

# *Marriage* in the **Catholic** **Church**



Frequently Asked  
Questions



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# Marriage: FAQs

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# Introduction

Marriage is a divine calling by which a man and a woman give themselves to each other in a life-long partnership. It is an opportunity to experience the beauty of human love, a love that mirrors the love of God. It is a path to holiness, to being saints. Most people today still have very high ideals for marriage and hope to find their own happiness there. The future of our society and of our Church – indeed of all humanity – depends upon the health of our married and family life. Yet marriage is often misunderstood or underappreciated today. All sorts of relationships are called marriages which are not. Many people delay getting married too long. They do not express their married love in building a family with God. They are confused about the meaning and place of sex in their lives before and after marriage. Many marriages are under pressure and some fail. We need to rediscover what marriage is all about.

God loves us with a love so great he could only compare it to a good marriage (e.g. Hos 2:21). He wants to raise us to share in his own divine life and love, and to make this possible he came amongst us as a man, Jesus Christ (2 Pt 1:4; Vatican II, Lumen Gentium 2). As the early Christians put it: “God became man so that we might become God” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 460, hereafter CCC). So that we might begin to live that divine life even now, he gave us his truth in the Scriptures, in the living, teaching Church, and above all in the person of Jesus Christ. This is a truth that makes us free (Jn 8:32). And this includes a holy wisdom about marriage, sexuality and family life.

Introduction

# marriage *matters*

## 1. Why does marriage matter so much to the Church?

Because marriage is so important to human beings it is important to the Church. Jesus established the Church to be his intimate, his precious one, his bride (cf. Eph 5:25). The Church in turn wants to share with the world what she has learnt about love. By loving well – loving as Jesus loved (Jn 15:12) – we can become more like God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, who give their total selves to each other without holding back and so make gifts of themselves. By failing in love, on the other hand, as when we sin sexually or against our marital commitment, we obscure the image of God in ourselves. We abuse the great gifts of our bodies and of our freedom. We can blind ourselves to the truth about love, life, our sexuality, our future. We hurt each other and ourselves. The good news is that in Jesus

there is forgiveness and healing. In Jesus there is a new start and a new direction. He has the power to transform us into children of light and love, into persons who love as the Persons of the Trinity love.

The Church wants to help couples fully appreciate the significance of marriage. Between Christians marriage is a sacred reality, a 'sacrament', or effective sign of God's love and fidelity, which strengthens and divinizes the natural union of marriage. It is also the beginning of a family, the basic unit of society and the smallest instance of the Christian community (a 'domestic church'). So as 'the bulwark of truth' the Church seeks to proclaim the truth and meaning of married love as revealed in Christ. As an 'expert in humanity' she seeks to support people in living out their married lives in happiness. As the 'bride of Christ' she tries to be an image of that committed, faithful, fruitful love in action.



# sex



## 2. Does the Church really believe that sex is good?

Yes! From its opening pages the Bible affirms the goodness of human sexuality. Male and female, we are created “in the image of God” and in our very bodily natures is inscribed our vocation “to join together and so become one flesh” and in turn to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen chs 1-2).

Human sexuality as male and female is expressed in countless ways: in our bodies and personalities, our perceptions and responses, our gestures and activities, our love and affections. But the most intense expression of human sexuality is bodily union with one’s spouse. The ‘marital act’ expresses intimacy of mind and body, unity of two persons as they give to and receive from each other, and a promise of fidelity to that gift. It has the power to say “love”, to ‘make love’. It also has the power to say “life” and to ‘make life’. So new human beings come to be within the loving embrace of their parents and the security of that commitment. The Church encourages ‘good sex’, that is to say, sexual intimacy that unites a man and a woman as faithful lovers and as potential parents and which, for this reason, presupposes the life-long commitment of marriage (cf. CCC 1604ff). Within the context of marriage sex consummates and celebrates time and again the holiness of the marriage covenant.

