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From Rite to Mystagogy: An Online Blog on the Sacrament of Marriage

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From Rite to Mystagogy: An Online Blog on the Sacrament of Marriage

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Married couples face a variety of obstacles in living out the sacrament of marriage. Busy families may not have the time or opportunity to attend a parish marriage enrichment program. The Church has sought to find new ways of supporting couples in order to help them fruitfully live out their sacramental vows. Post-sacramental catechesis and mystagogical reflection can help couples to understand and integrate the liturgical rites, symbols and images of the marriage sacrament into their married lives.

The project designed, piloted and evaluated an online interactive blog community that offered married couples an opportunity for enrichment and support through mystagogical reflection on the sacrament of marriage. In the project, couples used theological reflection on their sacramental vows to better understand that the path to holiness is intimately related to their sacramental vows and is now expressed in their daily interactions together.

Theological reflection provides a methodology for couples to engage in a mystagogy on the sacrament of marriage. The project integrates catechesis, mystagogy and blogging while using a process of theological reflection. This form of mystagogy allows spouses to reflect on their marriage, their covenant bond, the meaning and implications of their professed vows and their impact on daily experiences in married life. The project also includes an overview of the history of the ritual and theology of

marriage leading up to the significant revisions that contributed to the 1969 *Rite of Marriage*.

The participants' blog responses and evaluations reported that they shared their reflections verbally with their spouse and in writing with other couples in the online community, engaged in the theological reflection process, and pondered how their marriage vows are lived out in daily life. Couples reported experiencing a deeper understanding of the Church's teachings on marriage and how those teachings apply to their daily life.

The online resource is readily reproducible for possible future use in parishes which will allow the blog to continue to enhance the Church's ministry and outreach to married couples.

This dissertation by Peter J. Murphy fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Theology and Religious Studies approved by Dr. Lucinda Nolan, Ph.D., as Director, and by John Grabowski, Ph.D., and Rev. Donald Heet, D.Min. as Readers.

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To my encouraging and generous wife,
Katie.

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INTRODUCTION

Catholic couples are asked three questions on their wedding day: “Have you come here freely and without reservation to give yourselves to each other in marriage?”; “Will you love and honor each other as man and wife for the rest of your lives?”; and “Will you accept children lovingly from God, and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?”¹ The ceremony reaches its culmination as couples answer these three simple questions and then share marriage vows with one another. These questions and vows from the *Rite of Marriage* reveal the profound theological understanding and tradition of the sacrament of marriage. As the rite concludes the couple is given a blessing and sent to live out the sacrament of marriage, often without a meaningful understanding of the sacrament.

Modern couples face a variety of obstacles in living out the sacrament of marriage. Changes in society’s view of marriage have led to a greater acceptance of divorce, cohabitation and single parent families. With rampant cultural changes, there is greater need for contemporary pastoral initiatives to assist married couples. This introduction brings to light some of the challenges facing couples as noted in Church documents and by theologians and secular authors. To help address these concerns and support married couples, this project proposes an online marriage enrichment blog to

¹ International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL), *The Rites of the Catholic Church* (henceforth referred to as *The Rites*) as revised by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Vol. 1. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), no. 24, 726.

assist couples in reflecting on the sacrament of marriage and the fullness of its meaning for their lives.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued the *National Directory for Catechesis* in 2005. This document highlights several cultural and societal challenges facing Catholics today. Secularism, religious indifference, the difficulty of engaging adults in lifelong faith formation and inspiring a lasting commitment in young adults are just some of the issues facing the Church.² Holding a secular worldview makes it easy to see marriage as something that is for and about oneself alone. "The essential bond between husband and wife is challenged by an increasing individualistic attitude of the spouses in relation to each other."³ A sacramental understanding of marriage runs contrary to a secular notion and helps spouses look beyond themselves.

In November 2009, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops sought to directly engage the modern understanding of marriage and help Catholics come to see what the sacrament of marriage truly is and can become. In the Pastoral Letter *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, the bishops laid out a vision for married life. The document begins by recognizing the signs of the time and the difficulties married couples face today. "The incidence of divorce remains high. The social sanctions and legal barriers to ending one's marriage have all but disappeared and the negative effects of divorce on children, families, and the community have become more apparent in recent

² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), *The National Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2005), 13.

³ Ibid., 39.

decades."⁴ The bishops cite three factors that threaten the institution of marriage: lack of being open to children, seeing marriage as an exclusively private matter that seeks personal satisfaction, and attempts to redefine marriage.⁵

The bishops express concern for the lack of understanding about marriage:

We are troubled by the fact that far too many people do not understand what it means to say that marriage—both as a natural institution and a Christian sacrament—is a blessing and gift from God. We observe, for example, that some people esteem marriage as an ideal but can be reluctant to make the actual commitment necessary to enter and sustain it.⁶

Many couples do not realize what marriage is and what it takes to make marriage work. They often marry without having reflected on the nature of marriage or marital love. Many within the Catholic Church marry without understanding the sacramental power and grace that marriage brings. Without this understanding, couples are not able to fully embrace the reality of their married love or to utilize all the spiritual supports available to overcome trials and difficulty within marriage.

The bishops' document affirms what John Paul II's 2001 Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, said about marriage. "At a time in history like the present, special attention must also be given to the pastoral care of the family, particularly when this

⁴ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Marriage: Life and Love in the Divine Plan* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2010), 4.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

fundamental institution is experiencing a radical and widespread crisis."⁷ In *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*, the Pontifical Council on the Family recommends that married couples receive on-going support to counter the personal and societal difficulties they face and to grow in faith:

Especially where the environment has become paganized, it will be particularly advisable to offer a "journey of faith, which is similar to the catechumenate" (FC 66), and a presentation of the fundamental Christian truths that may help acquire or strengthen the maturity of the faith of the persons contracting marriage.⁸

Obstacles to lifelong marriage are overwhelming many couples, causing them to question and doubt their ability to remain in marriage and even doubt the institution of marriage itself.⁹ They do not take the time to reflect on the reality of the sacrament or even the vows that they share with one another to enter into marriage. Once in marriage, they are ill equipped to handle the trials of married life. A marriage enrichment process that offers a presentation on the truths of Christianity and marriage will help married couples attain a maturity of faith able to manage the difficulties of married life.

In *The Human Person According to John Paul II*, theologian Fr. J. Brian

Bransfield highlights three historical and cultural revolutions that contributed to the

⁷ John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (January 6, 2001), no. 47, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte_en.html (accessed May 31, 2011).

⁸ Pontifical Council on the Family, *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage* (Vatican City State: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1996), no. 4, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_13051996_preparation-for-marriage_en.html (accessed June 10, 2011).

⁹ "Marriage and family life remain very important goals for today's teenagers at the same time that they widely accept a range of nonmarital lifestyles." Bradford Wilcox and Elizabeth Marquardt, eds., *The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America 2009* (Charlottesville, VA: The National Marriage Project and the Institute for American Values, 2009), 114.

individualistic and secular view of marriage. First, the author shows how the Industrial Revolution created a need for acquiring material objects and how this revolution took fathers out of their homes and off their family farms to work in factory businesses. This revolution created a shift from focusing on the internal family business to an external concern about the company and profit margins. Work, once directly a component of family life, was now done outside of the home with non-family members. The Industrial Revolution caused work to become less familial and personal.¹⁰

The second revolution, according to Bransfield, changed the way society understood sexuality. Before the sexual revolution, sexuality was primarily understood as a familial and interpersonal relationship. The sexual revolution reinterpreted sexuality as an individual experience for personal pleasure. The effects of the sexual revolution directly impacted marriage. The decades since the beginning of the sexual revolution have seen exponential increases in cohabitation, divorce and fatherless families. Bransfield observes that “the sexual revolution and the exaltation of privacy eroded people’s willingness to commit themselves in marriage.”¹¹ As sexual relationships became more acceptable outside of marriage, the rate of marriage declined and other forms of living arrangements increased.

¹⁰ J. Brian Bransfield, *The Human Person According to John Paul II* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books and Media, 2010), 23. Bransfield shows that through the Industrial Revolution, “A personalist atmosphere is being replaced by a secular focus on humanism.”

¹¹ Ibid., 24.

The last revolution highlighted by Bransfield involves technology and mass media. Now, not only do people wish to acquire goods and pleasure, they also want them quickly. The technological revolution allows people to get what they want immediately, while at the same time, it diminishes their ability to relate to others in a human fashion. "Video games, Web chats, and streaming video can easily replace the direct nature of person-to-person relationships, and they have introduced an automatic fantasy style of low-grade loneliness as recreation."¹² Technology can help connect people, but also serves to alienate them from true interpersonal relationships. Face to face relationships are replaced by virtual relationships.

The cumulative effect of these three revolutions is that many people desire to acquire pleasure quickly. Primarily focusing on self and acquiring material objects makes it less likely for some to desire to marry or to stay married when they feel their "needs" are not being met. The sacrament of marriage requires a patient and selfless nature that seeks not only one's own pleasure, but the happiness of the other and the family.

In an attempt to address and offer solutions to the damage done to the institution of marriage, in June of 2006 the Witherspoon Institute released "Marriage and the Public Good: Ten Principles." The document affirmed the challenges highlighted in the various religious documents. It states that the institution of marriage has weakened over recent years and highlights four developments as "especially troubling: divorce, illegitimacy,

¹² Bransfield, *The Human Person*, 31.

cohabitation, and same sex marriage."¹³ These developments, also noted in Church documents, indicate that marriage is not only threatened by outside influences but also by the internal dynamics of a married couple's own understanding of marriage.

In *The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America 2009*, Bradford Wilcox and Elizabeth Marquardt note cultural shifts in perception about the institution of marriage. "Americans are now gravitating towards a 'soul mate' model of marriage, one that privileges emotional intimacy and personal growth, often at the expense of other goods long associated with marriage, such as marital permanency, childbearing, and economic cooperation."¹⁴ A couples' understanding of marriage as the permanent union of a man and woman that is open to life is diminishing. The traditional aspects of marriage no longer shape the meaning of marriage as people begin to re-define it for themselves. The institution of marriage is socially weakened and appreciation for marriage fades. Couples are left to create their own structures to define marriage.

In 2005, seeking to address the weakening of marriage within society and to help couples overcome marital struggles, the federal government began a marriage initiative. Due in part to federal grants from the Healthy Marriage Initiative, the past decade has seen an increase in marriage enrichment programming.¹⁵ Congress issued one hundred

¹³ The Witherspoon Institute, *Marriage and the Public Good: Ten Principles* (Princeton, NJ: The Witherspoon Institute, 2006), 5, www.winst.org (accessed April 20, 2010).

¹⁴ Wilcox and Marquardt, eds., *The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America 2009*, ix.

¹⁵ United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, "Healthy Marriage Initiative" website, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/> (accessed April 16, 2010).

and fifty million dollars each year for five years to be allocated for programs to support marriage and fatherhood initiatives. Many of these programs seek best practices and up to date methods for enriching marriages. Unfortunately, this healthy trend has not seen a corresponding increase in Catholic marriage enrichment programming.

Traditional methods of pastoral support for marriages in the parish or diocese often do not meet the changing lifestyle of Catholics, especially younger Catholics, who typically primarily seek and receive information through the use of new media and the Internet. The *National Directory for Catechesis* cautions that in order to be successful in promoting the gospel the Church must begin to make use of modern technology: "In order to be faithful to her mission, the Church should employ all modern means of communications technology as effectively as possible to bring others to Christ."¹⁶ Methods using new media must be developed to help couples live their sacramental married life more fully. Without technological advancement in evangelization, the Church will not be able to reach as many people. "Nevertheless, the Internet's potential to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to invite potential disciples to follow him, and to welcome them into his Church has only been partially realized. It is only limited by the imagination of contemporary evangelists and catechists."¹⁷

¹⁶ USCCB, *The National Directory of Catechesis*, 26.

¹⁷ Ibid., 291.

With separation and divorce so prevalent, even among Catholics, couples need assistance in developing healthy and holy marriages.¹⁸ This project will develop a marriage enrichment blog that can assist married couples in meeting the challenges of married life. Through an online blog, couples will be able to read, discuss and share information with their spouses, other couples and the blog facilitator. By allowing couples to enrich their marriages from their own homes through a source they often turn to for information, the Internet, the Church can meet married couples amidst their hectic lives. Busy families, families with young children or families who live far from the church, who may not have the time or ability to attend a parish marriage enrichment program, can now enrich their marriages via an online marriage enrichment blog.

A marriage enrichment blog, as proposed in this project, can serve as a spiritual component to complement marriage education programs that focus on communication and problem solving skills. Allowing couples the opportunity to reflect on their marriage vows through an online blog will highlight the role that faith can play in marriage. Using a methodology of theological reflection, couples will enter into a time of reflection and discussion on the sacrament of marriage. Through reflection on their wedding day promises and vows to one another, the couple can find opportunities for a new awareness

¹⁸ *The Marriage Index* notes that, "in 1970, 77.4 percent of first marriages were intact, whereas only 61.2 percent were intact in 2007. However, more married couples seem to be staying together at least in the last decade." Institute for American Values and The National Center on African American Marriages and Parenting, *The Marriage Index: A Proposal to Establish Leading Marriage Indicators* (New York: The Institute for American Values and The National Center on African American Marriages and Parenting, 2009), 10. See also the Witherspoon Institute, *Marriage and the Public Good*, 24. "From 1960 to 2000, the divorce rate more than doubled in the United States—from about 20 percent to about 45 percent of all first marriages (Note: the divorce rate has declined modestly since 1980)."

of the spiritual component of marriage that will ultimately empower them to see the sacred in their “ordinary” married lives.

CHAPTER 1

MARRIAGE TODAY: SOCIOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL CONSIDERATIONS

The institution of marriage is being challenged on many fronts. Reflecting on these pressures, secular as well as Catholic studies on marriage indicate that marriage is weakening. More and more couples are marrying without a common understanding of what marriage involves. This is true for couples who marry civilly and Catholic couples who marry without fully understanding what the sacrament of marriage entails and how the sacrament shapes and can enrich their marital life together. This chapter will examine sociological data on Catholic and secular marriages. It will discuss some possible courses of action by which the Catholic Church can pastorally assist married couples understand more deeply the sacrament of marriage and the many gifts that it contains. With the help of sociological data, the Church will respond more effectively to the needs of married couples in contemporary culture.

