

## Section 3

# Christian marriage



## The Roman Catholic marriage service

The wedding takes place after a period of preparation. The main features of the marriage service are as follows:

- entry of the bride, with her father or other male relative, and bridesmaids
- welcome from the priest, which makes clear the joyful nature of the celebration
- appropriate readings from the Bible
- homily in which the priest sets out the nature and purposes of marriage
- asking three key questions to ensure that the couple are prepared for the lifelong commitment of marriage: the priest asks if they are prepared to give themselves to each other ‘freely and without reservation’, to ‘love and honour each other as man and wife’ for the rest of their lives and ‘to accept children lovingly from God’, giving them a Christian upbringing
- the couple state that there is no legal impediment to their marriage and that their choice to be married is totally free from pressure
- the couple make vows to one another, promising to remain married for life, to love and cherish each other whatever the circumstances: ‘for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health’
- rings are exchanged in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as a sign of love and faithfulness



A Nuptial Mass

- the priest proclaims that the couple are now married and that nobody should break the sacred bond that has been made before God
- the couple may choose to have a **Nuptial Mass** before the marriage blessing
- prayers for the couple and a marriage blessing
- the signing of the marriage register, which is a legal formality

### Key words

#### Annulment

The declaration by the Church that a true marriage never existed

#### Nuptial Mass

Celebration of Holy Communion at a wedding

#### Procreative sex

Sex leading to the possibility of conception

#### Sacramental covenant

An agreement that has sacred significance

#### Unitive sex

Sexual intercourse that makes the couple one

## Roman Catholic teaching about marriage

Marriage is above all a **sacramental covenant** between two people that has been established by God. It was part of God's plan right from the time of the creation. Because of its sacramental nature, marriage should take place in a church, with God and the congregation as witnesses of the solemn vows that the couple make to each other, and so a Nuptial Mass is especially appropriate. The visible sign of the sacramental bond is the wedding ring, a symbol of lifelong love and faithfulness.

Because of the vows that have been made and the exchange of rings, marriage is permanent, ending only with the death of one of the partners or, in exceptional cases, with

**annulment**. Jesus himself made this clear when he said that no one should separate those whom God has joined.

Marriage is also intended to be life-giving. Both bride and groom state their willingness 'to accept children lovingly from God'. This means that every sexual act should be both **unitive** and **procreative**. Artificial forms of contraception are unacceptable as they are contrary to God's will, frustrating his creative plan.

The married relationship is also an exclusive one. In the vows and at the exchange of rings, each partner promises lifelong faithfulness. However difficult the circumstances may be, the two must remain true to one another.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church sets out the ideals of marriage as follows:

Love seeks to be definitive; it cannot be an arrangement 'until further notice'. The intimate union of marriage, as a mutual giving of two persons, and the good of the children, demand total fidelity from the spouses and require an unbreakable union between them.

## Mixed marriages

The Roman Catholic Church accepts marriages between Roman Catholics and those of other Christian denominations, other faiths or of no faith, and mixed marriages are on the increase. Nevertheless, the Church states that there can be difficulties for partners to such marriages in fulfilling the vows as interpreted by the Church, so official permission has to be obtained from diocesan authorities.

# Sexual relationships

## Attitudes in modern society

Attitudes to sexuality and to sexual relationships have changed dramatically since the middle of the twentieth century. In the past decade especially, gay couples have become more open about their relationships, and they can now legally register their partnerships.

The availability of abortion and of a far greater range of safe contraception means that unmarried people need no longer fear that sexual intercourse will result in pregnancy. There is also a changed attitude to children born outside marriage, and statistics show an ever-increasing number of such children.

The emphasis in the media is on sex as something to be enjoyed, whatever a person's situation, and it tends to be assumed that everyone has sexual relationships on a regular basis in their mid and late teens. Many teenage magazines deal mainly with issues relating to sex, and it is a prominent theme of soap operas and films.