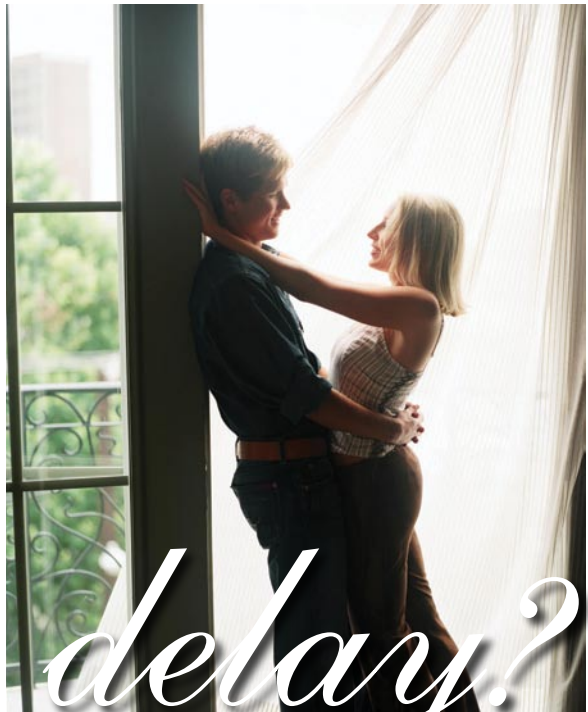
*is good*

### 3. Why do many people today delay getting married?

Today many couples pursue a sexual relationship without making a marriage commitment. There are many reasons for this: the opportunities and demands of study, work and travel; a reluctance to embrace any life-course that might involve sacrifice; a fear of making a life-long commitment to another person and of the responsibility of child-rearing; economic and social pressures; a secular mindset that sees marriage merely as a legal contract rather than a God-given vocation; and so on. Even Christians sometimes talk of 'trailing' marriage by 'living together' for a time, perhaps for many years, before finally 'taking the plunge' and 'tying the knot'.

But the more commonplace living together has become, the more evidence has accumulated that it reduces marital sticking power. People are sold short by being told to postpone that for which they are made by nature and grace. They become habituated in non-commitment, in putting off ever saying "I do". If ever they are ready to commit they face the problem that they have for years practised not committing to that person. They have always had in their mind "I can get out of this if things don't work out as I want". Now they have to learn all over again how truly to love. The imaginary freedom of living with "no strings attached" actually limits their freedom really to give themselves and achieve their true happiness. For as Jesus taught: "No greater love has any man than that he give his life for his beloved" (Jn 15:13).

why





# promise

## 4. But does getting married really add anything?

“Conjugal love involves a totality, in which all the elements of the person enter: appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will. It aims at a deeply personal unity, a unity that, beyond union in one flesh leads to forming one heart and soul; it demands indissolubility and faithfulness in definitive mutual giving; and it is open to fertility” (CCC 1643).

The public declaration of those ideals through the promise to love and honour as husband and wife for the rest of their lives commits both spouses to a certain plan of life. It transcends all the anxiety and ambiguity of merely living together. It calls upon the family and friends present and the wider community to recognize and support that marriage. In making this declaration before God and his Church in a sacramental marriage, a couple also invoke the supernatural grace which they need to support them to live their vocation. They publicly profess not only their love, but their faith and hope.

*of love*

# why wait?

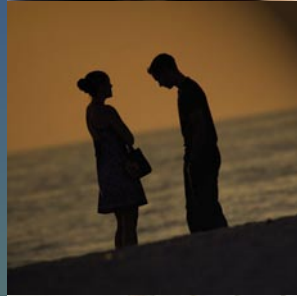
## 5. Should couples really postpone sex until they get married?

We should say what we mean and mean what we say with sex. And sex says marriage. Sexual intercourse is the body language which accompanies and expresses, again and again, the wedding vows. It is the language of total gift. If one or both persons are not yet ready to say “I give all that I am, including my body” and “I accept from you the gift of all that you are, including your body”, then they are not ready for sex. If a couple do not fear becoming a real gift to each other, they should not fear marriage.

Sex outside of marriage is contrary to God’s commandments and the clear teachings of the Bible (Ex 20:14; Dt 5:18; Mt 15:19; 19:18; Rom 13:9; Col 3:5; Eph 5:3) and of the Christian tradition. If freely and knowingly chosen, such an act is seriously sinful. The commandments are not arbitrary. They protect what is most precious: in this case, our bodies, our sexuality, our personality, our love, our family life.

