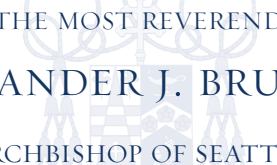


A PASTORAL LETTER



THE GIFT OF MARRIAGE
Of Union Most Sacred



THE MOST REVEREND
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ARCHBISHOP OF SEATTLE

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Dear Friends in Christ, as you know, you are about to enter into a union which is most sacred and most serious, a union which was established by God himself. By it he gave to man and woman a share in the greatest work of creation, the work of the continuation of the human race.

EXHORTATION FROM WEDDING LITURGY



THE GIFT OF MARRIAGE

Of Union Most Sacred

AS ARCHBISHOP, I am writing this pastoral letter because of challenges to the understanding of marriage commonly held in our society. My pastoral letter considers the importance of marriage from different perspectives. These include the foundation of marriage, the challenges to marriage, the supports for marriage, upholding marriage and the future for marriage. My letter intends to deepen your appreciation for the gift of marriage and to help you know the Catholic Church's care and support for this special sacrament.

As the Vatican Council document *Gaudium et Spes* spells out, "The wellbeing of the individual person and of both human and Christian society is closely bound up with the healthy state of conjugal and family life" (GS 47:1).



FOUNDATION OF MARRIAGE

The scriptures describe marriage as a union of human body and heart fashioned by a good and gracious God and proclaimed by the preaching of Jesus Christ. Our Catholic faith tradition emanates from the creation account in Genesis that describes marriage as brought forth by a loving God, who created man and woman as equal partners with the command to “be fertile and multiply” (GN 1:28).

For Catholics in the Sacrament of Matrimony, the spouses become an integral part of God’s plan for creation when they give themselves freely and fully to each other in a lifelong and life-giving relationship of mutual love and support.

In his earthly ministry, Jesus spoke of the great blessing that flows from the oneness of flesh between husband and wife. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (MK 10:7-8). Marriage began with a covenant between a man and a woman, continues today, and will endure to the end of time. This understanding of marriage is most fully expressed in the love and physical union of husband and wife, which opens them to the gift of children.

For Catholics in the Sacrament of Matrimony, the spouses become an integral part of God’s plan for creation when they give themselves freely and fully to each other in a lifelong and life-giving relationship of mutual love and support. This love between a man and a woman, in a permanent and exclusive relationship, is also a sign of Christ’s sacrificial love for the Church, a life-giving love poured out for us.

As Pope Benedict XVI pointed out recently in his talk to the Diocesan Convention of Rome, “The sacramental quality that marriage assumes in Christ, therefore, means that the gift of creation has been raised to the grace of redemption. Christ’s grace is not an external addition to human nature, it does not do violence to men and women but sets them free and restores them precisely by raising them above their own limitations. Just as the incarnation



of the Son of God reveals its true meaning in the cross, so genuine human love is self-giving and cannot exist if it seeks to detach itself from the cross.”

Jesus’ teaching on marriage was not determined solely by the religious or secular understanding of his own day. It reaches back to creation and proclaims the ongoing relationship between a man and a woman in marriage as a fulfillment of the procreative presence of God in the world. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus states “... from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female’” (MK 10:6). Jesus challenged the contemporary understanding of the Mosaic Law by proclaiming that marriage is a permanent bond between a man and a woman rooted in creation. “Marriage is not purely a human institution despite the many variations it may have undergone. Through the centuries in different cultures, social structures and spiritual attitudes, these differences should not cause us to forget its common and permanent characteristics. Although the dignity of this institution is not transparent everywhere with the same clarity, some sense of the greatness of the matrimonial union exists in all cultures” (CCC 2331).

As Catholics we believe that marriage is an institution created by God and provides a religious context and spiritual meaning to the biological realities of reproductive life so evident in creation. In their conjugal unity, a man and a woman form a sacred bond before God and create the basis for their mutual love, support and sexual fulfillment.

CHALLENGES TO MARRIAGE

Our sacramental view of marriage as a vocation is faithfully taught and lived in Catholic families throughout the Archdiocese of Seattle and honored as a fundamental teaching of our faith. The Catholic Church has always recognized the challenges of creating a happy and fruitful marriage.