Sociological Considerations

Many statistics and trends can be found in studies on both secular and Catholic marriages. Examining sociological data on Catholic marriage and marriage trends in the larger society will assist the Church to respond adequately to the needs of Catholic married couples. Such responses can help couples realize the spiritual gifts they have in the sacrament of marriage. Using sociological data will assist the Church in formulating new pastoral approaches for ministering to married couples.

“Marriage in the Catholic Church: A Survey of U.S. Catholics”

In 2007, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) conducted a national survey, “Marriage in the Catholic Church: A Survey of U.S. Catholics.” It affirms what John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* identified as a problem in 1981. Families “have become uncertain and bewildered over their role or even doubtful and almost unaware of the ultimate meaning and truth of conjugal love and family life.”¹ The Catholic Church is suffering from many of the same cultural obstacles as general society.

Through analysis of sociological data, the CARA study shows that the institution of marriage is weakening. Older Catholics are much more likely to have heard Church teachings and agreed with them than younger Catholics.² The study collected data from 1,008 self identified Catholics and reveals that the Church needs to reach out to and support Catholic married couples.

“Marriage in the Catholic Church” found that many Catholics lack an understanding of marriage’s spiritual dimension. According to the CARA report, only fifty-four percent of Catholics view marriage as a calling from God or as a vocation.³ The

¹ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio* (November 22, 1981), no. 11, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html (accessed May 23, 2011).

² Mark M. Gray, Paul M Perl, and Tricia C. Bruce, *Marriage in the Catholic Church: A Survey of U.S. Catholics* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Georgetown University, 2007), 11. See Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 14, for a full listing of the various age groups surveyed.

³ *Ibid.*, 47.

survey also found that, aside from age, frequency of Church attendance is another common indicator of whether a Catholic had heard and agreed with Church teaching.

CARA reports,

In general, the more frequently one attends Mass, the more frequently he or she participates in other Church or religious activities, the greater his or her knowledge about the Catholic faith, the greater his or her awareness of current events in the Church, and the greater his or her adherence to Church teachings.⁴

While good news for those who are active in the Church, this raises the question of how to reach out to those Catholics who are not practicing or active in their faith.

The CARA report notes that non-practicing couples are the most vulnerable to marital discord. “Among those who have ever been married, those who rarely or never attend Mass are most likely to have been divorced.”⁵ Non-practicing couples face the difficulties of married life without the support of the Church, Church teachings, regular reception of the sacraments and the support of a parish community. Couples who practice their faith infrequently are most likely to face their individual and social difficulty alone and unaware of the inherent value and blessings that the sacrament of marriage has for them.⁶

However, couples who frequently attend Mass also experience hurdles in their marriages and need support. “Married couples have always experienced problems that threaten their union: jealousy, infidelity, conflicts, and quarrels. Lust and arbitrary

⁴ Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 2.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 33.

domination can ruin a marriage."⁷ All too often, left to their own devices, couples' marriages end when they experience unexpected difficulties. The CARA report shows that divorce impacts twenty-three percent of all adult Catholics and of these eleven percent are remarried, living with another partner or widowed.⁸

Couples often enter the sacrament of marriage relatively unaware of how the sacrament differs from a civil marriage. Only slightly more than half of Catholics (fifty-five percent) believe that their views on marriage have been at least somewhat informed by Church teaching.⁹ Once couples understand that Church teaching can impact their everyday married life, they have the potential to live their lives in new ways.¹⁰ Since eighty-four percent of Catholics believe that "the sacrament of marriage extends beyond the wedding day," marriage enrichment would prove helpful to assist them in living the sacrament of marriage in daily life. Reflecting on the sacrament of marriage can help couples better understand their faith and the sacrament.

The CARA marriage report found that overall, seven in ten Catholics believe themselves to be "somewhat familiar" with Church teaching, while one-third believe

⁷ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006), 287.

⁸ Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 4. See also Wilcox, *State of Our Unions 2009*, 79 and 80 for more statistics on the risk of divorce for various demographics.

⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰ William V. D'Antonio, James D. Davidson, Dean R. Hoge, and Mary L. Gautier, *American Catholics Today: New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 62. The authors of *American Catholics Today* found that commitment to the Church is more consequential in Catholics' behavior than is the identification with the faith. Thus, they hypothesize "that highly committed Catholics are more likely to participate in the sacraments and to agree with Church teachings than Catholics who are only loosely connected to the Church."

themselves to be “very familiar.”¹¹ Only thirty percent or less say they are “somewhat” interested in learning more about Church teaching on marriage.¹² Those wanting to learn more are most interested in topics regarding commitment, fidelity, and faithfulness. Essentially, these topics are related to their marriage vows. Offering guidance, learning and facilitating spiritual growth to couples about the power of the sacrament of marriage in their lives will prepare them to face difficulties that arise in their marriage.

Through the sacrament of marriage all couples are transformed. Yet not all couples know or have faith in the sacrament and its power to help them live out their marriage for a lifetime. John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris consortio* notes that

this holds true especially for young families, which, finding themselves in a context of new values and responsibilities, are more vulnerable, especially in the first years of marriage, to possible difficulties, such as those created by adaptation to life together or by the birth of children. Young married couples should learn to accept willingly, and make good use of, the discreet, tactful and generous help offered by other couples that already have more experience of marriage and family life.¹³

Younger married couples may need assistance to overcome difficulties in their marriages. Young couples may also need help reflecting on marriage and their vows. Reflection is necessary for them to experience the strength that the sacrament can offer them. Older married couples have wisdom and experience to share from their years of

¹¹ Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 34.

¹² Ibid., 35.

¹³ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 69.

married life together. The CARA report reveals that younger Catholics are more likely than older married Catholics to seek help for their marriage.¹⁴ Older couples sharing their marital wisdom are a plentiful resource of help couples for newly married couples. If mutual support among married couples is offered to young couples in a convenient and easily accessible format, it may eventually reach Catholics who are not attending Mass or Church functions. If it does draw in couples, it can help them early in their marriages to "discover the beauty and grandeur of the vocation to love."¹⁵

Catholics who enter the sacrament of marriage ought to have a sense of the grace and power to live out the sacrament of marriage more efficaciously. The CARA report indicates that Catholics often enter into marriage without a spiritual understanding of their union and often suffer the same afflictions in their marriages as people of other faiths or no faith.¹⁶

Sociological Trends

Noting what keeps marriages together in *The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America 2009*, researchers Bradford Wilcox and Elizabeth Marquardt show that there are

¹⁴ Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 7.

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 1. Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church* on page 123 note that while older Catholics are most likely to say they are "very familiar" with Catholic teaching on marriage, it is the youngest generation of Catholics that is most likely to have a romantic notion of marriage and would thus need help seeing the deeper realities of sacramental love.

¹⁶ Simply getting married in the Church seems to impact marital outcome. "Catholics who have divorced or who are currently separated are significantly less likely than currently married Catholics to have been married in the Church (forty-five percent compared to sixty-five percent)." Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 4.

characteristics that will increase a couple's odds of having a lifelong marriage. "So if you are a reasonably well educated person with a decent income, come from an intact family and are religious, and marry after age twenty five without having a baby first, your chances for divorce are very low indeed."¹⁷ Spouses could benefit from knowing what factors or behaviors help increase their chances for marital success. Couples that are religious, that is, pray and worship together, increase their odds of staying married.

Another sociological trend is the decrease in the number of marriages in both the general public and the Church.¹⁸ Nationally, this trend is seen in the fact that "in 1970, 78.6 percent of adults age 20-54 were married. In 2008, it [the marriage rate] dropped to 57.2 percent."¹⁹ Catholics are part of this trend of not choosing to get married. "Those who do are increasingly marrying non-Catholics, and an increasing percentage is marrying outside the Church. As a result, the number of marriages reported by the Church is not keeping up with the growth of the Catholic population."²⁰ William D'Antonio and his co-authors found that

¹⁷ Wilcox and Marquardt, *The State of Our Unions*, 80.

¹⁸ "Marriage trends in recent decades indicate that Americans have become less likely to marry, and the most recent data show that the marriage rate in the United States continues to decline....This is reflected in a decline of about 50 percent, from 1970 to 2007." Ibid., 68.

¹⁹ Institute for American Values and The National Center on African American Marriages and Parenting, *The Marriage Index: A Proposal to Establish Leading Marriage Indicators* (New York, NY: The Institute for American Values and The National Center on African American Marriages and Parenting, 2009), 8.

²⁰ D'Antonio et al., *American Catholics Today*, 144. This study found that for most aspects of Catholic life and belief that there were very few differences between Catholics who attended Catholic schools and those who did not.

After climbing to 355,182 in 1965, the number of marriages taking place in the Church declines quite steadily to only 207,112 in 2005. With the Catholic population rising and the number of marriages falling, the ratio of Church-approved marriages to total Catholics has risen from one in ninety-nine in 1945 to one in 323 in 2005.²¹

Fewer couples are marrying within and outside the Church and fewer couples view marriage as a means to holiness. While seventy-one percent of Catholics believe that marriage between two baptized persons is a sacrament, only fifty-four percent view marriage as a calling from God or as a vocation.²² This calls into question their understanding of what marriage as a sacrament truly means. The CARA study shows that the younger generations are the most likely to question marriage as a calling from God and as a vocation, yet they are also the most likely to believe that marriage is a lifelong commitment.²³ Young people continue to see marriage as a human good, but are increasingly more accepting of alternative lifestyles to marriage.²⁴

Marriage is also a vital institution for the retention of Church members. The more stable one's relationships are with significant others, the more secure that person's Catholic identity. If significant relationships change in a person's life, one's religious identity is more likely to change as well.²⁵ Married Catholics have higher commitment

²¹ D'Antonio et al., *American Catholics Today*, 58.

²² Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 47.

²³ Ibid., 48.

²⁴ Wilcox, *State of Our Unions 2009*, 112.

²⁵ D'Antonio et al., *American Catholics Today*, 16.

levels to the Catholic Church.²⁶ Thus, marriage not only supports active participation in the Church, it also may strengthen a couple's commitment level.

Pastoral Considerations

The Catholic Church needs active, involved couples in order to thrive in the future. With only twenty one percent of Catholics attending Mass each week it is difficult to reach those who are not regularly active in the Church.²⁷ New means of reaching Catholics who do not come to Mass must be developed. The *National Directory for Catechesis* notes that people are not as connected to local parish communities as they once were:

Transportation and communications technology, combined with the tradition of mobility, have made geographic boundaries less important than ever. This situation affects parishes since they are communities of faith, and communities of faith are likewise less connected by geography than ever.²⁸

As mobility increases and new modes of communication emerge, the Church and her members will need to find new ways to adapt.

Pastoral care cannot be restricted to only those who come to Church since those most in need of support often are not present. Families, especially young families, often

²⁶ D'Antonio et al., *American Catholics Today*, 40. On page 32 the authors' research indicates that as time passes Catholics tend to blend more and more into culture and hold similar values as the society at large (even when these may contradict Church teaching).

²⁷ Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 30. On page 31 the survey notes that, "Respondents who belong to the oldest generation (the Pre-Vatican II Generation) are particularly likely to say that they attend Mass at least once a week (45 percent compared to 20 percent of the Vatican II Generation, 13 percent of the Post-Vatican II Generation, and 10 percent of the Millennial Generation)." The survey also notes that, "Married respondents are more likely than divorced or separated respondents to say they attend Mass once a week or more (26 percent compared to 12 percent of divorced or separated)."

²⁸ USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis*, 27.

find attending Mass and Church activities difficult. Pastoral care for these families is especially important during the transition from married to family life. *Familiaris consortio* states that the pastoral care of families is every Catholic's responsibility:

The pastoral care of the regularly established family signifies, in practice, the commitment of all the members of the local ecclesial community to helping the couple to discover and live their new vocation and mission. In order that the family may be ever more a true community of love, it is necessary that all its members should be helped and trained in their responsibilities as they face the new problems that arise, in mutual service, and in active sharing in family life.²⁹

Just as important as the difficulty of reaching out to those who are not attending the liturgy is the challenge of reaching and helping those who do attend Sunday worship. The liturgy is a vital point of contact for those who attend Mass. A married couple's wedding day is a significant point of contact with the Church for both couples who regularly attend Church and for those who do not. How can the Church help couples realize the deeper meaning of the words they are saying on their wedding day and at the weekly Eucharist? In her book *Saying Amen*, Kathleen Hughes writes that what is needed is a way for people to "enter the world of the liturgy, not simply to think about it but to dwell inside it, not remaining detached students or spectators."³⁰ Those who attend liturgy can learn to be educated and formed by the very liturgy they are attending. This is

²⁹ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, 69.

³⁰ Kathleen Hughes, *Saying Amen: A Mystagogy of Sacrament* (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 2007), 8. The author's goal is to help people "participate more thoughtfully in its celebration and to embrace the commitments they make to a way of life and to a vision of the reign of God each time they say 'Amen'. In liturgy, as in life, one thing regularly leads to another: understanding leads to loving, loving to participation, participation to commitment and commitment to a transformed way of living. It seems so elementary. Believers simply need to understand what they are doing when they gather for prayer and the rest will follow," Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 1.

not a passive learning. It is an active process that often needs to be taught. In *The Art of Theological Reflection* by Patricia O'Connell Killen and John de Beer, the authors claim that "the connection between contemporary experience and the Christian heritage is seldom obvious."³¹ When people learn to enter into the liturgy, they will benefit more from it. If couples truly experience their vows and know what they are saying at their wedding liturgy, their married lives can be transformed. The reflective process can even benefit those who may not have realized the full depth of what they said on their wedding day, but are now in a place where they are willing to think more deeply about their vows and their wedding liturgy.

Killen and de Beer note that unfortunately the full impact and revelation offered by tradition and experience is lost when theological reflection is done solely at the spontaneous level.³² All too often people experience the liturgy on a superficial level and all they are left with is their feeling or lack of feeling on the event. If Catholics learn to reflect on their past and present experiences, they can learn to capture deeper meaning from liturgical experiences.