Ingram

There is a lot of media pressure on young people to have sexual relationships

## Key words

### Adultery

A sexual relationship between two people, at least one of whom is married

### Casual sex

Sexual relationship without commitment

### Cohabitation

A couple living together and having a sexual relationship without being married

### Extramarital sex

A sexual relationship outside the commitment of marriage

### Premarital sex

A sexual relationship between two unmarried people

## Different types of extramarital sexual relationship

It is important to distinguish between **extramarital sex** between two single people (often referred to as premarital sex) and sex between two people where at least one of the partners is married (often referred to as **adultery**). On the question of **premarital sex**, some religious believers make a distinction between recreational or **casual sex** (which includes, for example, one-night stands) and sex within a relationship (for example, two people who live together without being married). Living together without being married is known as **cohabitation**.

## Roman Catholic views on sexuality

Sexuality is seen as one of God's most precious gifts. The second creation story in Genesis tells of the man's delight when the woman is created and of the joy of their sexual relationship (Genesis 2:24–25), and the Song of Songs (also in the Old Testament) is a collection of explicit love poems.

In one of his letters, St Paul told his Christian readers that their bodies were holy, since the Holy Spirit was at work in their hearts. They should respect their bodies as they would a place of worship: their bodies were temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:18–20).

Throughout the history of the Church, **celibacy** has always been valued, and Roman Catholic priests, monks and nuns are not able to marry. Some other individual Christians also choose to be celibate as a way of showing their devotion to God.

For most Christians, however, sexual relationships are important, and the Roman Catholic Church sees sexuality as something to be celebrated. However, because of the power of the sexual instinct, it is also something that should be controlled. The Church therefore promotes the virtue of **chastity**, which is viewed as a gift from God and which all baptised Christians are called to practise.

All forms of extramarital sex are offences against chastity. Homosexual practice is contrary to Natural Law.

Adultery is a breach of the sixth Commandment and an act of betrayal, causing hurt, loss of trust and often the breakdown of a marriage, with all the misery that this entails for both the married couple and their children.

Premarital sex is regarded as sinful for a number of reasons:

- it goes against teaching contained in the Bible
- it carries the risk of pregnancy, and thus of a child either being unwanted or perhaps brought up in deprived circumstances
- if contraception is used, this goes against the teaching of the Church
- it cheapens and trivialises something precious
- it encourages lust and exploitation rather than love and commitment

## True Love Waits

In 1993 the 'True Love Waits' movement was founded in the USA to win teenagers back to what were seen as traditional sexual values and to promote chastity. Teenagers (who may or may not be virgins) promise not to have sex before marriage, and they sign a card. Parents or supporters give the young person a ring, saying: 'Let this ring be a constant reminder to you to be sexually pure.' This movement has now become international and has attracted Christians of all denominations as well as non-Christians.



This silver ring is worn by teenagers who are part of the True Love Waits movement

### Key words

#### Celibacy

Not having a sexual relationship within or outside marriage, often as the result of a religious promise

#### Chastity

Sexual purity: not having a sexual relationship outside a marriage relationship

## Other Christian views

Many Christians recognise that society has changed and think that the reasons given in the past for confining sex to marriage are no longer valid. These Christians accept sexual relationships, provided they occur in a loving and committed relationship, which may ultimately lead to marriage. They do not approve of recreational or casual sex, which devalues marriage.

They do, however, take seriously the sixth Commandment, ‘Do not commit adultery’, and Jesus’ teaching (recorded in Matthew 5:27–28). Adultery is cheating on the married partner and causes deep hurt and feelings of betrayal. Once one of the partners has been unfaithful to the other, it is hard to build up trust again.

## Responsible parenthood

The Roman Catholic Church believes that all sexual acts are meant by God to be both unitive and procreative. It does, however, recognise that couples, as responsible parents, may have good reasons for wanting to space out their children. Natural methods of family planning may be used to achieve this, but not artificial means.

