wives, as Christ showed love to the Church when He gave Himself up on its behalf. . . .

“That is why a man will leave father and mother and will cling to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. Yes, these words are a high mystery and I am applying them here to Christ and His Church” (Eph. 5:23-33).

The responsibility, then, of the Christian marriage is to serve as the symbol of the union of Christ with the Church, to be the visible reminder of the invisible union with Him. Husband and wife unite with each other in Matrimony for the purpose which Christ pursues in His union with the Church, the growth of His Mystical Body. It is a growth both intensive and extensive: intensive in so far as husband and

wife help each other to love God more, extensive in so far as they co-operate with God in bringing into the world new members of the Mystical Body whom it is their privilege to form to the image and likeness of God. Again, Father Scheeben says, “. . . the Christian marriage bond is more than an image of the mysterious union between Christ and the Church; it is also an organ of this union and has to co-operate for the attainment of the same supernatural end, the propagation of God’s children. Thus Christian marriage possesses a supernatural consecration by its very nature. The married couple are consecrated to God in a special way, and accordingly enter into a special union with Christ and His life of grace.”

### **Toward Heaven Together**

Ultimately, Christians marry to make their way to heaven together. It is a difficult way and most of us find a need to share difficulties with others. We cannot stand loneliness; we want someone who understands us, sympathizes

with us, who instinctively knows how we feel, the encouragement we need. The strength of one sustains the weakness of the other, and more and more each finds himself fulfilling the vocation to which he is called — to sanctify one another in the bond of love.

As this wedded love grows more mature it should be permeated by tenderness. Tenderness attaches to every love which attains a certain excellence. It is a special form of love's free outflowing, serene and bright as love itself. Distinguished by a freedom from constraint, it is marked by thoughtfulness and gentleness, is ever sensitive to the mood of the one loved, ever ready to adapt to the need of the beloved. As union grows, as each comes to know and understand the other, tenderness becomes characteristic of a love that never takes one another for granted, that each day finds something new to love, finds new reasons to serve one another.

Unfortunately, wedded love does not always grow this way. We can become used to persons. We take them for

granted, and the sensitive delicacy that is the joy of love disappears. With its disappearance is experienced the difficulty of living so close to each other, of fitting in with each other. The original attractiveness seems gone.

### **Love Must Grow—or Die**

Modern advertising would suggest that a new tailor or a new beauty treatment is the remedy. But even if the original attractiveness is regained, it may no longer be attractive. We don't think much of what we've gotten used to. Two years after marriage a wife may be as radiant as on her wedding morning and still fail to distract her husband from the sports' page. It's not that the riches of each other have been exhausted. It's that we have stopped exploring.

Then the first child is born and something new discovered. In his wife the husband sees the beautiful mystery of motherhood and she sees him as father. The joy and happiness of the first days of marriage reawaken. As new demands are made upon them, new re-

sources are revealed. To the children they must open the world of faith: teach them to pray, to walk in the presence of God, to grow up in habits of self-denial and generosity. Since one cannot give what one hasn't got, these responsibilities are incentives to their own growth in virtue. To perfect their children they find a need to perfect themselves. In drawing closer to God, they draw closer to each other and experience how truly they love one another who love God. As the children grow into maturity, father and mother see themselves as sculptors in the great quarry of humanity, carving living stones and compacting them together into the temple of God. In them the whole mystery of the union of Christ and His Church shines forth and in this, their vocation, is their happiness.

### **Obedience with Love**

“Wives must obey their husbands as they would obey the Lord. The man is the head to which the woman's body is united, just as Christ is the Head of the Church, He, the Saviour, on Whom

the safety of His Body depends; and women must owe obedience at all points to their husbands, as the Church does to Christ. You who are husbands must show love to your wives, as Christ showed love to the Church when He gave Himself up on its behalf. He would hallow it, purify it by bathing it in the water to which His word gave life; He would summon it into His own presence, the Church in all its beauty, no stain, no wrinkle, no such disfigurement; it was to be holy, it was to be spotless. And that is how husband ought to love wife, as if she were his own body. . . . That is why a man will leave his father and mother and will cling to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. Yes, those words are a high mystery, and I am applying them here to Christ and His Church. Meanwhile, each of you is to love his wife as he would love himself, and the wife is to pay reverence to her husband" (Eph. 5:23-33).