Theological reflection is not something that is tangential for the Church; it is a skill that is necessary for adult faith formation. The *General Directory for Catechesis* points out that

³¹ Patricia O'Connell Killen and John de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), 52.

³² Ibid.

Adult catechesis concerns persons who have a right and a duty to bring to maturity the seed of faith sown in them by God. It is addressed to individuals who are charged to fulfill social responsibilities of various types and to those who are also prey to all kinds of changes and crises, sometimes profound.³³

The *General Directory for Catechesis* adds, "The faith of adults, therefore, must be continually enlightened, developed and protected, so that it may acquire the Christian wisdom which gives sense, unity, and hope to the many experiences of personal, social, and spiritual life."³⁴ Acquiring wisdom requires reflection. Lacking Christian wisdom, couples fail to make sense of marital strife, their unity breaks down and they lose hope because they are unaware of the gifts they have been given in the sacrament. They have powers and abilities, graces, available to them and of which they are often unaware. The Church has the duty to help married couples "bring to maturity the seed of faith sown in them by God" on their wedding day. Catholic married couples need preparation and on-going support from the Christian community to fulfill their responsibilities and overcome any crisis that may arise.

From Preparation to Marital Formation

In order to help engaged couples understand the rite and theology of marriage, the Church requires couples to prepare for the sacrament. On October 8, 2004 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office of Communications released a statement entitled, "Lifelong Support for Marriage Emphasized in Catholic Church." The statement

³³ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference—Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 173, page 166.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 173, page 167.

revealed that virtually all dioceses require some form of marriage preparation program and that over eighty percent of couples that were married in 2003 went through some form of marriage preparation.³⁵ While this is encouraging news and these programs assist couples in developing foundational skills for their marriage, they often do not address the needs couples will face once they have professed their vows. At this point in their relationship, the couple has little support. Who do they turn to for advice? Where are the marriage programs that will assist them? Do they have to wait until their marriage is about to end in divorce before they will encounter a program in the Church that can help them? The statement from the Bishops' Conference on lifelong support for marriage only mentions that couples have the opportunity for on-going marriage enrichment without going into any detail about these support programs.

The United States Bishops' pastoral letter, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, states,

After they are married, couples are still themselves, with all their personal faults and failings. Sacraments, each in their own way, really do configure us to the love of Christ revealed in his Passion, Death and Resurrection (the Pascal Mystery), but they do not bring about instant perfection.³⁶

The sacrament does not magically transform people or eradicate personal struggles and faults. The sacrament of marriage does provide a means of grace to help couples deal with their human shortcomings.

³⁵ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Lifelong Support for Marriage Emphasized in Catholic Church, Survey Finds," (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2004) <http://www.usccb.org/comm/archives/2004/04-184.htm> (accessed April 29, 2010).

³⁶ USCCB, *Marriage: Life and Love*, 52-53.

Cardinal Godfried Danneels highlights the need for ongoing assistance in his article, “The Christian Family in Crisis.” Cardinal Danneels points out, “The Church makes many pastoral efforts in relation to the preparation for marriage and to its celebration. Does she make sufficient efforts to assist the family once it has been set up, especially young families? Besides the task of accompanying engaged couples, there is also the need to support and accompany young families.”³⁷

When a couple approaches the altar and professes vows to one another they leave the Church transformed by Christ. Yet are they aware of the grace they just received? All too often the Church requires preparation for a sacrament yet often does not require or even provide the opportunity for a couple to reflect on the mystery in which they just participated.

Even though most dioceses in the United States require marriage preparation, the CARA study on marriage shows that divorce impacts twenty three percent of all Catholics.³⁸ Marriage preparation classes attempt to prepare couples to handle foreseeable problems they are likely to encounter in their marriage: finances,

³⁷ Godfried Danneels, “The Christian Family in Crisis,” *African Ecclesial Review* 23 (Feb – Apr 1981): 112-116. Danneels concludes by speaking on behalf of all married couples who are seeking a message of encouragement from their bishops as they live out their vocations to the best of their ability. Danneels says on their behalf, “Show us the depth and richness of our marriage sacrament, because, according to Paul’s words, a great truth is hidden there; I am speaking of Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:32) (116).” Also see, Alex Chima, “Plenary Study Session on Pastoral Care of Christian Families,” *African Ecclesial Review* 28 (Feb-Apr 1985): 72-75. Chima also asks what the Church leadership is doing to assist married couples (72). He calls for not just a repetition of doctrinal statements but the development of some concrete principles and practices that can enhance married life.

³⁸ Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 4.

communication, conflict resolution, etc.³⁹ What marriage preparation programs do not often do is prepare the couple to live as a new sacramental reality. There is a key ingredient missing from the preparation program. Marriage preparation programs and marriage enrichment programs need a vision for marriage and its accompanying marital spirituality that is applicable and speaks to the couple's whole married life beyond the wedding day. This is highlighted indirectly in *Marriage in the Catholic Church: A Survey of U.S. Catholics* as it notes that thirty-nine percent of married Catholics rarely or never discuss religion and faith with their spouse.⁴⁰ Many couples do not talk about faith with their spouse and may not know how faith could assist them in married life. Even the best of marriage preparation programs usually do not include reflection opportunities for the couple after the wedding ceremony. Reflection following the sacrament allows the couple time to ponder the mysteries they recently experienced. Reflection after the sacrament of marriage is necessary for a couple to fully understand and integrate the richness of the sacrament into their daily lives.

Often a couple becomes engaged and goes through their required marriage preparation classes out of a sense of obligation. Even if they come to the classes of their own accord they are often preoccupied with many concerns about the wedding day and its planning. Marriage preparation attempts, with varying degrees of success,⁴¹ to help a

³⁹ See Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 70-76 for more information about marriage preparation programs in the Church.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 81.

⁴¹ "Pre-Cana appears to be a mixed blessing, almost exclusively dependent on each group's leadership for its focus and direction." Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 109.

couple realize that they are not just preparing for a day but for a life.⁴² Marriage is not a onetime event. As a lifelong sacrament, marriage shapes the vocation and mission of a person in the life of the Church.⁴³

Why the Church Provides Pastoral Care for Married Couples

Gail Risch and Michael Lawler in their article, "The First Five Years of Marriage: Resources and Programs for Ministry," examine the results of a national study of couples in their first five years of marriage that was conducted by the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University in conjunction with the Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth of the United States Catholic Conference, the National Association of Family Life Ministers, and Engaged Encounter.⁴⁴ Between 1995 and 1999 the Center

⁴² See Robert A. Ruhnke, "Marriage Preparation Programs: Are They Working?" *The Living Light* 36 (Spring 2000). Also see Paul A. Holmes, "A Catechumenate for Marriage: Presacramental Preparation as Pilgrimage" *Journal of Ritual Studies* 6 (Summer 1992): 93-113. Holmes argues that the best preparation for marriage will be creating a catechumenal model where couples enter on a pilgrimage toward the sacrament with many ritual experiences throughout. This model highlights the need for conversion, as the catechumenate does, as preparation for receiving the sacrament. It is appropriate for marriage to have a catechumenate because it directs the sacramental grace of baptism toward a unique call and mission in the life of the couple. Also see Catherine Dooley, O.P., "Liturgical Catechesis: Mystagogy, Marriage or Misnomer?" *Worship* 66 (Summer 1992): 386-397. In this article Sr. Dooley states that the ancient catechumenal model can provide a pattern for liturgical catechesis (393). This ancient catechumenal model could also have applications for marriage preparation.

⁴³ "Everyone has a vocation. What is in remarkably short supply is the awareness that each of us has received a unique call from God, a divine vocation. That general unawareness is the real vocation crisis today, and it is a crisis because it seems to insinuate that priesthood and religious life are the only God-oriented vocations. By extension, the implication is that as people choose a state of life and give themselves to its unfolding, those who do not embrace a 'religious' calling need not take God nearly as seriously as those who do. This misapprehension plays itself out in a variety of ways, not the least of which is that we appear to ask far more of teens preparing for confirmation than we do of those preparing to enter the lifelong covenant of marriage." Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 102.

⁴⁴ Gail S. Risch and Michael G. Lawler, "The First Five Years of Marriage: Resources and Programs for Ministry," *Journal of Family Ministry* 15, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 22-28.

studied newly married couples. Among other things, the study determined what resources newly married couples would use if they were made available to them. While many practical aspects were identified: such as the desire for parenting classes, childcare at events, new parent get-togethers, there was also a surprisingly high request for follow-up to marriage preparation, marriage refresher courses, marriage enrichment and marriage counseling. This study revealed a real desire for couples to learn more about their married lives. Couples wanted both practical support and a deeper spiritual understanding of marriage. The study also revealed that marriage preparation alone is not enough to help foster the sacrament in a couple. The challenge is to provide an effective means of support and catechesis for married couples.

Providing marital support will be an on-going challenge for the Church throughout the new millennium. As Michael Lawler states in “Life Together: A Catechesis of Marriage as Sacrament,” “There is a need for marital catechesis not only as a marriage preparation but also as marriage enrichment.”⁴⁵ These enrichment opportunities ought to pass along practical wisdom of married life and parenting, and also sharing with couples the vast riches, resources and grace they have in their sacramental marriage.

⁴⁵ Lawler, “Life Together,” 10.

Since it will be through the acceptance and living of gospel values that marriages and families will be renewed, a pastoral plan to make this happen is required. The Church often calls for such pastoral care but leaves the specifics up to the local churches.⁴⁶

The CARA study on marriage shows that couples desire pastoral care. “Nearly a quarter (twenty-three percent) of married Catholics say they would be at least “somewhat” interested in participating in a Church sponsored session on spiritual life for married couples.”⁴⁷ Marriage enrichment programs will also help those in troubled marriages. Nearly a quarter (twenty-four percent) of separated or divorced Catholics report that having attended a Church sponsored session on spiritual life might have helped them avoid or deal better with marital troubles.⁴⁸

Familiaris consortio is quite clear on the need for pastoral care for married couples:

Therefore, it must be emphasized once more that the pastoral intervention of the Church in support of the family is a matter of urgency. Every effort should be made to strengthen and develop pastoral care for the family, which should be treated as a real matter of priority, in the certainty that future evangelization depends largely on the domestic Church.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ "The pastoral care of the Church for the support of marriage is shown by a variety of programs to help men and women to know God's plan for marriage and the Church's teaching." USCCB, *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, 285. A marriage enrichment blog can contribute to a pastoral plan.

⁴⁷ Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 88.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 104. Only effective communication (thirty percent) and balancing family and career (twenty-seven percent) rated higher than attending a Church sponsored event to help with marital difficulties. Secular marriage enrichment programs often deal with the topics of communication, finances, and balancing family and career.

⁴⁹ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 65.

Part of the urgency is to help support the fifty-three percent of all adult Catholics who are currently married from becoming part of the twenty-three percent of adult Catholics who are affected by divorce or separation.⁵⁰ While two-thirds of currently married Catholics were married in the Church, younger generations are less frequently choosing to marry in the Church. Eighty-four percent of pre-Vatican II generation Catholics were married in the Church compared to only fifty-eight percent of the Vatican II generation Catholics.⁵¹

As levels of overall Church commitment decline, so too do married couples beliefs related to marriage.⁵² “Catholics seem to believe in the value of the sacrament, and a majority of laypeople continue to participate in it. However, they also believe that compliance with Church rules regarding marriage and divorce has little or nothing to do with one’s status as a good Catholic.”⁵³

Seventy-one percent of Catholics agree that couples do not take marriage seriously enough when divorce is easily available.⁵⁴ The effects of not taking marriage seriously are easily identifiable. As Catholics, it is imperative to understand marriage as a calling from God with responsibilities to be lived out in daily life. *Familiaris consortio* recommends,

⁵⁰ Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 3.

⁵¹ Ibid., 3.

⁵² D’Antonio et al., *American Catholics Today*, 47.

⁵³ Ibid., 60.

⁵⁴ Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 8.

This profession of faith demands that it be prolonged in the life of the married couple and of the family. God, who called the couple to marriage, continues to call them *in marriage*. In and through the events, problems, difficulties and circumstances of everyday life, God comes to them, revealing and presenting the concrete "demands" of their sharing in the love of Christ for His Church in the particular family, social and ecclesial situation in which they find themselves.⁵⁵

How many couples see and experience God in and through their married life and daily activities? Eighty-four percent of Catholics believe that the sacrament of marriage extends beyond the wedding day but only sixty-seven percent see married love as bringing the husband and wife closer together and therefore closer to God. Slightly fewer Catholics view married love as revealing God (sixty-four percent) and married love as imperfect yet holy (sixty-three percent).⁵⁶ "The oldest generation is especially likely to say that each statement 'very' closely reflects their understanding of the Catholic sacrament of marriage."⁵⁷ Catholics attending Mass most frequently are significantly more likely to agree with statements about the sacramentality of marriage.⁵⁸ Clearly, a deeper reflection on the sacrament of marriage is necessary and will be fruitful.

The fact that sixty percent of Catholics believe that divorce is acceptable if the couple falls out of love shows that the concept of divorce as socially acceptable has permeated even Catholic attitudes about marriage.⁵⁹ This notion is underscored by the

⁵⁵ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 51 (italics mine).

⁵⁶ Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 51.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

fact that fifty-six percent of Catholics also believe that marriage is whatever two people want it to be and only thirty-four percent believe that it is important for spouses to share the same religious faith. These understandings of marriage are most prevalent among the younger generations indicating the need for the Church to educate its own. This is made difficult when only fifty-five percent of Catholics believe that their Catholic faith influenced their personal view of marriage (this reduces to eight percent among those who rarely attend Mass).⁶⁰

Yet even couples who believe in marriage as a sacrament need support in the early years of marriage. “Among those who were divorced, more than half were divorced within the first ten years of their marriage.”⁶¹ This highlights the need for couples to have marriage enrichment early in their marriage. While a mystagogy on the sacrament of marriage is ideal in these early years, couples married many years would also benefit from reflecting on their vows and how to live the sacrament of marriage in their daily lives. Couples married several years also have wisdom and experience to share with couples married less years. Many couples lack the support of older, experienced married couples to share their wisdom with them. An enrichment blog will provide couples married a variety of durations an opportunity to share their experience with each other.