Parents are expected to give their children the love, security and Christian upbringing that they will need to draw on throughout life. Responsible parenthood means ensuring that the children receive all the sacraments that are open to them. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states: ‘Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children in the faith, prayer and all the virtues. They have the duty to provide as far as possible for the physical and spiritual needs of their children.’

## Adoption and fostering

For a wide variety of reasons it may not be possible or in their best interests for children to live with their parents. It may be that parents have died, are in prison or are seriously ill. It may be that the mother is very young and feels that, when her baby is born, she will not be able to care for her child herself, perhaps because she has no parental support. Such children’s needs are assessed by social workers,

who will seek either **adoption** or **fostering** within loving and responsible families.

Adoption is a permanent arrangement. Once an adoption order has been signed, the adoptive parents are legally responsible for the child. Fostering may be permanent or temporary. With fostering, the foster parents share responsibility for the child with the social services, and the child may well see his or her genetic parents and other relatives on a regular basis.

A number of Roman Catholic adoption and fostering agencies work with the social services to find homes that will provide children with the love and security that they need. The children do not have to be Roman Catholic, nor do the prospective adoptive parents or foster parents. The well-being of the children is the important thing.

Responsible care of children is a central duty of the Church. Children are particularly vulnerable and have the right to protection. There are several references in the Old Testament to the importance of caring for 'orphans and widows', the most vulnerable members of society. When children were brought to Jesus, his disciples wanted to turn them away, but he insisted on giving time to them, taking them in his arms and blessing them. It is this compassionate approach that Roman Catholic agencies take as their example.

## Why marriages fail

Most marriages have rough patches. This is part of human nature. Many not only survive these difficulties but are the stronger for them. Others, however, break down.

### Key words

#### Adoption

The process by which an individual or couple who are not the genetic parents of a child become his or her legal parent or parents

#### Fostering

A person or couple share responsibility for the upbringing of a child with the social services



Roman Catholic adoption agencies help find loving homes for children



Figure 3.1 Why marriages fail

**Key words**

**Eucharist**

Thanksgiving': the sacrament in which Christians receive the body and blood of Christ

**Reconciliation**

One of the seven sacraments

**Roman Catholic marriage support**

People with marital problems should seek help from their families and friends, a marriage counsellor or priest. They should also look for help from the Bible, prayer and the sacraments, especially the **Eucharist** and **Reconciliation**. There are also a number of Roman Catholic marriage-support organisations, such as Accord and Marriage Care.

## Divorce, annulment and remarriage

### The law

It is much easier to obtain a divorce now than it used to be, and one in three marriages ends in this way. The sole ground is 'irretrievable breakdown of marriage'. Remarriage is allowed without limit.

If it can be shown that the marriage was never valid in the first place, then it is annulled and there is no need for any divorce procedure. The partners are free to remarry.

### Christian attitudes to divorce and remarriage

Christians of all denominations agree that marriage is intended to be lifelong, but there are significant differences of opinion about divorce and remarriage, partly because not all Christians see marriage as a sacrament, as the Roman Catholics and many Anglicans do, and partly because of differing approaches to the teaching of Jesus and St Paul on divorce and remarriage.

According to Mark 10:2–12, Jesus said that divorce was never part of God's purpose. It was a concession to human weakness, and marriage was intended to be for life. Remarriage after divorce was tantamount to adultery. This passage raises a number of questions:

- Was Jesus creating a law or stating an ideal?
- Was he trying to protect the status of women, who were made vulnerable by the divorce laws of his day?
- Were any or all of the verses that teach against remarriage after divorce an addition by St Mark for the Church in Rome since women may not divorce men under Jewish law? And was the reference to a wife's infidelity as a ground for divorce, made in Matthew 5:32, an addition to meet the needs of the Jewish Christian community for which that Gospel was written?

