

“The grace of Matrimony will remain for the most part an unused talent hidden in the field unless the parties exercise these supernatural powers and cultivate and develop the seeds of grace they have received.” – Pope Pius XII

Christian marriage is a sacrament which gives to husband and wife special helps to fulfill their duties according to God’s Will.

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It is in marriage that the vast majority of men and women are called to work out their salvation and sanctification.

Call to Holiness

The married state, as Saint Paul explains, is in itself less perfect than virginity consecrated to God (Cf. 1 Cor. 7:8-35). But this does not mean that individual married men and women are called by God to be less holy than priests and nuns. Pius XII declared:

“Holiness of life is commended not only to those consecrated in the priestly state or called by a certain divine inspiration to pronounce the vows of religion, but also to all in the lay state ...

“Fathers and mothers of families can reach the heights of holiness which Jesus Christ has promised will never be wanting to the Church.”

The words that Christ spoke in His Sermon on the Mount were addressed not only to the apostles, but to the entire crowd before Him: “Be you therefore perfect, as also your Heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matt. 5:48) This call to holiness was meant to resound through the centuries, even to married men and women of the 20th Century.

Saint Augustine makes this point very clear:

“It must not be imagined that these words of our Lord apply only to virgins and not to married persons, to widows and not to women whose husbands are alive, to religious and not to fathers of families, to clerics and not to lay-folk. The entire Church must follow Jesus Christ with all its members, who after the Master’s example, must also carry His cross and follow His teachings.”

Perfect Through Marriage

If you are in the married state, you are called to be perfect in your vocation. The priest and religious consecrate themselves directly and exclusively to the love and service of Christ; the married man and woman dedicate themselves to Christ through the care of their families, and it is through the fulfilling of their duties in marriage that they love and serve Christ.

Husbands and wives are not called to the holiness proper to religious life. Most of them do not even dream of being canonized. They are most probably called to be saints with a small “s”! But there are plenty of fathers and mothers on the liturgical calendar to remind them that sanctity is obtainable. Listen to Pius XII again:

“Holiness in life can really be obtained even without consecrated chastity. Witness to this are the many men and women who are publicly honored by the Church, and who as faithful spouses have stood out as examples of excellent fathers and mothers; indeed it is not rare to find married people who are very earnest in their efforts for Christian perfection.”

The Sacrament

Christ, then, wants each married person to become a saint. What does this mean in a practical way? It means *to make use of the sacramental graces of Matrimony*. Each husband and wife is called to imitate the life and virtues of Christ within the framework of his or her own special vocation. In order to give them the special help they need to fulfill the obligations of marriage, Christ established the sacrament of Matrimony.

A sacrament is a visible sign instituted by Christ to give grace. Recognizing man’s nature as a composite of body and soul, Christ established the seven sacraments, in which external and material things are used to symbolize and produce interior grace in the soul. Thus, for example, in Baptism the pouring of water and the saying of the prescribed words symbolize the washing away of sin and the infusion of sanctifying grace.

In the sacrament of Matrimony, the visible sign is the contract by which the man and woman give and accept each other as husband and wife. Christ took the natural institution of marriage and made it a means of conferring supernatural grace.

Ministers of Grace

It is a beautiful and touching thought for a bride and groom to realize that through the sacrament of Matrimony each is an instrument for increasing the grace of God in the soul of the other. For it is not the priest, but the man and woman themselves who are the ministers of the sacrament of Matrimony. The priest and two witnesses are necessarily present, for marriage is a public act; but the husband and wife are the ones empowered by Christ to confer the sacrament on each other.



For most of the sacraments the priest is the minister. Thus, it is usually the hand of the priest that pours the waters of baptism; it is the hand of the priest that is raised in sacramental absolution over the sinful soul; it is the hand of the priest that places the Eucharistic Christ on the tongue of the communicant. But in marriage the priest is not the minister, but only the official witness to the contract.

If you are married, you can, then, remember with gratitude and awe that on your wedding day you were a direct instrument in the hands of God for bestowing the wonderful treasure of an increase of supernatural grace upon the soul of your husband or wife.

With hands joined before God's Holy Altar, you spoke the words of your marriage vow:

"I take you for my lawful wife (or husband), to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health,

until death do us part.”

With these words, if you were in a state of grace when you got married you gave the treasure not only of human love, but of divine love, to each other. You made each other’s soul more beautiful in the sight of God by the increase of sanctifying grace which you were privileged to bestow by the sacrament of Matrimony. The words of your marriage vow drew you closer not only to each other, but also to God.

Symbol of Divine Love

In this way Christ elevated, completed, ennobled and perfected your human love. Indeed, as the epistle of the Nuptial Mass brings out, the love of bridegroom and bride is a symbol of the love of Christ for His Mystical Body, the Church:

“Let women be subject to their husbands as to the Lord; because the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the Church. He *is* the savior of His body. Therefore as the Church is subject to Christ, so also let the wives be to their husbands in all things. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the Church, and delivered Himself up for it, that He might sanctify it, cleansing it by the laver of water in the word of life; that He might present it to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish. So also ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife, loveth himself. For no man ever hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, as also Christ does the Church; because we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. *For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall be two in one flesh.*” (Ephes. 5:22-31)

Live the Sacrament

The sacrament of marriage merely begins on your wedding day. Saint Robert Bellarmine tells us that in a certain sense we can compare marriage to the Blessed Sacrament itself. When the priest cradles in his hands a wafer of bread, he pronounces the sacramental words only once, but the sacrament itself, the presence of Christ, remains as long as the appearances of bread remain. In the same way, you speak the sacramental words of your marriage vow only once, but the sacrament itself remains. As you leave the sanctuary, arm

in arm, you will be a new husband and wife about to begin the great adventure of living the sacrament of Matrimony in all its depths. Your married love and life is sacramentalized!