Familiaris consortio rightly notes the urgent need for assistance to married couples:

⁶⁰ Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 67-68.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

At a moment of history in which the family is the object of numerous forces that seek to destroy it or in some way to deform it, and aware that the well-being of society and her own good are intimately tied to the good of the family, the Church perceives in a more urgent and compelling way her mission of proclaiming to all people the plan of God for marriage and the family, ensuring their full vitality and human and Christian development, and thus contributing to the renewal of society and of the People of God.⁶²

Catholics must engage in the work of evangelization and catechesis of married couples.⁶³ The gospel must permeate the life and daily living of families if it is to help form and become a source of support for married couples.

Catholic Marriage Formation

Outreach and evangelization for married couples ought to first understand the present conditions that modern families experience, in order for the gospel to be heard and assimilated. Recognizing where couples are in their faith journey, clergy and lay leaders will be able to better assist couples as they prepare them for marriage and help them reflect on the sacrament after the wedding day. Presented effectively, the gospel will have the force and power needed to change the reality that people are living and help them live the plan that God has for their lives.⁶⁴

The *National Directory for Catechesis* challenges dioceses and parishes "to develop new and creative ways to provide significant points of contact for young adults

⁶² John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 3.

⁶³ "It is therefore indispensable and urgent that every person of good will should endeavor to save and foster the values and requirements of the family." Ibid., no. 86.

⁶⁴ Ibid., no. 4.

with the Church."⁶⁵ This includes young married couples and will require new ways of thinking and teaching for all Catholics. It means finding new mediums for presenting the truth of the gospel to a new generation formed and influenced differently from previous generations.

Catholic marriage formation will challenge couples to look at their lives and marriages in different ways.⁶⁶ It will move couples beyond their mere feelings about their wedding day and their natural love for one another to begin to look at the transformational experience that a supernatural love caused on their wedding day. Couples can learn to move beyond the natural to the supernatural. The *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* states, "God calls for spousal love as the remedy for moving beyond the sex appeal of the body alone to its nuptial meaning, revealing the person as made in his image."⁶⁷ This movement to understanding the nuptial mystery of marriage requires both theological understanding and reflective thought.⁶⁸

Church programs will better meet the needs of married couples if they realize that the couples are influenced by a secularized society and that their views are impacted by their surroundings.⁶⁹ Understanding the sacrament of marriage takes on particular

⁶⁵ USCCB, *The National Directory for Catechesis*, 196.

⁶⁶ Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori/Triumph, 2001), 294. Martos calls for new efforts to help married couples. "Yet at the same time, these official and unofficial programs are only partially successful at best. It would seem that much remains to be done if the dilemma is to be averted."

⁶⁷ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006), 413.

⁶⁹ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 68.

significance in the Latin Church since it is the spouses, as ministers of Christ's grace, who mutually confer upon each other the sacrament of matrimony by expressing their consent before the Church.⁷⁰ The ministers of the sacrament should fully understand what they are saying and doing in order for the sacrament to be valid and to impact their lives in a significant manner.

Kathleen Hughes discusses the sacramental aspect of marriage in her book, *Saying Amen*. "More than any of the other sacraments, marriage is a process whose beginnings we mark with ritual care but whose full sacramentality is realized only over the life of the marriage."⁷¹ The sacrament of marriage is not a onetime event or a static reality. The sacrament of marriage is lived out over a lifetime. Throughout the life of the marriage, couples need support and guidance.

Elements of an Enrichment Program

The Church can assist couples by offering marital formation throughout the course of the marriage. As both Teacher and Mother, the Church can help couples realize the sacramentality of their lives together while also assisting them in the challenges they face by proclaiming the truth about married love.⁷² John Paul II expresses the need to apply the truth of the gospel to married life. *Familiaris consortio* states, "The Church is deeply convinced that only by the acceptance of the Gospel are the hopes that man

⁷⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, Inc.—Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), no. 1623.

⁷¹ Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 105.

⁷² John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 33.

legitimately places in marriage and in the family capable of being fulfilled."⁷³ The gospel has the ability to help married couples deal with difficulties as well as marital joys.

Marriage formation will help couples realize the holiness of their married life as well as draw them deeper into the community of believers. When couples take the time to reflect on their wedding promises and vows to one another and understand their lives as sacramental, they begin to allow God to enter their married lives. This kind of theological reflection can transform their ordinary lives into extraordinary moments of grace.

Authentic theological reflection does not consider religion apart from ordinary life. "On the contrary, authentic theological reflection draws us into our ordinary lives, with all their uniqueness, all their limits, all their richness. Only here, in the midst of our living, do we encounter the living God."⁷⁴ Together within the community of faith, married couples can "discover and experience the liberating and inspiring value of the authentic love that is offered by the Gospel and set before us by the Lord's commandment."⁷⁵

Theological reflection will aid in this liberating discovery, inspiring couples to a realization that they are part of a larger community of believers who encounter our Lord in their married lives. Chapter five will discuss theological reflection in greater depth.

⁷³ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 3.

⁷⁴ Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 79.

⁷⁵ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 34.

Conclusion

Sociological data on marriage shows that the institution of marriage is struggling and spouses are in need of marital support. Through pastoral initiatives, the Church can offer support and enrichment to married couples. Pastoral ministry can help couples reflect on their promises and vows to better realize and live out the many gifts that the sacrament of marriage offers them.

Through reflection on the *Rite of Marriage*, married couples will come to see their wedding day as the beginning of a journey of faith and that "the gift of Jesus Christ is not exhausted in the actual celebration of the sacrament of marriage, but rather accompanies the married couple throughout their lives."⁷⁶ The joy and thrill of the wedding day may have past, but the excitement of a Christian life with Christ is never exhausted in the life of the couple.

⁷⁶ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 56.

CHAPTER 2

THE *RITE OF MARRIAGE*: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY CONSIDERATIONS

The 1969 *Rite of Marriage* emerged from a long and varied historical development of the ritual and sacramentality of marriage.¹ The *Rite of Marriage* provides a ritual and theology of marriage that teaches the meaning of the sacrament. The rite gives direction, guidance and an opportunity for theological reflection not only for couples preparing for marriage, but also for those who are married and living out their vows. Often when couples prepare for marriage, they are distracted or overwhelmed not with preparation for marriage, but for the wedding day and reception. Much of the knowledge and wisdom contained in the preparation is lost amidst the tumult of activity.

This chapter provides an overview of the history of the ritual of marriage leading up to the significant revisions that contributed to the 1969 *Rite of Marriage*. Exploring the *Rite of Marriage's* introduction, questions to the couple, vows and nuptial blessing reveals a theological understanding of marriage suitable for mystagogical reflection.

¹ The 1969 *Rite of Marriage* was selected for this project instead of the 1990 Latin edition of the *Order for Celebrating Marriage*. The 1969 *Rite of Marriage* is the rite that couples in the United States will experience. The 1990 *Order for Celebrating Marriage* has not been officially introduced in the United States. Couples who will be participating in the marriage reflection blog will be familiar with the 1969 *Rite of Marriage*.

The Historical Evolution of Marriage Rituals

The ritual for marriage has had a variety of forms throughout the centuries. In *Doors to the Sacred*, Joseph Martos briefly sketches the development of the rite of marriage over the centuries. Martos writes that marriage was a well established practice in prehistoric and ancient cultures even though for centuries no standard wedding rite existed.² The Church in the west was slow to develop a formal marriage ritual. “In fact, before the eleventh century there was no such thing as a Christian wedding ceremony in the Latin Church, and throughout the Middle Ages there was no single church ritual for solemnizing marriages between Christians.”³

In Jewish communities, marriage was a matter for families. It was the fathers of the couple, the family authority figures, who governed much of the marriage ceremony. Marriage and procreation was a sacred family duty. It was not the wills or intention of the spouses that made the marriage; it was the intention of the fathers. Joseph Martos affirms, “In ancient Israel marriage was a family matter that was arranged by fathers for their children usually when they were adolescents.”⁴

In *The Marital Sacrament*, Theodore Mackin comprehensively examines the development of the sacrament of marriage. Mackin highlights the transition of the ritual

² Joseph Martos, “Marriage,” in *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori/Triumph, 2001), 352.

³ Ibid., 351.

⁴ Ibid., 354. Martos goes on to state, “The Jewish scriptures say little about marriage customs and nothing at all about wedding ceremonies since marriages were private arrangements and weddings were not public religious functions.” Martos seems to ignore the fact that Tobit and the Song of Songs contain marriage ceremony narratives that provide insights into Jewish customs.

for marriage from the family to the Church. At the time of Christ, marriage rituals were familial and involved family blessings. The family or paternal blessing on the new couple was a sign of parental approval and request for divine favor to empower the couple to live their married life well. Mackin proposes, “To bless someone therefore is to either acknowledge a link with divinity or to create it. It is a productive link, through it a person is enlivened, empowered for a favorable and enriching conduct.”⁵ The marital blessing is clearly seen in Tobit 7: 11-12.⁶ Through obedience to family, married couples found holiness and blessing.⁷

Marriage in Roman tradition and Hellenistic culture around the time of Christianity’s beginning was not ecclesial.⁸ Martos notes,

Little is known about Christian wedding and marriage customs in the decades that immediately followed the writing of the New Testament. Most Christians were adult converts from Judaism and other religions, and presumably many of them were married according to their own customs before they were baptized.⁹

⁵ Theodore Mackin, S.J., *The Marital Sacrament: Marriage in the Catholic Church* (New York, Paulist Press, 1989), 41.

⁶ Ladislav Örsy, S.J., “A Historical Survey: Changing Horizons and Developing Categories,” in *Marriage in Canon Law: Texts and Comments, Reflections and Questions* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1986), 15. Örsy points out that the Old Testament scriptures do not present a systematic teaching on marriage but fragments and descriptions that reveal a highly developed understanding of marriage.

⁷ “The holiness available in this marriage was found in the spouses’ obedience to God’s will, an obedience carried out comprehensively in helping to fulfill Israel’s vocation; but fulfilled particularly in sons’ and daughters’ obedience to their parents and in care for their families.” Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 85. Later on page 86, the author notes that “The father of the family was ruler of wife and children and domestic priest. Together they form a kind of church in miniature.”

⁸ Ibid., 86.

⁹ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 358.

First century liturgical books have no mention of a wedding ceremony indicating it was likely still regarded as a personal family affair.¹⁰ Marriage was not a regular part of liturgical activity in the early Church. Martos comments that, “in early Rome, for example, marriage was a religious affair, but the religion was that of the family.”¹¹ Marriage had minimal requirements and whether secular or religious, for centuries the family led the marriage ritual.

Ecclesial Involvement

Marriage’s movement from the family setting to a church event was gradual but consistent over centuries. It was over one thousand years before the Western Church established a universal law regarding marriage. Before this time, regional structures and laws were established and marriages were generally civil or familial affairs. Mackin writes, “This drawing into the Church was done in two ways: through pastoral care eventually growing into juridical governance, and through inclusion in the Church’s liturgical celebration.”¹²

Mackin highlights a typical marriage ceremony before the Council of Nicea:

What the Christians did keep without demur was the exchange of the *consensus nuptialis*, but often with an added invocation to God the Father or to Christ. So too were kept the *dexterarum coniunctio*, the bride’s and groom’s joining of their

¹⁰ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 358.

¹¹ Ibid., 352. See also Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 86. Mackin highlights the simplicity of the Roman ritual for marriage and its lack of Church involvement. “The procedure in marrying was virtually empty of the traditional ceremony and therefore religious meaning. In the *matrimonium liberum* there was almost a formless transaction. As long as the three causes for the marriage were met, the citizen’s right to marry, the desire and will to marry and the reciprocal consent of the parties, then a marriage took place.”

¹² Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 123.

right hands, the kiss, the veiling of the bride with the *flammeum* (without objection despite pagan matrons' wearing this red veil at sacrifices), and the signing of the *tabulae nuptiales*. Later, as bishop or his presbyter was invited to the wedding, he too might sign the *tabulae*.¹³

Church involvement began with the traditional blessing of the couple by their parents (as seen in Tobit 7: 11-12). When a bishop or priest was invited to a wedding, it was a courtesy to invite him to assist with or give the blessing.¹⁴ Martos notes that the blessing was not an essential part of marriage ceremony and was given during the wedding feast, as a blessing of the wedding chamber or as a blessing during a mass after the wedding.¹⁵ There is no textual evidence before the fourth century of clerics having a liturgical part in family wedding ceremonies.¹⁶

Joseph Martos notes that weddings generally began with a feast in the home of the bride with family and friends. The groom was brought to the bride's home and the father

¹³ Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 125.

¹⁴ Ibid., 126. Mackin states, "The earliest textual evidence for this practice dates from the fourth century. And even then the sacerdotal blessing was not construed as an act of authority. The authority in charge was still familial; the parents officiated at the ceremony." Mackin's statement may be true in general but an exhortation from Ignatius of Antioch provides additional perspective into the marriage customs of the time period. "But it becomes both men and women who marry, to form their union with the approval of the bishop, that their marriage may be according to God, and not after their own lust. Let all things be done to the honor of God." See Early Christian Writings website, "Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp," <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ignatius-polycarp-longer.html> (accessed June 18, 2011).

¹⁵ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 368. See also Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 150. Mackin notes that by the fourth century, families were inviting clergy to attend their weddings, yet "there is no evidence from earlier than the eighth century that a priest's blessing was included in the betrothal ceremony." Documents from this era do not contain blessing formulas, so clergy most likely made up their own blessings. See also Kenneth W. Stevenson, *To Join Together: The Rite of Marriage* (Collegeville, MN, The Liturgical Press, 1987), 20. Stevenson notes that the "The fourth century is generally regarded as the formative era of Christian liturgy, when Christians moved from informality to formality."

