

Living in Truth series.

Christian Marriage in secular culture by Fr Richard Aladics

Today, marriage is partially hidden by a variety of newly accepted forms of sexual bonding between individuals: casual sex, men and women living together, serial relationships and homosexual and lesbian unions. The Catholic Church continues to teach that only marriage is able to respond to the demands of a life shared between a man and a woman because it accords with God's plan for humanity.

Historically, human wisdom has recognised the weakness of human beings and has sought to guard and support married love. Thus, we speak of marriage as an institution. The great declarations of human rights have always supported marriage and the family; humanity has never found better solutions to men, women and children's need for communal life.

The social norms which traditionally surrounded the institution of marriage were an attempt to guarantee the authenticity of human love. Civil marriage is true marriage for it contains the necessary elements of marriage: a man and a woman publicly expressing their intention to establish life together.

Catholic men and women are obliged to marry in the Catholic Church, and not in any other Christian church. Christian marriage represents an act of faith in God, and an act of reverence for the greatness of marital union in its openness to God's plan, in its openness to children and in its power to meet the needs of the human heart. Moreover, Christian marriage is a sacrament. Sacramental marriage in the Church expresses the fullness of what God intends for marriage. Christ has made marriage, by his death and resurrection, a unique way of participating in the new life of Grace. This Sacrament happens automatically with spouses who are baptised. In the United Kingdom Christian marriage is recognised by the State.

The sacrament of marriage not only expresses the human elements of marriage; that it is exclusive and indissoluble, open to procreation and seeks to good of both spouses, but also, that it is a means to holiness. The Church considers that a civil marriage between Catholics is an irregular and imperfect union because of the disassociation of civil marriage from its sacramental meaning. A civil marriage entered into by a Catholic is absolutely invalid.

Depending on circumstances, such irregular situations may be corrected by celebrating the canonical form of marriage in the Church. Catholics who remain in a civil marriage are unable to receive the Sacraments of the Church, nor can they hold any positions of responsibility or public witness in the Church, but they are not separated from the Church.

Christian marriage in the Church is entered into as an intimate community of life and love. It represents a mutual self-giving marked by fidelity and perpetuity. The two spouses become 'one flesh', living a life of self-gift to the other. Moreover, such a union is a source of grace and is a constant symbol of the union of Christ with His Church. In sacramental marriage Christ sanctifies married love, converting it into an act of worship. Thus Christian spouses are inserted into the saving work of Christ and are called to give themselves as much to Jesus Christ as to one another. Spouses also give themselves to the Church since their very marriage reveals the mystery of the Church. In fact, a Christian marriage is called a 'domestic Church'.

What is necessary for a person to enter into Christian marriage?

1. The person must be baptised and should be living his or her Baptism and Confirmation in a spirit of faith.
2. The person must be capable of marriage. First, he or she must have reached the age recognised by Civil and Canon Law for marriage. Secondly, there must be no impediment to the marriage such as an already existing marriage bond, Holy Orders, impotence or consanguinity in the direct line and to the fourth degree in the collateral line.
3. The person must be capable of giving his or her personal consent in marriage. That is, the consent must be free, sincere and must accept all the essential elements of marriage.

Furthermore, without a dispensation from his or her Bishop a Catholic cannot marry a non-baptised person. A dispensation is also required for marriage with a non-Catholic baptised person. In preparing for a marriage, the Church asks couples to participate in pre-marriage counselling and to complete the ecclesiastical pre-nuptial documents.

The form of Christian marriage consists in expressing marital consent before a priest or deacon and before two witnesses. Such a marriage is considered as the culmination of a spiritual journey and as an expression of love that is blessed by God.