St. Paul here not only sets forth the ideal of the Christian marriage but also sketches how husband and wife are specifically to realize it. Each has a



different function, each different qualifications. Their holiness will in great measure depend on how these functions are fulfilled and how each adapts to the other in this fulfillment.

### **Head of the Family**

It is the divine order that man should be head of the family, its protector, its strength. Since he is to wield authority he tends to be more sure of himself; since he must lead he tends to be more decisive, more self-sufficient. He proceeds by reason and, once convinced, acts on this conviction without further reassurance. Man is trained from early youth to control his emotions and is less influenced by them than by reason. His very qualifications, however, may become his defects.

He inclines to be not only self-sufficient but self-centered, not only authoritative but forgetful of the rights of others, not only decisive but lacking in consideration. At times he may lack sympathy and tenderness, convinced that his support of the family is sufficient evidence of his sentiments. His

reasoned approach and attachment to principle may be a drawback in dealing with individuals: Specific differences may be ignored and he may demand of human action an exacting uniformity not adapted to varying personalities.

Because man is self-centered he may fail in understanding others, especially his wife. A man acts as if a woman's reactions were the same as his own. He reasons with her when he should appeal to her emotions. He would resolve her troubles by a logical analysis instead of sweeping her into his arms and giving her a kiss. And when reason and argument fail he sings in frustration, "Why Can't a Woman Be More Like a Man"?

### **Heart of the Family**

But, as Pope Pius XI said, "If the man is the head, the woman is the heart and as he occupies the chief place in ruling so she in loving." God has, therefore, endowed her particularly with gentleness, devotion and intuition. A woman's heart and feelings influence her understanding much more than does her reasoning. She can put herself

in the place of others and can appreciate their sentiments and wishes. That is why she is so gracious, so readily puts others at ease, knows best what approach to take to each of her children. Because she is sympathetic she may sometimes twist principles to suit individuals. She dislikes one man because of his whiskers and is charmed with another because of his darling mustache. With the children she finds it difficult to implement principle by punishment and readily excuses their shortcomings.

She attaches much importance to what men call trifles and will give more time to buying a pair of earrings than to a hundred shares of stock. But, then, she has to wear the earrings. She must consider not only how they look in themselves and on her, but with what dresses they will go, at what events she can wear them, how her husband, and even her children, will like them. These trifles are invested with meaning. They become symbols, and if the symbol is ignored that for which it stands is, too. She will spend an hour and a half dressing for a dance. Every bit of make-up,

each line of her dress is calculated to impress. She arrives looking perfectly radiant, and all her husband is thinking of is how late they are. The new hairdo and the new dress are completely ignored and she is crushed. She did it all out of love; the whole ensemble was just to please her husband, and she feels that if this is ignored, so is her love.

### **Pursuer and the Pursued**

Woman loves to be pursued and to play hard to get, simply because the ardor and effort of pursuit testify to love. And woman not only wants to love, she wants to be loved, has a much more profound need of it than man because she is less self-sufficient. And this love needs to be often expressed. Perhaps this is why St. Paul sums up the husband's responsibility to her in: "You who are husbands must show love to your wives."

Intrinsic to happiness and holiness in marriage is respect for the divine order and the specific qualifications of each other. Yet it is an order that seems increasingly disregarded in the

progressive surrender of masculine leadership to feminine domination. Feminine domination is not ordinarily due to feminine aggressiveness, but to masculine inertia or to the excessive pressure of business and competition that exhaust the father and leave him little time or energy for the family. Once the chase is over and she has been captured, woman prefers to submit and to be led. But if leadership in the family is lacking she will assume it. The family cannot be without leadership; even a bad policy is better than no policy at all.