¹⁶ Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 150. Martos states that since parents arranged marriages and managed weddings, "clerical intervention would have been deemed an invasion."

of the bride “gave her away.” Crowns were placed on their heads and the whole group processed to the couple’s new home.¹⁷

“The entry of the clergy into the solemnization of marriages, or, reciprocally, the drawing of this solemnization into the Church’s liturgy and under its authority” took place slowly over centuries.¹⁸ The Church’s authority grew, in part, through the use of decretals on marriage. Decretals and statutes were published by individual bishops and by bishops in council for doctrinal teaching, pastoral exhortation and management.¹⁹ These decrees began to regulate marriage. The Church issued local or regional commands to drive out from family-controlled marriage inherited pagan elements.²⁰

In the West, a separate Christian ceremony slowly began to take shape. Roman wedding customs of the fourth century included a crowning, joining of the right hands and the written agreement to marry:

Catholic authorities accepted the traditional regional ceremonies as valid for creating marriages without religious addition or modification. Families and bridal couples were no more than encouraged to invite a bishop or priest to the ceremony and to ask his prayer and blessing. This held for the first ten centuries in the Christian West.²¹

¹⁷ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 362.

¹⁸ Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 139. On page 150, Mackin states, “The simple truth is that Christian marriage eventually became ecclesial mainly because the families first invited the churchmen to participate in their weddings, and eventually the churchmen took over.” Later on page 153, Mackin states that in the early Church there is little evidence of a nuptial Mass as the setting for Christian weddings.

¹⁹ Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 139.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

Mackin states that the wedding customs of Rome slowly replaced those of the European peoples, as their rulers appropriated the sacramentaries produced and authorized by Rome.²² As Roman authorized sacramentaries spread throughout Europe, the wedding ceremony became more uniform.

The Leonine sacramentary was the first to include a nuptial Mass. Its name is derived from Pope Leo I (AD 440-461). The nuptial Mass included a collect, a secret prayer, a post-Communion prayer and a nuptial blessing after the Our Father that coincided with the veiling of the spouses:

The blessing here is in reality two prayers, first a short one that later made its way into the Roman Missal that remained in use until 1969; the second a much longer prayer that recapitulated awkwardly the theology of marriage reigning at the time. As a prayer it was aimed exclusively at the bride in consideration of her moral frailty.²³

The Leonine sacramentary advanced a developing theology for marriage by highlighting the work of Christ in uniting the couple and preserving their union.²⁴

In the second half of the seventh century the Gelasian sacramentary also contained a nuptial Mass. Named for Pope Gelasius (AD 492-496), the Gelasian sacramentary borrowed liberally from the Leonine sacramentary. It differed from the Leonine sacramentary in that it added “a blessing after the Communion, a blessing

²² Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 162.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 174.

invoked not on the bride alone but on both spouses.”²⁵ This innovation underscored the equality between the man and the woman, who was often portrayed as the inferior.

The Gregorian sacramentary, named after Pope Gregory I (AD 590-604), but whose surviving content came from about AD 735, was originally intended for the Frankish empire but became universal in the Latin Church. “Its nuptial Mass, under the rubric *Oratio ad sponsas velandas* (‘A prayer for the veiling of the spouses’), survived, except for its preface and part of the canon (the *hanc igitur*), in the Roman Missal until 1969.”²⁶ The Gregorian sacramentary made more extensive use of the New Testament and referenced the Ephesians’ metaphor of Christ as the bridegroom of the Church.²⁷

Mackin summarizes the effect of the sacramentaries,

What emerges from this nearly exclusive installation of the Gregorian Roman liturgy in the churches of Europe by the end of the ninth century at the latest is that marriage was being drawn irreversibly into the religious experience of the Church as a whole, and that the clergy were being accorded and were taking an increasingly important place in the concluding of marriages.²⁸

Marriages in Rome during the ninth century generally had no clergy present. If the couple had a nuptial Mass it was held after the wedding and contained a special ceremony in which the couple was covered in a veil and given a nuptial blessing.²⁹ The wedding Mass

²⁵ Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 162.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 279.

²⁸ Ibid., 280.

²⁹ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 371.

was not to become a regular fixture of the ceremony until the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Martos notes that early Christian writings were usually regarding pastoral matters and authors generally accepted the government's right to regulate marriage and divorce.³⁰ By the ninth century both church and civil governments held stricter standards for marriage.³¹

As the papacy and Rome's authority grew, so too did its authority over marriage. With barbarian invasions decreasing and communication throughout Europe being reestablished, bishops were held more accountable for their actions and could be called to Rome if needed.³² Where bishops held ecclesial authority as well as civil authority, their decrees were all the more influential.

Martos highlights the role of the Church in marriage at the turn of the millennium. "Eventually the secular courts came to be bypassed altogether, and by the year 1000 all marriages in Europe effectively came under the jurisdictional power of the church."³³ False decretals in the names of popes Evaristus and Calixtus were evoked in order to

³⁰ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 359.

³¹ "Late in the eighth century the regional council of Verneuil decreed that both nobles and commoners should have public weddings, and a similar council in Bavaria instructed priests to make sure that people who wanted to marry were legally free to do so." Ibid., 370.

³² Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 252.

³³ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 372.

ensure that marriages took place legally, in front of witnesses and with a clerical blessing.³⁴

Mackin shows that as the first millennium drew to a close “the elective and invitational status of this [clerical] blessing began to migrate toward the obligatory.”³⁵ At this time the Church was working to end clandestine marriages that were taking place. To stop these from happening regional councils would issue decrees “to answer questions, resolve doubts and decide disputed marriage cases.”³⁶ Recurring abuses called for intervention from the Church.

Mackin observes that by the thirteenth century, the typical wedding ceremony contained much of the same ritual as today:

By the middle of the thirteenth century, then, the solemnization of a marriage most commonly included the following elements: the spouses presented themselves at the portal of the church; the priest questioned them about possible impediments and about their intention to marry; the families exchanged dowry and wedding gifts; the bride and the groom expressed their marital consent; together and led by the priest they entered the church for the blessing and for the wedding Mass, unless this were planned for a later date.³⁷

The Council of Trent (1545–1563) did not see the need to impose uniformity in marriage rituals.³⁸ The Tridentine decree on marriage, *Tametsi*, encouraged local

³⁴ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 372.

³⁵ Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 277.

³⁶ Ibid., 251. Later on page 252, Mackin states that “The obvious measure for blocking clandestine marriages was to mandate authoritative witnesses of the contracting of marriage as a condition of the latter’s legitimacy.”

³⁷ Ibid., 342.

³⁸ Stevenson, *To Join Together*, 100.

marriage customs that did not contradict the faith to be observed.³⁹ Since the couple shares the vows with one another, they often had to do so in the vernacular, making marriage different from other sacraments celebrated in Latin. Following the Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, other Christian churches developed their own wedding ceremonies, and for over two centuries almost all marriages in Europe were church marriages.⁴⁰

The 1614 *Rituale Romanum*, in use until 1969, respected the Tridentine decree *Tamesti*. *Rituale* was a simple rite that had: marriage banns; three witnesses; consent; a priestly blessing formula; the blessing of the ring and a short prayer for the couple. This rite was intended to be minimalist and more elaborate customs were retained in local service books.⁴¹ It was encouraged that the nuptial Mass follow with a solemn blessing after the Pater Noster and another short blessing before the closing benediction.⁴² All of these previous rites and rituals contributed to the development of the 1969 *Rite of Marriage*.

³⁹ Ignatius Gramunt, Javier Hervada and LeRoy A. Wauck, *Canons and Commentaries on Marriage* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 65. The authors write that the present Code of Canon Law, no. 1119 retains this provision. “Outside of a case of necessity, the rites prescribed in the liturgical books approved by the Church or received through legitimate customs are to be observed in the celebration of marriage.”

⁴⁰ “But in the late eighteenth century this picture began to change. In France, the revolution of 1789 brought an end to the ecclesiastical control of marriage, and the Napoleonic code of 1792 made civil weddings mandatory for all French citizens.” Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 383. Other European countries began to follow France’s lead.

⁴¹ Stevenson, *To Join Together*, 102.

⁴² Herbert Thurston, “Ritual of Marriage,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume 9 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910) <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09703b.htm> (accessed June 14, 2010).

The 1969 *Rite of Marriage*

The *Rite for Marriage* was significantly revised in 1969 to reflect the theology and teaching of Vatican II on marriage and family life. The opening decree states that it has been revised “in order that this rite might be enriched, more clearly signify the grace of the sacrament, and impart knowledge of the obligation of the married couple.”⁴³ The enriched rite more clearly reveals the grace and theology of marriage than previous rites of marriage.

After the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* was promulgated in 1963, several study groups were created to draw up new rites. In drafting the *Rite for Marriage*, “the result is a considerable advance on the ‘irreducible minimum’ model of 1614, for the new Ordo has now no fewer than six ingredients: reception of the couple, liturgy of the word, preliminary questions, consent, blessing and giving of the rings, and the nuptial blessing.”⁴⁴

In *To Join Together: The Rite of Marriage*, Kenneth Stevenson affirms that Vatican II recognized that the *Rituale Romanum* required improvements and the need for a new marriage rite to be developed:

⁴³ ICEL, *Rites of the Catholic Church*, 719.

⁴⁴ Stevenson, *To Join Together*, 132. See also Gramunt et al., *Canons and Commentaries on Marriage*, 65. The authors say that “In the United States, the Rite for Celebration of Marriage (Sacred Congregation of Rites, March 19, 1969), as adopted by the United States Episcopal Conference, ought to be observed for licitness. For validity, the minimum required is that consent be manifested according to the established canonical form (cf. C 1108 and commentary).”

Chapter 77 of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* stated that the marriage rite was to be ‘revised and enriched in a way that more clearly expresses the grace of the sacrament and the duties of the spouses.’ There could be no clearer hint that the 1614 service was found to be poor in comparison.⁴⁵

Stevenson points out that “the *Ordo Celebrandi Matrimonium* of 1969 is among the shortest and simplest of all the reformed rites of the Roman Catholic Church.”⁴⁶

While short, the *Rite of Marriage* presents choices of rites for couples to select. “Never before in the Western tradition have couples been presented with this kind of choice in an official manner.”⁴⁷ The rite retains the principles of both Trent and Vatican II in allowing local customs to be maintained in the preparation of local rituals while asserting that the consent of the partners and the nuptial blessing must always form part of the rite.⁴⁸

The 1969 marriage rite allows greater flexibility and adaptability to personal preference than previous rites. It has a variety of scriptural passages to be used in the nuptial mass and a number of different formulas to express consent.⁴⁹ Local customs and

⁴⁵ Stevenson, *To Join Together*, 136.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, ix. On page 79, Stevenson highlights how Western marriage ceremonies are different from Eastern rites of marriage. In the East, symbolism was more lavish and stressed marriage less as a legal reality and more as an experience of redemption. The West views the couple as the ministers of marriage, whereas the East saw marriage as an ecclesial action presided over by the presbyter. The Western rite climaxes with the consent whereas the East stresses the crowning of the couple.

⁴⁷ Stevenson, *To Join Together*, 137.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴⁹ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 389. Martos notes that the 1969 *Rite of Marriage* had to tackle some long standing issues. It had to address the long standing scholastic marriage rites that saw marriage as contractual, the question of marriages of Catholics and non-Catholics along with social and cultural concerns of various Catholic countries. The flexibility of the rite helped address some of these issues.

practices, when appropriate, may also be incorporated into the ceremony.⁵⁰ The 1969 *Rite of Marriage* was a significantly enhanced rite over its predecessors that allow couples to better understand the sacramentality of marriage and their married lives.⁵¹

The *Rite of Marriage* as Formation

In the article, “The Newly Revised Roman Rite for Celebrating Marriage,” German Martinez proposes that an understanding of the major themes from the marriage rite (particularly the introduction to the rite) can “make the process of celebrating marriage a formative event at its best.”⁵² Martinez notes the unfortunate lack of effect that the newly revised rite can have on a couple who lacks understanding of what they are saying and creating:

Despite the enormous progress made from the doctrinal and canonical points of view, exemplified in the first reformed rites of marriage (issued in Rome in 1969), the Church has experienced difficulty in making this renewal appreciated, and in confronting the current crisis of marriage.⁵³

⁵⁰ Stevenson, *To Join Together*, 117-123.

⁵¹ Paul Covino, “The Rite of Marriage as a Theological Foundation for Marriage Ministry Today,” National Symposium on Marriage Ministry, Boston College C 21 Center (September 26, 2007), <http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/top/church21/pdf/Covino.pdf> (accessed June 26, 2011). Covino states, “The Latin *editio typica* of the *Order for Celebrating Marriage* was published in 1990, and a couple of committees have contributed time and energy toward the bishops’ efforts to produce a U.S. edition of the *Order for Celebrating Marriage*, but seventeen years after the revised *editio typica*, we are still using the *Rite of Marriage* from 1969.” Covino notes that there are several similarities and differences from the two rites. The author believes the revised version offers a more comprehensive understanding of the sacrament of marriage and that the longer introduction of the 1990 version explains key concepts more fully. He notes several enriched aspects including: marriage as part of the order of creation, the sacramental nature of marriage rooted in baptism and the sacrament unfolding over time.

⁵² German Martinez, “The Newly Revised Roman Rite for Celebrating Marriage,” *Worship* 69 (March 1995): 127. Martinez calls for an adequate preparation in order that the formative aspects of the liturgy may come to fruition.

⁵³ Martinez, “The Newly Revised Roman Rite,” 127.

Martinez believes, as this thesis suggests, “the catechetical and formative value of the rite depends on the entire process of preparation, celebration and ongoing support for marriage.”⁵⁴ Catechesis on the sacrament of marriage cannot end with the celebration of the wedding. A catechesis of marriage risks losing its formative potential if it fails to provide ongoing support for married couples. The United States Bishops affirm that,

On their wedding day, the couple says a definitive ‘yes’ to their vocation of marriage. Then the real work of marriage begins. For the remainder of their lives, the couple is challenged to grow, through grace, into what they already are: that is, an image of Christ's love for his Church.⁵⁵

On-going reflection and support is part of the real work of marriage that helps a couple recognize the potential for grace and support they have in the sacrament of marriage.