Some people fear that if they do not engage in sexual activity before marriage they will be ‘repressed’, ‘immature’ or ‘inexperienced’. But as the story of Adam and Eve tells us, there is no real ‘getting of wisdom’ in choosing to sin. We actually end up confused, ashamed, addicted.

The Church knows the reality of temptation. She understands human weakness. That is why, in addition to proclaiming the truth of God’s will for humanity, the Church also offers the mercy of God to those who fail. Christ offered forgiveness even to the worst sexual sinners (Jn ch 4; 8:1-11). But he also called them “to sin no more”. The Gospel always calls us to more and better. It calls us to a new life. “Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness... these are not the way to the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control: these are what is permitted. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:19-24).



## 6. So what might the Church say to couples who are 'living together'?

The Church recognises the genuine good will and fidelity of many couples who are living together, but at the same time it is deeply concerned for them. Damage can be done to couples by a relationship that is “going nowhere” and which is not grounded in the truth of man and woman. Such couples are missing out on something far more fulfilling – namely, a sacramental marriage – and their chances of later achieving and maintaining this are reduced. Moreover, there is no evidence that living together is a good preparation for marriage: quite the opposite. ‘Fidelity’ in either a series of short relationships, or in a longer but open ended relationship, is not a good preparation for the exclusive and permanent fidelity of marriage.

Couples living together should reflect on their expectations when they began to live together, and also reflect on how these have changed. What does their holding off from marriage say about their relationship or about themselves? Are they truly sharing their lives? What are they saying (and not saying!) to each other in their sexual intimacy? Are they being honest with each other? Where is God in their lives?

together



Couples should also beware of marrying to “fix” any problems or uncertainties in their relationship. Marriage will not resolve underlying tensions or sources of disagreement. Cohabiting couples should consider living apart for some time before marriage in order to appreciate the significance that marriage will have for them. Minimally, they should prepare themselves spiritually for marriage through sexual abstinence and approaching the sacrament of reconciliation before exchanging vows.

“The Church’s pastoral concern ... [extends] to those families in particular which are in difficult or irregular situations. For all of them the Church will have a word of truth, goodness, understanding, hope and deep sympathy with their sometimes tragic difficulties. To all of them she will offer her disinterested help so that they can come closer to that model of a family which the Creator intended from ‘the beginning’ and which Christ has renewed with His redeeming grace” (John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* 65).

## 7. Why should marriage be for life?

Human beings cannot make a real gift of themselves if they believe they can always take back the gift and give it to someone else. We are temporal or 'historical' beings: we live, grow, change, and shape our lives through time, from birth to death, through the choices we make. God has given us the gift of freedom; the opportunity to make not only umpteen little choices but also the really big ones which mean giving ourselves completely to another person as a spouse or parent, or to God and his people as a priest or religious. As the Second Vatican Council observed, "man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself" (*Gaudium et Spes* 24). As a temporal, mortal creature, the only way a human being can make an unconditional commitment to another is by making a life-long commitment. Only the stable, life-long commitment of marriage can truly protect the integrity of a couple's sexual and emotional intimacy, enabling their friendship to deepen through all the challenges of family life.

Furthermore, God has revealed his will for marriage as a life-long commitment. Two shall become one: a total gift (*Gen* 2:24; cf. *Mt* 19:3-9; *Eph* 5:31). In binding himself to the Chosen People as a husband to his wife, God in the Old Testament revealed not only something of the depth of his self-giving love and fidelity to Israel, but also his high aspirations for marriage (e.g. *Mal* 2:16).

So too when Christ bound himself to his Church as her bridegroom. Christ revealed that it is precisely for this self-giving love – consummated in his own case on the cross (*Jn* 19:30; 15:13) – that man and woman are made. This is one more example of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that "it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear" (*Gaudium et Spes* 22). Thus Jesus declared not only in words but by his deeds that "what God has joined, no-one may divide" (*Mt* 19:6). As Christ will never abandon his Church, so spouses



must love each other for life: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her... For this reason shall a man leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two become one. This is a great mystery [sacrament] and I mean this in reference to Christ and the Church" (*Eph* 5:25-26, 31-32).