### **Family Spirituality**

The husband is the spiritual head of the family, so much so that in some tribal religions he is also the priest. He is to imitate Christ, the Head of the Church, Who is the source of its life and vitality. From him must come the spiritual initiative of the family. Yet it is here that the man frequently abdicates. Does he go to the sacraments only when his wife urges him to do so or does he set an example for his wife and children? Does he lead grace be-

fore meals or is he halfway through the soup when his wife says, "Dear, we ought to pray." Does he insist on family prayer and do the children grow up with him praying in their midst or do they find him on his knees only when he is looking for a lost quarter?

For this leadership the husband has a particular grace since he has this responsibility. If he fails, the family will suffer. Momism, the particular term for feminine domination, has received much study in recent years: Lack of courage, initiative, leadership, discipline, resourcefulness are too apt to characterize the children of such a family. The growing boy, in particular, must be made to suffer privation, face danger, endure pain, overcome difficulty, meet competition; and this will seldom happen under the direction of his mother. Women are wonderful to bind up wounds but it takes men to lead to war.

### **Equal—but Different**

The obedience which wives must show their husbands is not that of a serf. They are equals — God made her

like to him. The authority of the husband, God-given, is neither a mark of excellence nor a sign of personal worth but a necessity for his social function. The husband will not drive but lead. Husband and wife will plan together, and the direction of one and the obedience of the other will be sustained by their mutual affection. In obeying their husbands wives will obey as the Church does Christ, not reluctantly in submission to power but freely in submission to love.

Like all authority that of the husband has as its aim the common good of the family, not his personal advantages. Realizing this the good wife will encourage the authority of the husband and assist him in his weakness so that a loving respect and reverence be accorded him. This does not mean that the wife is without influence. She is the heart of the home, making it human and livable, and what is so influential as love. Her function demands of her great love and great self-effacement. But a wife who generously gives of herself is the happiness of the home, its interior light, its joy.

“A man who has found a perfect wife has found a rare treasure. . . . Bound to her in loving confidence, he will have no need of spoil. Content, not sorrow, she will bring him as long as life lasts. Does she not busy herself with wool and thread, plying her hands with ready skill. . . . From early dawn she is up, assigning food to the household, so that each waiting woman has her share. . . . Ripe wisdom governs her speech, but it is kindly instruction she gives. She keeps watch over all that goes on in her house, not content to go through life eating and sleeping. That is why her children are the first to call her blessed, her husband is loud in her praise” (Proverbs 31:10-31).

### **Joseph's Example**

Christ had no human father in order that it might be abundantly clear that in no way did the human nature He received from His mother lessen the divine nature that was His from His Eternal Father from all eternity. Yet to Him was given one who on earth was His foster father and of that Family was truly the head. From the time



Joseph took Mary to wife we read of no more communications to her from God. Henceforth, it is to Joseph that God sends His message. Joseph is told to name the child, Jesus. It is to Joseph the message is given: "Fly into Egypt"; to Joseph: "Return to Nazareth." It is from him that the Boy learns in a human way how to drive a nail, to plane the wood, to shape the furniture and the tools that a sleepy mountain village needs.

Between Joseph and the Boy must have developed a great intimacy and a close companionship, for when Jesus is 30 years old and Joseph long dead the townsfolk still refer to Him as the carpenter's Boy, as if the sight of Jesus still brought back the memory of Joseph. Leading without domineering, strong yet mindful of weakness, directing Jesus and Mary with deepest reverence of their great dignity, he realizes ideally and practically the vocation of husband and father, as Mary does that of wife and mother. May from them come the inspiration to realize the riches of grace in this great sacrament.

## **PRAYER OF A HUSBAND AND WIFE FOR EACH OTHER**

May God the Father bless us.  
May Jesus Christ keep us safe.  
May the Holy Ghost enlighten us.  
May the Lord look upon us and have mercy on us.  
May the Lord turn His gaze upon us and give us peace, filling us with every blessing and forgiving our sins, that we may come to life eternal.  
May He give us peaceful days, health of mind and body, joy in the blessing of children, and, after the labors of this life, bring us happily to the companionship of the holy angels.

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