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We cannot be so idealistic as to think that happy, joyful and fulfilling marriages just happen. They are the result of an ongoing effort to live the abiding faith and committed love pledged on the wedding day. Married couples soon realize that their future with its hopes and disappointments, its successes and its failures, its pleasures and its pains, its joys and its sorrows, is often hidden from their eyes. Every day they must activate their love so that forgiveness, reconciliation, acceptance, compassion and a host of other attitudes can strengthen their bond. There are no enduring marriages that can be reduced to mere romanticism or mimic television sitcoms.

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The Catholic Church acknowledges with sadness society's widespread indifference to the great blessing of marriage. Many young people are married without adequate premarital preparation, and an increasing number of couples enter into cohabiting relationships prior to marriage. Research indicates that those lacking adequate marriage preparation and couples who cohabit prior to marriage experience higher rates of divorce.

Divorce itself has become a terrible emotional scar in the lives of many people. At times, divorced and separated persons end up alone through no fault of their own. Violence and abuse also may play a prominent role in the disintegration of marriage and family life, resulting in serious social problems. Many single parents heroically undertake child care with little financial and emotional support. The Catholic Church has a responsibility to assist couples in dealing with the issues that place stress on their marriages and to offer love and care to divorced or separated persons.

More than ever, Catholic families need the guidance of the Church and her moral and social teachings. Children can easily



become the unintended victims of family disintegration and social experiments. Issues of custody, spousal benefits and the legal claims of individuals must not overshadow the needs of the young and the vulnerable in families. We also must challenge the portrayal of marriage and family life by print and electronic media, which too often sensationalize and exploit the struggles of family life and divorce.

Irrespective of our background, our social status, our race, our culture or our economic standing, we are all here as a result of the union of a man and a woman, no matter how successfully or how poorly that union was lived out in one's upbringing.

SUPPORTS FOR MARRIAGE

Parishes are required to offer preparation for those entering the Sacrament of Matrimony. For instance, pre-marriage inventory assessments, evenings for the engaged and Engaged Encounter support couples who are seeking to build a deep and life-long marital relationship. Other parish-based movements also provide a profound recognition of the sacredness of marriage. Among these movements are Marriage Encounter, *Cursillo*, the Christian Family Movement, Couples for Christ and Natural Family Planning. Some parish-based programs, such as the *Retrouaille* movement, strengthen troubled marriages through peer ministry. In addition, Catholic Community Services provides resources to assist couples and families in crisis. We are grateful to the many different ministries that support marriage throughout the Archdiocese of Seattle.

The greatest support for marriage as a vocation comes from the couples who celebrate the shared communion of Christian marriage at Sunday liturgy and in their daily lives. Citing the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops notes, "A true marriage in the Lord with his grace will bring the spouses holiness. Their love manifested in their fidelity, passion, fertility, generosity, sacrifice, forgiveness and healing, makes known God's love in their family, communities and society."¹

In the intimacy of marital life, the married couple actualizes



in a sacramental way the creative presence of God. Lived joyfully and faithfully, the Sacrament of Matrimony, like the Eucharist, provides a vibrant witness to contemporary culture. This Year of the Eucharist should remind us that the regular pattern of participation in Sunday Eucharist and daily prayer, along with involvement in parish community life, nourish the love necessary for faithful and lasting marriages.

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Elderly couples, married for decades, and faithful young parents serve as a moral compass for the community, pointing all of us to a life of fidelity and love. These couples witness to the rich blessings of marriage in their struggle to balance the demands of daily life. In the process, they become a source of renewal not only for matrimony but for the very life of society. In the same way, ethnic and immigrant communities arriving in the Archdiocese of Seattle from around the world with large extended families contribute their own enduring sense of solidarity. Their joyous family traditions are enlivening parish life and replanting in our North American culture another example of living marriage and family life.

UPHOLDING MARRIAGE

Because of the high value we place on marriage, the recent challenges to the definition of marriage in Washington State as well as troubling contemporary social trends that undermine married life require a response from the Catholic faithful. By upholding marriage as a union between a man and woman, with deep religious, historical and cultural roots, we place before others the reality that marriage is more than a legal agreement and should not be changed by civil authority.