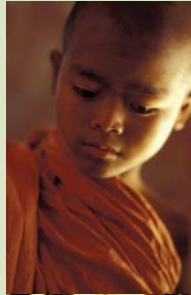
Thus the Church challenges the cynicism sometimes found in our culture and affirms God's plan for marriage as the truth for which we must strive. The goodness of marriage must be respected by those who enter into it and by society at large. While some people are quick to talk down the happiness found through marriage or to talk up the failures in marriage, many 'ordinary people' have fulfilling life-long marriages and pass on to their children the example of their fidelity and service.

## 8. Why do all societies have laws about marriage?

A 'private' or 'secret' marriage would be an anomaly, because marriage requires not only that a couple make their promises to each other, but also that others witness, respect and support those promises. Indeed, it is the public recognition of marriage as a social institution that creates the privacy of marital intimacy. In every society, marriage is surrounded by laws and customs that protect its meaning and value.

Couples that marry in the church only need one wedding ceremony in Canada, since the priest or pastor is authorized to act on behalf of the State. In some countries, a civil ceremony is also required.

In Canada and in Canadian provinces, marriage was governed by laws concerning who is eligible to marry, what marriage involves, and how it must be witnessed, which largely coincided with those of God and the Church. In 2005, however, Canada adopted a law that changed the definition of marriage in a way which radically contradicts the law of God and the Church.



## 9. What is required for a “valid” marriage in the Catholic Church?

At the heart of every marriage is a couple’s public commitment to love and honour each other as husband and wife for the rest of their lives. This is a complex, many-sided commitment, involving more than just publicly spoken words or privately held intentions. Church laws identify what is required for a marriage to be ‘valid’ and ‘complete’, conditions for a person to be free, ready and able to marry, the necessary understanding of what marriage involves, the proper process for witnessing a marriage, and so on. Even the ‘natural union’ of two non-Christians, or of a Christian and a non-Christian, will be recognized by the Church as a real marriage if these aspects of marriage are fulfilled. In the case of the marriage of two Christians, this will be recognized as a sacramental marriage if all these elements are present. In the case of those who are baptised Catholics, the Church teaches that for marriage to be valid it must be celebrated according to the laws and customs of that part of the Church – East or West – to which the spouses belong.

Thus amongst the things that might make a marriage invalid in the eyes of God and the Church would be: a serious lack of understanding or freedom or mental health or mature discretion on the part of one or both of the parties to the marriage at the time they made their vows; an unwillingness, from the beginning, to live monogamously or to be open to the gift of children; or a failure on the part of a Catholic party to get married within the Church or (if outside) with the permission of the Church (cf. Code of Canon Law 1063-1133, hereafter CIC). Where there is doubt about such a matter the Church has a ‘marriage tribunal’ process to clarify the validity of particular marriages.

## 10. So are Catholics who ‘marry outside the Church’ really married?

Today many couples, at least one of whom is a Catholic, marry ‘outside the Church’. Sometimes they have sought and been given permission by the Church to marry in, for instance, the non-Catholic church of their spouse or in some other place where they are living far from a Catholic church; the ‘minister’ who presides over the marriage ceremony in this case may even be non-Catholic. Nonetheless the Church will regard such a marriage as a perfectly valid sacrament.

But if a couple get married ‘outside the Church’ without permission – either because they prefer a civil ceremony or because there is an obstacle to their marriage in the Church (e.g. one partner was previously married but not widowed and that marriage has not been annulled) – then their union will not be a marriage in the eyes of the Church. Though their marriage will be recognized and protected by the state and while they may assume many of the responsibilities of spouses, it will be defective and this should, where possible, be corrected (see CCC 1631-37; CIC 1141-65).

For Catholics validly to marry non-Catholics they must receive a dispensation from the Church, avoid any dangers to their falling away from their faith, and sincerely promise to do all in their power to have their children baptised and brought up in the Catholic Church (CIC 1124-29).