It is the Church’s responsibility to work to prepare couples for the sacrament and to assist married couples in living out the sacrament effectively and fruitfully. In November 2009, the United States bishops’ confronted the challenges facing marriage by issuing *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*. In this pastoral letter the bishops make a commitment to the “urgent priority for the Church” of marriage ministry.⁵⁶ Marriage ministry proclaims the truth about marriage, accompanies and assists couples at all stages in their married lives, “encourages and utilizes many methods and approaches in order to serve individuals and couples whose circumstances in life, whose needs, and

⁵⁴ Martinez, “The Newly Revised Roman Rite,” 129.

⁵⁵ USCCB, *Marriage: Life and Love*, 45.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 58.

whose preparation and readiness to receive the Church's ministry vary widely."⁵⁷ The bishops encourage pastoral outreach to support marriage throughout its various stages.

In *Familiaris consortio*, John Paul II highlights the formative value of the *Rite of Marriage*:

The celebration of the sacrament of marriage is the basic moment of the faith of the couple. This sacrament, in essence, is the proclamation in the Church of the Good News concerning married love. It is the word of God that "reveals" and "fulfills" the wise and loving plan of God for the married couple, giving them a mysterious and real share in the very love with which God Himself loves humanity.⁵⁸

Through the sacramental celebration of the *Rite of Marriage*, the couple shares in the very life of God. The sacrament is a participation in God's love where the couple learns the plan of God for their married lives. Not knowing what the future holds, the rite assures the couple that God will be with them throughout their married lives. Through the *Rite of Marriage*, the couple professes faith in God to guide their lives and lead them closer to one another.

A marriage officially begins with the exchange of and consent to the vows on a couple's wedding day. These vows are not meant to be only nice words that are nervously spoken in a church and forever forgotten. The Catholic Church devotes time and energy to the careful wording of the rite in order that it conveys the understanding that a new

⁵⁷ USCCB, *Marriage: Life and Love*, 58-59.

⁵⁸ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 51.

reality is being created in marriage,⁵⁹ a reality that images God to each spouse and to the world; a reality that reflects the goodness of God and his covenanted love; a reality that is forever binding and sacred.⁶⁰

Marriage requires a maturity⁶¹ and selflessness⁶² on the part of spouses. The *National Directory for Catechesis* says that "most adults are capable of a free and informed response to faith to God's initiative of love."⁶³ The fact that adults are capable does not necessarily mean they have made this free and informed response of faith. Reflection offers adults the opportunity to renew, or deepen, or to perhaps fully embrace for the first time their wedding vows.⁶⁴

In "Marriage Rites as Documents of Faith," Mark Searle points out the formative importance of the rite for two baptized people beginning a new life together in the

⁵⁹ Christy Burke, "Marriage and the Family: Some Pastoral Problems," *African Ecclesial Review* 22 (October 1980): 273. Burke's article addresses several areas of concern for the family particularly within the African context. Yet in the second paragraph in the 'Theological Note' the author makes a profound statement about the power of the marriage rite. Burke states, "The teaching from traditional theology that each sacrament is a sign pointing to a reality through and beyond itself when we consider the marriage rite itself, for this is an action accompanied by words, but pointing to and bringing about a grace-filled effect in the lives of the people involved in this action."

⁶⁰ "Liturgy has the role of illuminating the meaning of human existence, not of providing a means of escape from it." Brian Hearne, "Marriage, or Human Love as Sacrament," *African Ecclesial Review* 15 (Jan 1973): 12.

⁶¹ Pontifical Council for the Family, *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage* (May 13, 1996), no. 32, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_13051996_preparation-for-marriage_en.html (accessed June 1, 2010).

⁶² Ibid., no. 36.

⁶³ USCCB, *The National Directory for Catechesis*, 187.

⁶⁴ USCCB, *The National Directory for Catechesis*, 189. Understanding the marriage vows better could assist couples in fulfilling the three major goals of catechesis: conversion to the Lord, membership in the Christian community and to be a Christian disciple in the world.

sacrament of marriage. The couple needs to understand the rite and its implications because it will “be the form in which their Christian vocation and their engagement in the mystery of salvation is lived out.”⁶⁵ A married couple learns to engage the world anew as a two-in-one-flesh union. Learning to engage the world as a married couple is not a spontaneous or easy process. Searle notes that the marital understanding of the couple is “significant not only for the couple themselves, but for the wider community to which they belong.”⁶⁶ All who participate in the marriage liturgy should gain a deeper appreciation and understanding for what is taking place. The rite has the power to instruct all who are present at the wedding.

In *Saying Amen*, Kathleen Hughes argues that it is the vows that the couple shares with one another that allow for an on-going enrichment in marriage. She notes that, “rites—the movements and gestures, the symbols and the words—are invariably the point of departure for further reflection.”⁶⁷ Through the *Rite of Marriage*, the wedding liturgy informs and empowers the couple with the type of supernatural love they are to live in marriage. The movement from liturgy to life is essential if the liturgy is to have relevance and be an ongoing source of grace for the couple.

The *Rite of Marriage* is a source of guidance and formation for a life long journey filled with joy and sorrow, triumph and failure, love and disappointment. If understood,

⁶⁵ Mark Searle, “Marriage Rites as Documents of Faith: Note for a Theology of Marriage,” *Vision: The Scholarly Contributions of Mark Searle to Liturgical Renewal*, eds. Anne Koester and Barbara Searle (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004): 235.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 10.

the rite can instruct the engaged couple about what they are entering into while also forming married couples who take time for reflection.

Introduction to the *Rite of Marriage*

The Introduction of the *Rite of Marriage* presents a short theology of marriage as an indissoluble covenant that shares in the love between Christ and his Church and is the foundation for procreating and educating children. The rite's brief theology on the sacrament of marriage provides an excellent resource for couples to reflect upon marriage and its meaning.

The first article of the *Rite of Marriage* states several goals of marriage:

In virtue of the sacrament of marriage, married Christians signify and share in the mystery of the unity and fruitful love that exists between Christ and his Church; they thus help each other to attain holiness in their married life and in welcoming and rearing children; and they have their own special place and gift among the people of God.⁶⁸

The opening article highlights that the couple shares in the mystery of Christ and the Church. The ecclesial orientation of the married couple provides them a special and unique place in the Church. The article goes on to show that the couple also has an internal orientation to help their spouse welcome children and attain holiness. The family becomes a unique expression of the church in the world. In married life the couple creates an environment of love and holiness that witnesses the life-giving love of God to those in society.

⁶⁸ ICEL, *The Rites*, no. 1, 720.

While a theology of marriage is presented in the rite, it is not the role of the rite to clearly define how the couple is to live the rite's theology in daily life. The first article of the rite mentions, without further explanation, that the couple has a special gift among the people of God.

The next article of the *Rite of Marriage* stresses the permanency of marriage. Permanency is a recurring theme throughout the rite. The first time the lasting nature of marriage arises in the rite is not in a juridical context of ownership of one another's body, but in the context of covenant love. The second article of the rite states,

A marriage is established by the marriage covenant, the irrevocable consent that the spouses freely give to and receive from each other. This unique union of a man and a woman and the good of the children impose total fidelity on each of them and the unbreakable unity of their bond. To make the indissoluble marriage covenant a clearer sign of this full meaning and a surer help in its fulfillment, Christ the Lord raised it to the dignity of a sacrament, modeled on his own nuptial bond with the Church.⁶⁹

The covenant theme is carried throughout the rite and creates the context in which the exchange of vows and marriage blessing take place.

The next article explains that it is the covenant that is created in marriage that enables a couple to have "their own special place and gift among the People of God."⁷⁰ The gift is the covenant relationship they enter into with each other, the Church and God. The couple, already members of the Church through baptism, now lives in the Church as a witness to Christ in a new way. The *Rite of Marriage* states, "He (Christ) has already

⁶⁹ ICEL, *The Rites*, no. 2, 720.

⁷⁰ Ibid., no. 1, 720.

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.”⁷¹ It is “in virtue of the sacrament of marriage, married Christians signify and share in the mystery of the unity and fruitful love that exists between Christ and his Church.”⁷² Thus it is through the sacrament of marriage that a couple is transformed by grace into a new reality whereby they not only represent but also participate in the mystery of the love between Christ and his Church, a love that led Christ to lay down his life for his bride, the Church. Christ’s love is a total and complete self-donation for his beloved. In marriage a couple now shares self-donating love with each other and reflects it to the world while sharing in Christ’s love for his Church. All this takes place when a couple freely chooses to enter into the marital covenant.

The third article of the *Rite of Marriage* stresses that marital love must be nourished and developed in the couple’s marriage “by undivided affection, which wells up from the fountain of divine love: in a merging of the human and the divine.”⁷³ The couple’s human life is transformed through the act of uniting themselves to Christ. They are forever changed and empowered to “remain faithful in body and in mind, in good times as in bad.”⁷⁴ This merging of the human and divine is what transforms a couple’s life and activity into something that has the ability to confer grace and be a means of

⁷¹ ICEL, *The Rites*, no. 23, 726. Parenthesis mine.

⁷² Ibid., no. 1, 720.

⁷³ Ibid., no. 3, 720.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

holiness. Christ gives them the power to live the sacrament and transforms the two individuals into a new united reality. “Thus they are no longer two but one flesh, let no man separate what God has joined.”⁷⁵

Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage by the Pontifical Council on the Family, encourages couples to come to understand the valuable and life-altering theological principles found in the *Rite of Marriage*. “The immediate preparation for the sacrament of marriage must find suitable occasions to introduce the engaged couple to the rite of marriage.”⁷⁶ This is why the fifth article of the rite calls priests to explain the rite when preparing a couple for marriage so that “the bridegroom and the bride will receive far greater benefit from the celebration of the sacrament.”⁷⁷ Marital instruction is to include “the teachings on marriage and family, on the sacrament itself and its rites, prayers, and readings.”⁷⁸ While great emphasis has been placed on marriage preparation in recent years, the preparation content does not always introduce couples to the *Rite of Marriage*. Marriage preparation programs often focus on preparing couples to

⁷⁵ Matthew 19: 6. The New American Bible, St. Joseph Edition (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1970). Although the New American Bible Revised Edition was released in 2011, the couples participating in the marriage enrichment blog would not have heard this version proclaimed at their wedding ceremony. Also, at the beginning, development and completion of the experiential portion of this project, the new edition had not been released.

⁷⁶ Pontifical Council for the Family, *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*, 26.

⁷⁷ ICEL, *The Rites*, no. 5, 721.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

communicate, resolve conflicts and handle finances to the neglect of the rite.⁷⁹ As couples understand the rite and its theology they will better understand what it is that they are doing when they exchange vows.

The Introduction of the *Rite of Marriage* is prepared by the Church to provide a brief overview of the sacrament and its theology. The theology from the rite ought to be made available for all couples in both marriage preparation and marriage enrichment. In understanding the theology of marriage, married couples would be empowered to live the sacrament of marriage more fruitfully.

The Questions and Marriage Vows

The apex of the marriage ceremony is the answering of the questions and the consent to the vows of marriage. These parts of the *Rite of Marriage* provide rich content for mystagogical reflection. Frequently couples remember what they were thinking and feeling as they looked into each other's eyes and promised their lives to one another.⁸⁰ If pondered, the questions and vows of the marriage rite make known to couples the type of love they are committing to each other.

While the emotional impact of the moment can serve to help couples remember their vows for later reflection, it can also serve as a distraction. Today people often get

⁷⁹ Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 109. The author adds, "We certainly oftentimes fail to bring them back or to welcome them into the church or see this as a wonderful opportunity to try to rekindle baptismal faith."

⁸⁰ Stevenson, *To Join Together*, 221. Stevenson highlights the emotional force of the couple holding hands before the priest at the altar. "When this part of the liturgy is performed well, it carries an overwhelming impact." Stevenson believes the strong feelings and emotions often felt while saying the vows helps couples remember the moment of consent.

caught up in the sentimental aspects of the ceremony and miss the value of the *Rite of Marriage*. In *To Join Together*, Stevenson laments that “There is widespread ignorance about the meaning of the marriage liturgy among most Christians today.”⁸¹

In *Worship: Wedding to Marriage*, German Martinez highlights the value of the questions that lead up to the consent:

The preliminary questions do not repeat what was asked during the pre-nuptial investigation; rather, they are a public and liturgical proclamation of the conditions that make up a true Christian marriage: freedom of choice, lifelong faithfulness, and acceptance of children.⁸²

Through the questions the couple freely and publicly declares their intention to form a Christian marriage. The CARA survey, *Marriage in the Catholic Church* exposed the fact that only fifty-five percent of Catholics believe that their views on marriage have been at least somewhat informed by Church teaching.⁸³ The survey also discovered that seventy-one percent of Catholics believe that marriage between two baptized persons is a sacrament, but only fifty-four percent view marriage as a calling from God or as a vocation.⁸⁴ Additional reflection on the meaning of the sacrament of marriage’s questions and vows from the *Rite of Marriage* will help couples see God’s role in their married lives.

⁸¹ Stevenson, *To Join Together*, 214.

⁸² German Martinez, *Worship: Wedding to Marriage* (Washington, DC: The Pastoral Press, 1993), 140.

⁸³ Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 5.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

The initial question asked of the couple is, "Have you come here freely and without reservation to give yourselves to each other in marriage?"⁸⁵ The couple made a free choice to give themselves to each other without holding anything back from one another. This total gift of self can only be made in freedom.⁸⁶ The couple enters their marital covenant by a free choice. In responding to this double question, the couple answers in freedom that they wish to make of themselves a gift. They freely and fully (without reservation) give themselves to their spouse. Kathleen Hughes highlights the necessity of freedom when she notes that God's call for our lives (marriage) is always a free gift and so the "human response must also be freely given."⁸⁷ Freedom is so vital that a coerced response would invalidate the union.

It is through marital love and the free gift of self to the other that couples come to discover who they are as human persons. It is in freely giving oneself away in marriage that a person finds out who they are meant to be. Human persons are made to love and form a communion of persons through the gift of themselves. The *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* confirms that "Marital love witnesses the total self-giving of man and woman. The miracle is that in the act of self-giving, each spouse gains a greater sense of self while enriching the other spouse."⁸⁸

⁸⁵ ICEL, *The Rites*, no. 24, 726.

⁸⁶ Mary Healy, *Men and Women are from Eden* (Cincinnati, OH: Servant Books, 2005), 31.

⁸⁷ Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 102.