Disregarding this rich heritage opens the door to demands for same-sex marriage and contractual same-sex unions. This, in turn, gives rise to the false assertion that a same-sex union attains the same status as a marriage between a man and woman. Church teaching on marriage between a man and woman should



in no way be viewed as detracting from the dignity of and respect owed to each individual person. We are all loved equally by God regardless of one's family circumstance or sexuality. Discrimination, intolerance or other mistreatment is contrary to Church teaching concerning the dignity of persons.

The Catholic Church's support for the legal definition of marriage as the union between a man and woman is rooted in our belief that the state has a responsibility for the common good. In marriage, the state determines and clarifies inheritance claims, property and custody rights, the entitlement of beneficiaries to employer-provided insurance, the right to exercise the power of attorney as well as other benefits. However, the public debate about extending benefits should not be confused with support for same-sex unions and must not lead to a deconstruction of the true meaning of marriage. In justice, any debate regarding legal entitlement to benefits must extend to everyone.

Regardless of their household situation or economic status, we must find ways to ensure that everyone receives their God-given rights and is treated with love, dignity and care. Similarly, our faith communities must offer meaningful support, respect and inclusion to all families and their members. The Church recognizes the profound importance of persons who adopt, who serve as foster parents and who assume parental responsibility for others—often as a result of divorce, separation, desertion, or the absence, disability or death of a parent.

It is important to remember that the bond between husbands and wives in marriage and their fruitfulness as parents is the essential building block of society. This is a common good that government exists to serve and uphold. It also is the reason the Catholic Church opposes attempts by proponents of same-sex unions to overturn the state's Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA).

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A FUTURE FOR MARRIAGE

With the Washington State Supreme Court deciding the definition of marriage, our support for marriage as a sacred union between a man and a woman is an urgent priority for our Church and our culture. As your Archbishop, I suggest that married couples and parishes take positive steps to promote marriage:

Married Couples

- Prayerfully reflect on your own vocation of marriage and build on its sacramental grace by seeking God's guidance in times of joy and sorrow.
- Invite other people to participate in your anniversary celebrations and other significant family events.
- Take advantage of the sacraments, especially Eucharist and Penance.
- Participate in marriage and family movements that uphold marriage and evangelize the culture.
- Write letters to your federal and state legislators supporting the Catholic understanding of marriage as a union between a man and a woman.

Parishes

- Study my teaching document, *Formation for Love and Chastity*, and use it as a parish resource for those involved in faith formation, marriage preparation and the support of family life.
- Celebrate significant anniversaries publicly with the renewal of vows.
- Announce upcoming marriages prominently so the parish community can share in the couple's joy.
- Bless liturgically the families that form our fabric of faith on special occasions that impact their lives.
- Invite families to make special efforts to attend Sunday Mass together.
- Organize letter-writing campaigns to your federal and state legislators supporting the Catholic understanding of marriage as a union between a man and a woman.



- Create mentor programs using experienced couples to assist younger couples to build their marriages and make them stronger during the early, critical years of marriage.

As a community of faith, I ask you to pray that we will become powerful witnesses to the sanctity of marriage in our world. Pray for divorced and separated persons. Pray for children who have become the innocent victims of family violence and disintegration. Pray for our government leaders, that they will recognize the common good that results from supporting marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Pray for those who disagree with us, that they might be enriched by the beauty of the truth we seek to preserve. Let us also live as a people of faith and in all we do, pray and act so that others might experience the love and care of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

No greater blessing can come to our society than to witness married life that is sustained by a pure conjugal love that is loyal and true to the end. If this true love and the unselfish spirit of sacrifice guide our family life, then we will rejoice in a strong society and a cohesive nation. The rest is in the hands of God!

Yours in Christ, Our Bread of Life and
Sign of Faith,

+ *Alexander J. Brunett*

†Alexander J. Brunett
Archbishop of Seattle



NOTE

1. “Between Man and Woman: Questions and Answers about Marriage and Same-sex Unions,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Nov. 12, 2003.