Keep



*The Faith*

## 11. Does the Church make it too easy or too hard for people to marry?

While some couples delay marriage too long, others rush into marriage too soon. As a result, they often bring to their marriage unresolved issues in their lives. Given the full significance of Christian marriage, some argue that the Church should be more restrictive in its approach to the witnessing of marriage; others complain when the Church puts any strictures on marriage at all. Priests properly try to ensure that couples are ready, willing and able to make a marital commitment, by helping them discern their vocation and offering them instruction on the nature, duties and rites of marriage. Sometimes priests refer couples to others for such marriage preparation. People should not enter marriage without careful thought and preparation, including spiritual preparation through prayer and participation in the sacramental life of the Church. But in all but the most obviously ill-considered cases, the Church is reluctant to deny its blessing to those who are legally free to marry.



# blessing



## 12. Why is marriage only between a man and a woman?

Marriage is a special kind of friendship. It is not only permanent and exclusive, but also between a man and a woman. It is a celebration of the similarities and the differences, the unity-in-diversity and the complementarity of the sexes. The very design of our bodies reveals that man and woman are made for each other. Marital love is thus designed by God to make men into husbands and women into wives.

Marriage is also a unique form of friendship in another respect: it is oriented towards the having and rearing of children. The sexual union of a man and a woman is the only kind of love-making which can also result in life-making. Marital love is thus designed by God to make men into fathers and women into mothers. (This is true even for those couples who cannot have children of their own and must find other ways to nurture and support children).

For the Church, friendships between people of the same sex cannot be marriages because they lack both the sexual complementarity and the orientation to new life which are essential marks of marriage. As we have already seen, faith and reason, scripture and tradition, reveal that sexual activity is a celebration of marital love. Homosexual acts, like other sexual acts outside of marriage or misuses of sexuality within marriage, are thus a misuse of the body and of friendship (cf. CCC 2357-59). When the Church reserves marriage to heterosexual couples and asks the State to privilege these marriages in various ways so as to support couples and families, no unjust discrimination is intended or results. Rather this simply recognizes that not all relationships are marriages. (cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Regarding Proposals to give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons (2003)).

man & woman

### 13. Why does the Church believe couples should be open to children and should not use contraception?

“When it is a question of harmonizing married love with the responsible parenthood,” the Second Vatican Council observed, “good intentions and motives are not enough: objective criteria must be used, drawn from the nature of the human person and human action, criteria which respect the total meaning of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love. All this is possible only if the virtue of married chastity is seriously practiced” (Gaudium et Spes 51 and CCC 2368; cf. Familiaris Consortio 32).

As we have seen already, the marital act has a double significance: it is both unitive and procreative; it is both love-making and life-making. These are, as it were, two sides of the same coin. To seek to exclude either dimension is to refuse to say what sex and marriage say. Thus when a couple give themselves fully to each other in sexual intercourse, they are implicitly renewing the promises they made on their wedding day, when they said “yes, yes, yes,” to the Church’s questions: “Have you come here freely and without reservation to give yourselves to each other in marriage? Will you love and honour each other as man and wife for the rest of your lives? Will you accept children lovingly from God and



bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?” The language of their bodies is promising again what should be habitually in their hearts. But when, through contraception (or violence or adultery) they block one dimension of their marital act, they are not re-consummating their marriage through their body-language. In deliberately rendering their sexual acts sterile – through contraceptive pills, condoms or surgical sterilisation – a couple diminish the meaning of their intimacy and fail to fully respect not only their commitment and their bodies, but also the law of God.



The Church therefore urges couples to welcome their fertility as central to the total gift of themselves to each other. The Church urges them to become knowledgeable about their fertility and to use this knowledge to plan their family responsibly. Modern methods of Natural Family Planning allow couples to regulate the size and spacing of their families with a high degree of accuracy, without in any way rejecting their bodily relationship with its God-given cycle of fertility and infertility. But this challenges them to cultivate self-mastery (chastity) within marriage, and to find ways of expressing intimacy during those times when sexual intercourse is imprudent. And it challenges the rest of the Church and community to find ways of supporting them, especially when struggling against temptation or other difficulties.

The Church honours those couples who are unable to have their own children, and who choose to adopt, foster or otherwise support and nurture the young. They too need the understanding and support of Church and community.