⁸⁸ USCCB, *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, 412.

In *Saying Amen*, Kathleen Hughes states that when people fall in love and marry, they discover that they will be “most fully human and holy by following Jesus in totally self-giving love to another in marriage.”⁸⁹ The author notes that as couples learn to freely and willingly die to themselves, they become a gift to the other.⁹⁰

Hughes notes that the free gift of self is only the beginning of the sacrament. The “wedding ceremony is simply marking the beginning of the sacrament, the beginning of the journey, the beginning of what will happen in a life of vowed relationship, public promise and public witness.”⁹¹ What will happen after the wedding day is unknown. What is known is that God will be present in the marriage. Hughes discusses how worship is a mysterious unification of the work of God and the work of the participant.⁹² Marriage is a mysterious work of God that unites the couple’s effort with God’s work so that the spouses become a gift to the other. The first question the couple answers verifies their freedom to give themselves away to the other and allows the spouses to make themselves a gift that unites God and the spouses in a lifelong covenant of love.

⁸⁹ Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 104.

⁹⁰ “Every loving is a dying, a dying to my own time, comfort, convenience, wants, needs, concerns, interests. Every loving is a dying to self-interest and self-aggrandizement in an act of generosity and self-giving.” Ibid., 105.

⁹¹ Ibid., 115.

⁹² “What we are doing when we gather for worship is fundamentally and tenaciously mysterious: We are participating in the work of God. Liturgy is simultaneously God’s work and our work joined.” Ibid., 2.

The second question asks the couple, "Will you love and honor each other as man and wife for the rest of your lives?"⁹³ The permanency of the marriage bond is revealed not as something to be endured but something that will last in the context of love and honor. This mutual gift of self is offered out of love for the other and in so doing honors the other. It is not healthy to give oneself away as a gift unless the gift will be received and cherished. The second question vocalizes the couples' desire for permanence to create a stable environment in which they will give themselves to one another.

Many couples are aware of the teaching that marriage is forever. Catholic theology holds that marriage is an indissoluble bond and a sacrament:

On this point the Church cannot yield to cultural pressures, no matter how widespread and even militant they may be. Instead, it is necessary to ensure that through an ever more complete gospel formation Christian families show convincingly that it is possible to live marriage fully in keeping with God's plan and with the true good of the human person—of the spouses, and the children who are more fragile.⁹⁴

Many married couples are influenced by cultural trends viewing marriage as temporary, lasting only as long as it leads to personal happiness. Many couples may interpret the "true good of the human person" as merely one's own personal fulfillment.⁹⁵ Deeper reflection on their promises and vows, which are clarified in the Church's teachings,

⁹³ ICEL, *The Rites*, no. 24, 726.

⁹⁴ John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (January 6, 2001), no. 47, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte_en.html (accessed May 4, 2010).

⁹⁵ Bransfield, *The Human Person*, 20-43. Fr. Bransfield's text shows how the industrial, sexual and technological revolutions of the past century have led couples to desire to acquire pleasure quickly rather than make a gift of themselves over a lifetime. Seeking individual happiness to the exclusion of one's spouse makes giving oneself as a gift to another within a lifelong marriage difficult.

make it abundantly clear that couples are to unite their lives forever, until death separates them. Modern couples often do not see loving and permanent marriages and have little experience of faithful lifelong commitments.

In the Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris consortio*, John Paul II affirms the gift of permanence in marriage. "The gift of the sacrament is at the same time a vocation and commandment for the Christian spouses, that they may remain faithful to each other forever, beyond every trial and difficulty, in generous obedience to the holy will of the Lord."⁹⁶ The Gospel makes clear that "what God has joined together, no human being must separate."⁹⁷ These theological and scriptural concepts are meant to be translated into lived reality by married couples. Hearing the Church's teachings on marriage is not enough; couples must wrestle with them, especially if they have not seen them lived out.

The final question asks, "Will you accept children lovingly from God, and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?"⁹⁸ The total gift of self freely given has ramifications for the couple. Through a total gift of self the couple is now open to life-giving consequences for their own lives and the lives of their potential children. The love of the couple is like the love of God himself, it bears fruit.

In order for the couple to fulfill the promises of rearing children in the law of Christ and his Church, they must first come to know the Church's teaching for

⁹⁶ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 20.

⁹⁷ Matthew 19:6 (NAB).

⁹⁸ ICEL, *The Rites*, no. 24, 726.

themselves. Lacking a relationship with Christ or understanding of Church teaching, the couple will find it difficult to pass on the faith to their children.

Once the couple has affirmed that they truly wish to enter into marriage as it is intended by God, they now give consent to the vows that will seal their lives together. "I, N., take you, N., to be my wife/husband. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life."⁹⁹ Professing the vows enters the couple into a covenant relationship with each other and with God. Whatever life may bring, the couple vows to love and honor each other all the days of their lives.

Through the words of consent a couple enters married life and lives out their baptismal vows in a wholly unique manner. The couple now enters into a covenant relationship with God not as individuals alone, but as a married couple. They lead themselves and each other closer to God through their married love and the daily living out of the sacrament. Marital interactions, while fully human, are also a means to the divine. The *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* says,

The couple needs to remember they have entered a relationship between persons. They come to one another with two loves, the one commanded by Jesus and the one caused by their attraction to each other. They are challenged to unite their personal love with Christ's love. Their human love will survive more effectively the cultural challenges they face, as well as the psychological and economic ones, when it is merged with the powerful love of Christ, who wants them to succeed and whose divine grace is ever at their service.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ ICEL, *The Rites*, no. 25, 727.

¹⁰⁰ USCCB, *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, 286. Later in the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* on page 289 it states, "It is clear that there are differences because of diverse religious traditions, but these differences can be lessened when the spouses share what they have received from their

God desires all marriages to succeed. When couples unite their human love to Christ's supernatural love, their love and relationship is transformed. Christ gives the couple his grace and assistance throughout their married lives so that they can love one another with the same love that Christ has for the Church.¹⁰¹ The couple is called to a love that is complete, total, faithful and will last forever. The couple professes this Christ-like love in their marriage vows. Thus married love becomes the very love of God.

In marriage, a couple's loving relationship models the relationship of Christ with the Church. "This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church."¹⁰² In a unique and mysterious manner, the couple represents Christ's love to the world.

In *Worship: Wedding to Marriage*, German Martinez mentions,

The words of consent exchanged by the bridegroom and the bride is an ancient Anglo-Norman formula, which has been adapted to meet modern reality. They express the indissolubility of marriage, as an irrevocable covenant of the mutual self-giving of the spouses.¹⁰³

The couple now lives—in their relationship—what they have read about in Scripture, "This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called

respective traditions and learn from each other how they fulfill their fidelity to Christ." As more Catholics marry persons from other religious traditions it will be more important that they learn to share their faith with their spouse.

¹⁰¹ USCCB, *The National Directory for Catechesis*, 143.

¹⁰² Ephesians 5: 32 (NAB).

¹⁰³ Martinez, *Worship: Wedding to Marriage*, 140.

'woman,' for out of 'her man' this one has been taken. That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body."¹⁰⁴

The wedding promises instruct couples on what Catholic marriage is meant to be. Through the promises and vows the couple pledges a love to one another that is completely free (not forced or coerced), faithful (emotionally and physically faithful to one another), total (giving oneself without holding anything back from the other person and also accepting them as they are) and fruitful (open to new life and expanding beyond the love between the spouses to include others). Remembering the feelings and thoughts from the sacramental celebration can revive not only memories from one's wedding day but a sense of the profound love that first united the couple.

Stevenson also highlights the importance of the words of consent. The words of consent are a "special, unique type of liturgical speech unparalleled elsewhere, and rightly so."¹⁰⁵ The words of consent use liturgical language that contains rich meaning in a few words. What couple, on their wedding day, realizes the implications that these words will have on their lives? It is only after professing the vows and living the vows that couples begin to truly understand what they mean. The vows contain meaning that will only be fully understood over the lifetime of the marriage.

Kathleen Hughes observes that the vows themselves invite the couple into a dying to self through making themselves a total and faithful gift that is always open to others.

¹⁰⁴ Genesis 2: 23-24 (NAB).

¹⁰⁵ Stevenson, *To Join Together*, 221. Couples can grow in understanding the rich meaning of their wedding vows by reflecting on the unique liturgical language used on their wedding day.

Through their consent the couple enters more deeply into the Pascal Mystery. Hughes states that "some of the dimensions of the paschal mystery that a couple faces are spelled out explicitly both in the promises and in the exchange of consent that are part of the ceremony."¹⁰⁶ She goes on to show that the vows foreshadow how the couple will experience the Pascal Mystery in their married life:

The vows of consent also spell out a rhythm of dying and rising: better and worse, sickness and health, poverty and riches. The exchange of consent names some of the ways in which the paschal mystery will touch the lives of this couple, and the metaphors of health and prosperity and their loss are just that, metaphors for the rhythm of our days, of dishes and work schedules and children to be fed and cars that need servicing and the thousand details of life, large and small, that constitute the keeping of these promises—to say nothing of the crises, the moments of grief and loss, grave illness, financial woes, that form larger challenges to promise keeping.¹⁰⁷

The powerful effect of the words of consent cannot be diminished. The vows provide metaphors that allow a couple to experience the spiritual meaning found in marriage's ordinary daily activities. The vows are fundamental for the marriage ceremony:

The exchange of consent is the central sacramental act of the marriage rite. Preceded by the triple declaration of intent, perhaps at the door of the church, the exchange of consent takes place in the sanctuary before the community and the altar—a place of witness and of sacrifice.¹⁰⁸

The couple proclaims, before God and the community, their love for one another.

Recalling this experience can aid couples in remembering the words that united them.

¹⁰⁶ Kathleen Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 106.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 115.

Reflection and application of the vows to the experiences of married life are needed in order for the words of the vows to have a lasting impact on the life of the couple.¹⁰⁹

The Nuptial Blessing

Before a newly married couple departs the church, a nuptial blessing is prayed over them. German Martinez underscores the importance of the nuptial blessing:

The marriage rite climaxes with the consecratory prayer of the nuptial blessing. Following the ancient Roman tradition already attested in the Gelasian Sacramentary (seventh-eighth centuries), this prayer is proclaimed after the Lord's Prayer and stresses the Eucharistic meaning of marriage.¹¹⁰

The nuptial blessing is the original element of the Christian celebration of marriage and is found in all Christian liturgies of marriage.¹¹¹

Kenneth Stevenson observes that the nuptial blessing provides continuity to the marriage rites through the centuries. "The Gregorian nuptial mass became the standard throughout the later West and forms the basis for the first nuptial blessing in the 1969 *Ordo Celebrandi Matrimonium*."¹¹² Yet even with continuity change occurs:

First, although the nuptial blessing is the first and earliest part of the marriage liturgy, it eventually gives way to the consent of the partners as the part of the rite identified by the scholastic theologians as performative. Their premise was that *consensus facit nuptias* (consent makes marriage).¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Kate Blain, "Marriage Education Takes a Lifetime," USCCB website (November 5, 2004), <http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/blainstory.shtml> (accessed May 17, 2010).

¹¹⁰ Martinez, *Worship: Wedding to Marriage*, 142.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Stevenson, *To Join Together*, 31.

¹¹³ Ibid., 50.

Over time, the consent was viewed as the essential aspect of the rite that contracted the marriage. In marriages in the West, it is the nuptial blessing in which the clergy first took part, over time; the aspect of consent overshadowed the blessing.¹¹⁴

The rite's nuptial blessing reminds the couple that their marriage carries with it a unique mission in the world. One of the nuptial blessings prays, "Holy Father, you created mankind in your own image and made man and woman to be joined as husband and wife in union of body and heart and so fulfill their mission in this world."¹¹⁵ Their mission is different than it was when they entered the Church. It is through living in God's image and in a unity of body and heart with one another that the couple fulfills their mission. The nuptial Mass says, "May you always bear witness to the love of God in this world,"¹¹⁶ reiterating the mission of the couple to witness God's love in the place they live.

The nuptial blessing of the rite places the mission of the couple in a covenant theme and makes explicit that the couple participates in the love of God. One of the rite's nuptial blessings states,

Father, to reveal the plan of your love, you made the union of husband and wife an image of the covenant between you and your people. In the fulfillment of this

¹¹⁴ Gramunt et al., *Canons and Commentaries on Marriage*, 56. The Code of Canon Law states that the minimal requirements for marriage include: "The ordinary form consists of (1) a manifestation of consent, (2) the active presence of the 'assistant at marriage,' and (3) the presence of two additional witnesses."

¹¹⁵ ICEL, *The Rites*, no. 120, 754.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., no. 125, 757.

sacrament, the marriage of Christian man and woman is a sign of the marriage between Christ and the Church.¹¹⁷

Conclusion

The modern ritual for marriage developed slowly over the centuries. As the rite for marriage changed, so too did its theology and meaning for couples. The 1969 *Rite of Marriage* incorporated the centuries of development and the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. The new rite's theology and ritual is capable of catechizing married couples about the sacrament of marriage.

Taking time after the wedding to reflect on the vows and the implications for living them out allows for a theologically enriched experience of marriage. Even if couples may have had a good preparation for marriage, married life reveals that there is always more to learn. Reflecting on the sacrament of marriage helps married couples develop their own unique marital spirituality as derived from the sacramental *Rite of Marriage*. A rich marital spirituality can assist married couples who lack the support of marriage enrichment programs in living out their marital commitment.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ ICEL, *The Rites*, no. 120, 754.

¹¹⁸ Ignatius P.L. Montero, C. S. C., "Enrichment, Nurture and Resource, for Individual and Couple Happiness (E.N.R.I.C.H.)," (D.Min. diss., The Catholic University of America, 1991). Montero's dissertation project responds to the need in the Church for catechesis for married couples by developing a marriage enrichment program.

CHAPTER 3

MARRIAGE AS COVENANT: A SPIRITUALITY

The theological understanding of marriage took centuries to develop. The understanding of marriage as covenant is a revived understanding of marriage that has enriched the theology of marriage. The concept of covenant provides a context and framework for the discussion of many marital themes that arise from the 1969 *Rite of Marriage*'s covenantal understanding of marriage. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that it is the matrimonial covenant that establishes the lifelong partnership between a man and a woman and has been raised to the dignity of a sacrament.¹ The covenant creates a unique relationship between spouses with one another and with God. Exploring the theme of covenant, which appears throughout the rite, has the capacity to instruct and form a marital spirituality.