In his letter to Christians in Corinth, St Paul stated that a married couple should not seek divorce unless one of the partners was pagan and wanted a divorce because of his or her spouse's conversion to Christianity. In that circumstance, divorce was acceptable (1 Corinthians 7:10–15).

## Roman Catholics

The Roman Catholic view is clear-cut. Marriage is a sacrament. The vows cannot be dissolved, since they are made in the name of God. Roman Catholics believe that Jesus was laying down a law for Christians to follow. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that divorce is a ‘grave offence against the natural law’ and that remarriage makes things even worse: ‘the remarried spouse is then in a situation of public and permanent adultery’. Divorce is wrong because ‘it introduces disorder into the family and into society. This disorder brings grave harm to the deserted spouse, to children traumatised by the separation of their parents and often torn between them, and because of its contagious effect which makes it truly a plague on society’ (Catechism of the Catholic Church).

The Roman Catholic Church does not recognise civil divorce: couples are married for life. Those who remarry after divorce may not receive Holy Communion, but they are encouraged to continue to attend Mass since in other respects they often keep the faith and wish to bring up their children as Christians.

In exceptional circumstances, when a marriage can be shown never to have been a true marriage, then an annulment is possible — this means that the marriage never took place, and so the partners are free to ‘remarry’. An annulment may be granted if one of the partners:

- was forced into the marriage
- suffered from mental problems at the time
- did not intend to keep the promises he or she made in the marriage ceremony
- was not baptised at the time of marriage

## Protestant denominations

Protestant denominations, such as Methodists and Baptists, take the marriage vows very seriously. However, many accept that:

- humans are not perfect and sometimes divorce is necessary or the best course of action to take
- Jesus was always forgiving and offered people a fresh start
- Jesus’ teaching on marriage was stating an ideal rather than a law




Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles had a civil ceremony, followed by a marriage blessing in St George’s Chapel, Windsor

Remarriage in many churches is permissible, provided that the vows are taken seriously, but some Anglican churches prefer to offer a service of marriage blessing after a civil ceremony. They believe that marriage vows can be made only once.

## Questions and activities

### Sample questions and answers


**1** What is meant by a civil marriage ceremony? (1 mark)

 It is a non-religious ceremony.

#### Commentary

This is worth only 1 mark, so a short answer is sufficient.

**2** Explain the meaning and purpose of marriage for Roman Catholics. (6 marks)

 Roman Catholics see marriage as a sacrament. That means it is a ceremony that carries within it God's special blessing. The bride and groom make a covenant with one another in the presence of God and the Church community. They make vows that they will stay together for life through thick and thin, and that they will cherish one another. They promise to be open to God's gift of children, fulfilling his procreative purposes. In the married relationship, the man and woman are companions, sharing good and bad experiences together. Their sexual lives are enriched through lovemaking that is carried out only with one another. They work together to make their home a stable, secure and loving environment in which to bring up children. At the heart of their marriage are self-giving and mutual love and respect for each other. The everlasting nature of their love is symbolised in the marriage service with the giving of a ring or rings.

#### Commentary

The allocation of 6 marks means that a detailed answer is required. This sample answer explains both the meaning and purpose of marriage for Roman Catholics, and a number of developed points are made.

**3** 'Marriage is totally pointless in our modern world.' Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view. You should refer to Roman Catholic arguments in your answer. (6 marks)

So many marriages break up nowadays that marriage does not seem to have any real point. The vows people make seem meaningless. The old idea of a lifelong loving relationship doesn't seem so appropriate these days, when people are living longer. People, and situations, change, and so it is hard for the love to last. Few people have any religious commitments now, so the whole idea of marriage as blessed by God and the notion of partners making sacred promises are totally alien. In the past, people were shocked if you lived together, and children born out of marriage were looked down on. All that has changed, so it really doesn't matter whether or not you are married.