# *Life-Giving*



## 14. What are the best ways to strengthen a marriage?

Couples should first rejoice in God's gift to them of each other. They need to recognize the gift of romance, and to strive to keep that romance alive. Although 'falling in love' is driven primarily by (God-given!) feelings of attraction, these feelings inevitably vary in intensity and duration. The commitment of marriage requires a decision to keep building a relationship on a deep respect for one another, on friendship as well as passion, on shared values, hopes and interests, on the desire to make a life and a family together, and on a strong sense that through living out this vocation the spouses are responding to God's call to holiness. 'Falling out of love' occurs when couples forget that they can rise above their passing feelings and put each other first, caring for the other, despite inevitable disappointments in the relationship. The decision to love can help to recreate the feelings of love.

So couples should strengthen their relationship: by spending time together, by listening to each other, by valuing their similarities and differences, by learning to name and discuss their disagreements, by sharing their responsibilities for home and children, by deepening their spiritual life, and by seeking professional marriage-friendly counselling should this be necessary. As their relationship matures, spouses come to value and to love the person they have actually married, rather than the 'ideal partner' they imagined on their wedding day.

All this is increasingly difficult to achieve in today's society, so it is more than ever important to actively seek outside support. A couple's choice of friends is important in this regard, as well as their availing themselves of organizations and movements that support and strengthen couples and families. Most important of all are prayer and the sacraments. God wants their relationship to be fulfilling, joyful and fruitful and will never abandon them if they trust in Him.

Spouses must never forget, therefore, that their family is a domestic church (CCC 1655-58). They are called to pray daily, together with their children, and to lead each other to holiness. They must evangelize and catechize not only their children but each other. They must share and deepen their faith and hope and love. They must carry each other's needs to God, especially at Mass. The old saying still holds true: the family that prays together stays together (CCC 2558-65).

# strong

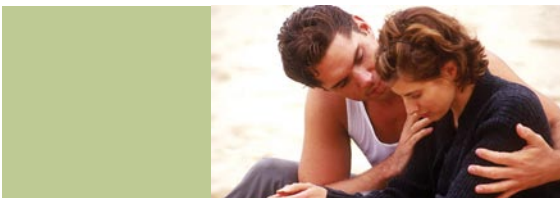


## 15. So do all marriages go through difficult times?

No-one should naïvely assume that the journey of marriage will be easy. All marriages go through difficult times, especially when couples must face changes in themselves and in their circumstances. A marriage is thus as much a journey of faith and trust, as it is of love. Couples should resolve to keep forgiving and communicating with each other, and to keep working with each other through the new situations in which they find themselves.

The journey of marriage thus involves constantly letting go of the past to embrace the future: it is a journey into the truth of who one is, the truth of who one's spouse is, the truth of who one's children (and extended family) are, the truth of who God is. Christians should recognise in their journey the Easter pattern of death and resurrection, and the mystery of Jesus Christ in their lives. Just as Jesus died and rose to new life, so the expectations and routine of one stage in a marriage may need to die, if the marriage is to be re-born at a new depth. Indeed, many couples find that it is only when they have reached a point of weakness or failure in their marriage, that they can truly surrender to God's grace and the renewal of their marriage in ways they could never have imagined.

A life-long commitment will always be tested. To reach old age in company with one's spouse, family and friends, is a unique joy that can only be known by those who have persevered through difficult times. This is the joy the Church wants married couples to experience, and this is why the Church strives to uphold and support marriage and families in every way it can.



*constant*

“The intimate community of life and love which constitutes the married state has been established by the Creator and endowed by him with its own proper laws...God himself is the author of marriage. The vocation to marriage is written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator... God who created man out of love also calls him to love – the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being” (CCC 1603-04).

# A Prayer for *Married Couples*

Father of life and love,  
you created us in your image – woman and man.  
We rejoice and thank you for the gift of each other.  
Sustain us in our love  
and lead us to a deeper understanding of your love.

Jesus, we come before you,  
seeking your guidance and direction  
in our relationship.  
In marriage you call and challenge us  
to a permanent, exclusive and sacred friendship.  
Be our strength and support, therefore,  
as we continue this journey together.

Holy Spirit, help us to strive towards a lasting,  
honest commitment united in love.  
Give us your strength to carry each other  
in times of darkness,  
your joy in times of happiness,  
and your gift of awe in the uniqueness  
and sacredness of each other.

May our love be a reflection and  
a sign of your love in the world.  
Amen.

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