Just as a man's whole life is changed by the reception of Holy Orders, so your life will be made different by the reception of Matrimony. When a priest preaches, teaches, celebrates Mass, and visits the sick, he is fulfilling the role given him by Holy Orders. In a similar way, when you perform the various duties toward each other or toward your children, you will be living the sacrament of Matrimony. This means that every act of love, great or small, for each other or for the children, can be sacramentalized and increase sanctifying grace in your soul.

This sacramental love covers everything in married life. Thus, when the husband leaves each morning for work, he is going to live the sacrament of Matrimony. His work will be a part of the sacrament because he is a Christian husband who is working to support his wife and children. Even taking down the storm windows and putting up the screens fall within the scope of the sacrament!

So, too, when the monotony of the continuous round of sweeping, dusting, ironing, washing and cooking threatens to sap the spirit of the wife, she should remember that these humdrum tasks are valuable in the sight of God because they are part of the sacrament of marriage. Everything in marriage can be thus made a means of grace, with the exception of sin.

Sacramental Grace

Each sacrament gives a twofold grace. The first, which is common to all the sacraments, is *sanctifying grace*, which makes the soul pleasing to God. All of the sacraments bestow sanctifying grace, either by giving it for the first time (as in Baptism), or by restoring it if it has been lost (as in Penance), or by increasing it (as in the other sacraments if you are in a state of grace when you receive them).

Each sacrament also imparts a special kind of grace that is called *sacramental grace*. This sacramental grace gives a special claim upon the actual grace needed to fulfill the duties proper to each sacrament.

Thus, Confirmation strengthens the Christian to profess his faith (Church Catechism) in the face of difficulties. Penance helps the person to be truly sorry for the sins he confesses, as well as to be sincerely determined to avoid those sins in the future. Holy Orders assure to the priest the right to expect from God all the assistance needed in carrying out the duties of his state in life. Matrimony grants to the married couple a firm foundation for confidence

that God will help them fulfill all the obligations of their life together.

What does this mean in a practical way to you as a married person? It means that you have a right to the actual grace of God which you need to act in accordance with your vocation. The sacramental grace of Matrimony will enable you to act rightly as husband and wife, and later on, God willing, as father and mother. You will be able to depend upon special light for your minds and powerful strength for your wills in order to fulfill your duty.

Light for the Mind

This divine light will brighten many areas of your life. It may be the problem of choosing the right job, a matter which is so important for the financial needs of the family as well as the personal satisfaction of the husband. You may have difficulty in making up your minds about a certain house, its location, price, or arrangement. There may come a certain tension in your life together, a tension that is felt but is not understood.

You may not know how to talk to a certain child. You may have a sick baby and not be able to contact a doctor. You may not know what is wrong and what should be done. Now in these, as in all matters, God expects you to use your reason to try to figure out what to do. But there will be times when you cannot decide, as no course seems to be decidedly better than the other. In such cases, at times, you will often find that everything becomes clear and that everything falls into place. This may be the result of your own thinking which has been assisted by the light of actual grace. But at times the light will come so suddenly and shine so brightly that it must be a special effect of the sacrament of Matrimony.

Courage for the Will

Light for the mind is absolutely necessary, but so also is courage for the will. Knowledge alone will not lead to action. Even the great apostle, Saint Paul, admitted unhappily that he did not always do that which he knew he should do. Human nature finds, at times, a certain reluctance to take the necessary steps to keep the law of God or to better one's life.

It may be a matter where birth control seems very attractive and the easiest solution to a problem, and great courage is required to keep God's law. Or you may realize that you should step up the tempo of your Christian life by receiving the sacraments more frequently or by saying the family Rosary. You know that you should pull away from a group that is pagan in its principles and anti-clerical in its judgments. Perhaps you have been dragging your feet for a long time, when suddenly you make the little spurt necessary to do what you realize you should do. Here again we can point to the influence of the sacramental grace of

Matrimony which has aided you in the accomplishment of these tasks.

But to receive these helps of the sacrament, you must co-operate with grace. Pius XII wrote:

“It is a law of divine providence in the supernatural order that men do not reap the full fruit of the sacraments which they receive ... unless they co-operate with grace. The grace of Matrimony will remain for the most part an unused talent hidden in the field unless the parties exercise these supernatural powers and cultivate and develop the seeds of grace they have received. If, however, doing all that lies within their power, they co-operate diligently, they will be able with ease to bear the burdens of their state and to fulfill their duties. By such a sacrament they will be strengthened, sanctified and in a manner consecrated.”

Marriage involves, indeed, many responsibilities and duties. But the grace to be faithful to duty is always at hand. Making use of the sacramental grace of marriage, husband and wife walk securely, hand in hand, along the pathway of life to the eternal Kingdom of God.

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