On the other hand, many couples still do want to marry one another. They feel that just living together is not the same. You don't make a public commitment when you move in with someone. You just move in. It's far too easy to leave one another if you are simply cohabiting. If couples are married, they may think twice before splitting up. This means that their children will have a better chance of a stable home with two parents. A secure childhood means a secure adult.

Although many people who were baptised as Roman Catholics do not attend Mass regularly if at all, nevertheless they want to uphold Roman Catholic ideals when it comes to marriage. They want to promise to be faithful until death and to share everything. They want God's blessing as they start out on a new life together and they want to bring up their children within a loving environment.

Overall, I think there is a point to marriage. Many people want to marry. They want it to last and, if they have support from family, friends and the Roman Catholic parish to which they belong, the likelihood is that it will. Yes, one in three marriages breaks down. That means that two in three don't.


### Commentary

It would be easy to answer a question like this without any reference to religious views, but this is a religious studies examination, so they must be included. As already stated, you do not have to give only religious views, nor do you do have to be a Christian yourself.

You simply have to be able to show how religious beliefs and teachings could support a particular view. It may be that you also wish to comment on the strength or weakness of the religious arguments, and this would certainly help you towards full marks. It does not matter whether the examiner agrees with you or not. All the examiner is looking for is the ability to evaluate two points of view, and an understanding of how Roman Catholic teachings might be relevant.

This answer gives both viewpoints in some detail and then ends with a brief conclusion that furthers the argument in support of marriage. Religious argument is included.

## Further questions

- 
- 1 What do Roman Catholics mean when they say that the main purpose of sexual intercourse is procreative? (1 mark)
  - 2 Explain some reasons why marriages fail. (3 marks)
  - 3 Do you think couples should stay together for the sake of their children? Give reasons for your answer. (4 marks)
  - 4 'There are situations when the Roman Catholic Church should permit divorce.' Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view. Refer to Christian teachings in your answer. (6 marks)

## Class activities and homework

### Finding out from the experts

Your teacher will invite into your lesson some adults who are prepared to answer questions relating to sex, marriage and divorce. One is likely to be the local parish priest. It may be possible to include a marriage counsellor or a legal expert. Bring your questions to the lesson.

### True Love Waits

Or does it? In small groups, find out more about this organisation and The Silver Ring Thing from the internet (addresses given below) and see if you agree with the campaigns' views and the way the campaigns work. Find out from the BBC news website (<http://news.bbc.co.uk>) about the dispute regarding Lydia Playfoot. Do you agree with her or with her school? Report back to the rest of the class.

## Caris magazine

Review this Christian teenage magazine.

Find out what getting a divorce entails. Then write an answer to the following:

'Divorce is far too easy. Couples should have to work harder at making their marriages work.' Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view. Refer to Roman Catholic teachings in your answer.

## Ten Commandments for marriage

Create your own Ten Commandments for marriage. Put them up on display and discuss in groups which ones you think are the most important.

Choose any soap opera and watch five episodes. Study the relationships between couples and note how they develop. Do you think these relationships could be improved and, if so, how? Do you think there is a future for them? Are the couples honest with one another? Do they love one another or are their relationships built on lust or on exploitation?

Research and make notes on the work of a Roman Catholic marriage counselling service and of a Roman Catholic adoption and fostering agency that works in your diocese (area ruled by a bishop).

## Useful websites

<http://re-xs.ucsm.ac.uk> Click on *World Religions*, then *Rites of Passage*, for information on Christian marriage.

[www.request.org.uk](http://www.request.org.uk) Click on *Issues* for Christian views on sexuality, marriage and divorce.

[www.accord.ie](http://www.accord.ie)

[www.marriagecare.org.uk](http://www.marriagecare.org.uk)

[www.carismag.co.uk](http://www.carismag.co.uk)

[www.silverringthing.org.uk](http://www.silverringthing.org.uk)

[www.catholiccaringservices.co.uk](http://www.catholiccaringservices.co.uk)

[www.cabrini.org.uk](http://www.cabrini.org.uk)