

## A Sacrament is a Sign

Your wedding makes solemn the decision that you have made to love and that you have pledged already in many spoken and unspoken ways. I would like to talk about a concept that may seem at first to be abstract, but which is, in fact, intended to be just about the most concrete element in our lives as Christians – the idea of *sacrament*.

An old Catholic definition of a sacrament goes like this: "a sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace." That is not a bad definition. As human beings we all need signs. You will exchange wedding rings. You send flowers or cards to express your love. Most of us have some personal symbols special to us and our relationships. All of these are ways to express what love means.

The same use of signs comes into play when we try to express our thoughts and beliefs about God. In a way, *who God is* cannot be put into words. No word or words can describe who God is.

In the language of the Old Testament, people had a more colourful way of dealing with this difficulty of talking about God. It was their belief that if you saw God face-to-face, you would die. You may remember the final scene in the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark* when the Ark of the Covenant is opened. The rather messy fate of the Nazi soldiers in that scene would have evoked nods from the Hebrews who had trembled in the desert at the foot of Mt Sinai when God gave the commandments to Moses.

## God Gives us a Living Sign of Love

Christianity is founded on the Good News that God has taken steps to overcome the gap between the human and the divine. We call that meeting between God and human beings the *Incarnation*. Another way of saying this is that God has become one of us in Jesus Christ. That *is* Good News! God could have done it another way.

This basic belief of Christianity, the Incarnation, brings us into relationship with God in a way that is not alien to us, but truly human. Jesus Christ walked in a particular time and place with real people, people who were so captivated by his message of love that they went on to lay their own lives on the line for the Good News.

The very presence of God in Jesus is itself a sign, a sacrament. Jesus is the visible way, we believe, that we come to know God fully. The Church, the community of women and men who put faith in Jesus, has become a sign as well: the visible presence of Jesus in the world. The Church is often a flawed sign because it is made up of human beings with all their faults and failings as well as their goodness. Like Jesus broken body on the cross, the Church, too, is broken and in need of healing and resurrection.

It is the mission of the Church and of the individuals who make it up to be the visible sign of Jesus life and work in the world. In that way the Church continues Jesus' own

mission to make God known. It is from this understanding that the other seven events that we call sacraments follows.

Look at it this way: The two of you are, together, a sign of a new reality, you *as a couple*. You choose more specific signs to point to that relationship. You will send wedding invitations, have photos taken, exchange wedding rings and so forth.

In the Church we have seven specific signs to express aspects of our life with God in Jesus Christ. They celebrate life, birth, belonging, growing, healing, loving, serving, dying, to mark the crucial moments of our lives; to identify special roles and to make a new relationship with God and community.

Thus, at Baptism, we are immersed in water or have it poured over us. This ritual carries meaning of washing, cleansing, drowning, and bringing new life. When well done in faith, Baptism also *creates* what it symbolises: It makes a person part of the mystery of Jesus as a member of the Church.

The same holds for the other sacraments as well, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, including the special sign you are now planning: the Sacrament of Marriage. Where the other sacraments use water, bread or oil, here too there is a visible, touchable, human element: *the two of you* bringing your whole selves to the ceremony.

## You Are the Sign

You – your minds and hearts, hopes and desires, bodies and creative energies – become, when joined together, a sign of how God wants to be joined to the human family – and especially with the two of you, as part of your marriage relationship. That is what we Catholics believe. That is why we say that the two of you are really the *ministers* of the Sacrament of Marriage. The priest or deacon is merely an official witness for the Church community. You give the sacrament to each other as you give yourselves to each other.

As the priest or deacon says to you in the marriage ritual right before you exchange vows:

"My dear friends, you have come together in this church so that the Lord may seal and strengthen your love in the presence of the Church's minister and this community. Christ abundantly blesses this love. He has already consecrated you in baptism and now he enriches and strengthens you by a special sacrament so that you may assume the duties of marriage in mutual and lasting fidelity."

(From the Rite of Marriage #23)

Through your sacrament, the two of you become the powerful sign of Christ's love for each person and for the world. We all need the sign you become. We in the Church community are aware of the connection between your love and that of Jesus Christ. In fact, we celebrate it with you in a religious ceremony – that's why the Church has cherished Jesus' understanding of marriage and calls it a sacrament.

In you, the rest of us look to see God at work:

- God loves us in a binding, never-broken way. Your marriage mirrors that love.
- God is always faithful. You, too, are called to be faithful to each other.
- God is good and gracious to us, forgiving and healing us. You must love and forgive each other.
- God's love has overflowed to create the world and all that is in it. You must bring new and creative life to the world.

We look to you to see God at work. That is an extraordinary thing to say. You are a sacrament of God, and your sacrament, marriage, is a power filled sign that goes on and on as long as you live.

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## THE SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE

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You are a sign of God's Love

St Joseph's Church Nambour