This chapter will briefly explore the theological history of marriage that informs the understanding of marriage as covenant. In the past, marriage was viewed as a vocation for the weak who were not able to live a life of celibacy. Under many conditions, the marital act was seen as an occasion of sin and marriage was not viewed as a state in life that led to holiness.² The Second Vatican Council re-discovered and postulated a covenantal understanding of marriage. A covenant understanding of

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1601.

² John Witte, Jr., "Marriage as Sacrament in the Roman Catholic Tradition," in *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 24.

marriage makes known social, prophetic, liturgical, and Eucharistic dimensions of marriage that contribute toward an integrated marital spirituality.

Historical Development of the Spirituality of Marriage

The shaping of a theology of marriage was a long process that led to the 1969 *Rite of Marriage* and its affirmation of marriage as a sacrament, covenant and means of holiness. In *The Marital Sacrament*, Theodore Mackin discusses the variety of influences impacting marriage's history. "Human needs, political-social crises, the seeds of development within the earliest Christian traditions, the liturgical celebration of marriage—all have contributed to this history."³ In outlining the historical and theological understanding of the sacrament of marriage, Mackin suggests that "marriage was accepted most hesitantly of all in the canonical list of seven sacraments instituted by Christ; and that much of the hesitation came from doubt that it can grace its participants in the sense that its typical conduct can enhance their holiness."⁴

Aside from the teachings of Jesus in the gospels and St. Paul's references to marriage,⁵ much of the theology that developed in the three hundred years following the Apostolic age shaped the theological understanding of marriage until the twentieth

³ Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 21.

⁴ Ibid., 6. On page 7, Mackin highlights that a sacrament creates a setting for humans to interact with God. "God takes the initiative in this interaction. He reaches from his invisible, trans-empiric dimension of existence into the empiric, visible-tangible-audible dimension that humans inhabit." Through God's interaction with humanity God draws people to himself and to one another.

⁵ See Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract*, 16. See also Ephesians 5: 21-33 (NAB). The understanding of marriage as a reflection of the relationship between Christ and the Church would develop slowly over the centuries.

century.⁶ The early theology of marriage was being written by men, many of whom had freely chosen to live celibate lives, rejecting marriage because they saw it as an obstacle to holiness.

Early authors on marriage believed marriage was a busy, temporally focused life that distracted one from the contemplation of God.⁷ The pleasure derived from sex was thought to override a person's reason and thus was considered sinful.⁸ As a theology of marriage was developing, the Church was reacting against a promiscuous Roman-Hellenistic culture where marital vows were often not respected.⁹ Marriage was held in honor because it was considered God's intervention in creation that was blessed by Christ

⁶Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 184.

⁷ Ibid., 185. "Insofar as they thought holiness was possible in marriage, this was the holiness appropriate to a monk." See also, Örsy, *Marriage in Canon Law*, 19. "Although the scriptural understanding of marriage as a sacred reality was never lost, some writers and teachers tended to impose a rigoristic interpretation on the sayings of Jesus and Paul. They exalted virginity and abstinence...."

⁸ Ibid., 95. It was believed that to attain true wisdom one must suppress worldly desires, especially sexual desires. Both the Gnostics and Manicheans affirmed the evil of created reality and sexual acts. Later on page 284, Mackin notes that viewing marriage as an imaging of the Christ Church relationship was used as a defense against Manichean attacks on marriage in the third century. The husband fulfilled the Christ role (thus having no need to be blessed in the marriage ceremony) and the wife fulfilled the image of the Church, the weaker member.

⁹ "Promiscuity, prostitution, and lewd public entertainments in the cities even led Roman philosophers of the period to insist that the only legitimate purpose of sex was to found a family." Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 361.

to provide citizens for the kingdom of God.¹⁰ Procreation was the only acceptable reason for sex.¹¹

From the fifth century until the Renaissance, the thought of Augustine and Ambrose, neither of whom sought to develop a theology of marriage, dominated theological commentary on marriage for one thousand years. Augustine and Ambrose defended marriage from attacks, but stopped short of suggesting marriage as a pathway of holiness.¹² Augustine expanded the theology of marriage by discussing marriage as sacrament.¹³

Theologians of this time viewed celibacy as superior to marriage. In medieval times

the conviction about the superiority of virginity over marriage was carried throughout this age and emphasized by the legend of St. John the apostle. It told that he was the bridegroom at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee (Jn 2: 1-12). On meeting Jesus and witnessing his miraculous changing of water into wine, he left his bride before consummating their marriage, thus preserving his virginity, and followed Jesus as his beloved disciple.¹⁴

¹⁰ “During the first three centuries of Christianity, then, the fathers of the Church did not say much about marriage, but when they did they talked about it as an important aspect of Christian life, not as an ecclesiastical institution.” Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 359.

¹¹ Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 177. In the fourth century, Jerome reinforced the notion of sexual intercourse as being free from sin only when the spouses’ exclusive goal is procreation. On page 112, Mackin notes that, “This ethic in turn was drawn from an assumed anthropology that human sexuality exists only for conception.”

¹² Ibid., 190-191. See also Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 365.

¹³ “Augustine’s theory on the marital goods of procreation, fidelity, and sacrament was the most integrated Christian theory of marriage offered by the Church Fathers.” Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract*, 22. See also Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 366.

¹⁴ Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 241.

Scholars viewed marriage in the ideal as being good, but in reality as being wounded.¹⁵ Marriage was seen to be tainted with sinful temptation and for centuries was considered less holy than other ways of life.¹⁶ Following Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians 7, the celibate life was considered a better life for a Christian. Later generations were taught "the quasi-principle that marriage was a default vocation of the weak."¹⁷ The Church's teachings on marriage were not only communicated through formal theological and legal tracts, "they also found their way into sermons, catechisms, and confessional handbooks that eventually allowed these teachings to reach deeply into the lives of the laity."¹⁸

After almost seven centuries focusing primarily on regulation of marital practices and conduct, the Scholastic period of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries began to develop a theology of marriage as sacrament. In the first half of the twelfth century, Hugh of St. Victor began to discuss marriage as a covenant union of souls and as an image of God's love for human souls.

¹⁵ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 359. Martos writes that Clement of Alexandria thought "sexual relations would be without sin only if they were performed with control and restraint" and that Origen believed that married couples temporarily lost the Holy Spirit during intercourse. Later on page 366, Martos notes that, "Those who were married usually committed at least a slight sin when they engaged in sexual intercourse, but they could be excused if they did it for the right reason." See also Örsy, *Marriage in Canon Law*, 21.

¹⁶ "To be sure, following patristic convention, Augustine regarded marriage as less virtuous than virginity and chastity, and sexual intercourse as per se sinful. But marriage, as a creation God, had its own inherited goods, which at least mitigated the sinfulness of sex." Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract*, 21. Later on page 24, Witte notes that marriage, "Though ordained by God and good, it served primarily for the procreation of the human community, not for the perfection of the individual. Participation in it merely kept a person free from sin and vice. It did not contribute directly to his or her virtue."

¹⁷ Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 132.

¹⁸ Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract*, 23.

Yet even as the theology of marriage developed, Scholastics still did not view marital grace as the kind of grace that brings holiness, rather it was a “medicinal grace, prophylactic in that it enables spouses to resist the temptation to adultery, and to temper lust within their marriages.”¹⁹ Joseph Martos admits that at the beginning of the thirteenth century,

Many theologians found it hard to admit that marriage as a sacrament conferred grace like the other sacraments. The traditional view of marriage was that it was more of a hindrance than a help toward holiness, a remedy for the sin of fornication rather than a means of receiving grace.²⁰

Ladislas Örsy notes that twelfth and thirteenth century scholars began to teach that sexuality belongs to human nature and can be good if done according to right reason and the precepts of the faith.²¹ The author goes on to point out that,

Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274), who so fully appropriated the Aristotelian world view, did not hesitate to declare that sexuality in itself was good; evil could be only in its inordinate use. Hence, marriage itself was entirely good and the act of generation was not sinful, Augustine’s authority notwithstanding.”²²

A theology that included the goodness of marriage and sexuality was developing.

The understanding of marriage as a contract began in the early middle ages. Contractual marriage “took root mainly because it helped in the regulation of marriages, and thereby diminishing the abuses against marriage and against women and girls

¹⁹ Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 320.

²⁰ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 377.

²¹ Örsy, *Marriage in Canon Law*, 28.

²² *Ibid.*, 30.

entering marriage.”²³ It put marriage in a familiar social and legal category that helped civil and ecclesial authorities defend marriage. “By the end of the twelfth century, then, civil law in Europe treated marriage as contracts” as did Church documents.²⁴ Martos notes that thirteenth century Scholastics spoke of marriage as a contract “and in the centuries that followed the legal terminology of canon law was further incorporated into the sacramental theology of marriage.”²⁵

It was not until 1139 in the Second Lateran Council that marriage was implied as being among the sacraments. In 1184 at the Council of Verona, marriage was formally listed among the sacraments that must be accepted under penalty of anathema. The Second Council of Lyon in 1274 again listed marriage as the seventh and last of the sacraments. As Church authorities began to control marital practices they brought “them into the mainstream of juridical and liturgical life in the Church”²⁶ making Catholics aware of marriage’s relationship with the other sacraments.

Theologians such as Bonaventure (1221-1274), Duns Scotus (1265-1308) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), affirmed the sacramental nature of marriage.²⁷

²³ Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 327.

²⁴ Ibid., 327.

²⁵ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 379.

²⁶ Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 276.

²⁷ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 380. See also Örsy, *Marriage in Canon Law*, 31. Örsy notes that the reformers views on marriage flowed from their view of original sin. They saw human nature and sexuality as corrupted by sin and in constant need of discipline. Martin Luther (1483-1546) challenged the sacramentality of marriage by viewing marriage as a natural and social institution.

Theologians contradicted a purely secular notion of marriage through their teaching that those who receive the sacrament worthily receive a unique marital grace.²⁸

The Council of Trent (1545–1563) affirmed marriage as one of the seven sacraments, that the sacraments were needed for salvation, and that the sacraments contained the grace they signify.²⁹ The Congregation of the Council, created by Pius IV in 1564 to interpret the Council’s decrees, clarified the role of the clergy in the wedding ceremony. The Congregation “determined that the priest witness had no juridical role in the contracting, but serves only as a *testis spectabilis*, as a public witness.”³⁰ In the following four hundred years leading up to the Second Vatican Council, theologians developed the Tridentine decrees and theological underpinnings of Church laws on marriage.³¹ Issues such as the conferral of grace, indissolubility, and marriage as sign were clarified in the writings of Robert Bellarmine (1542 – 1621) and others.

In the thirteenth century, new religious orders began that lived and moved among the people. Mackin asserts that over time these new orders grew and this new form of cleric, “coming from and living in reasonable proximity to middle class families and working with them, became the interpreters of marriage.”³² Their teaching on marriage

²⁸ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 377. See also Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 374.

²⁹ Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 428. See also Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract*, 36. “The Roman Catholic tradition provided its own systematic distillation of these biblical, patristic, and medieval teachings on marriage in the work of the Council of Trent (1545-1563).”

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 434.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 435.

³² *Ibid.*, 495.

reflected the lived experience of married couples. The great spiritual classic of the seventeenth century, *Introduction to the Devout Life* by St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) viewed all vocations as paths to holiness.³³ De Sales, writing to a lay woman about concerns of the laity, had a section of the book devoted to married life. De Sales writes that marriage is to be honored “because its origin, purpose, advantages, forms, and matter are holy.”³⁴

Following the Council of Trent, the Church and the State clashed regarding who had authority over marriage. Many countries declared marriage a purely civil matter over which the state exercised authority. The contract of marriage was considered primary and marriage was deemed a civil matter. If there was a sacramental aspect, “it is a spiritual and supernatural accessory to the contract. Therefore the Church has jurisdiction over nothing more than the supernatural effects of the sacrament.”³⁵ This secularization of marriage was part of a larger movement in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that began to divide human affairs into the strictly religious or non-religious.³⁶ The Church responded to the secularization of marriage through documents, such as Pius IX’s 1852 address, *Acerbissimum vobiscum*, and Leo XIII’s 1880 encyclical, *Arcanum divinae sapientiae*, which asserted marriage as a sacred reality.

³³ Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*. Translated and edited by John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1950), 43.

³⁴ Ibid., 219.

³⁵ Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 456.

³⁶ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 383.

The understanding of marriage began to shift from being a contract or ceremony that a couple participates in, to something that enriches the couples' spiritual life and empowers them to live a holy marriage. Theologians still had reservations about how a person could become holy through marriage since many believed that the grace of the sacrament was to unite the spouses with each other and fulfill their duties, not necessarily to unite them with God.³⁷

Over time, papal teachings began to focus on the innate goodness of marriage. In 1930, Pope Pius XI wrote the encyclical *Casti connubii* to highlight the holiness of marriage. This foundational document continued a developing theology of marriage that showed the goodness of married life and laid a foundation for the development of an anthropology of marriage. In *Casti connubii* Pius XI developed the teachings from the twenty-fourth session of Trent on marriage:

Christ the Lord, the Institutor and 'Perfector' of the holy sacraments, by raising the matrimony of his faithful to the dignity of a true sacrament of the New Law, made it a sign and source of that peculiar internal grace by which 'it perfects natural love, it confirms an indissoluble union, and sanctifies both man and wife.'³⁸

The Second Vatican Council's pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* shared a new vision for married life. The bishops rejected the first draft of *Gaudium et Spes* that simply restated Church teaching on marriage from past centuries. They wished to

³⁷ Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 534.

³⁸ Pius XI, *Casti Connubii* (December 31, 1930), no. 38, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_31121930_casti-connubii_en.html (accessed January 10, 2011).

envision marriage anew. The bishops consciously did not use the centuries old and most commonly used term “contract” to describe marriage. The term is not used anywhere in the document and is replaced with a more personalist understanding of marriage as covenant.³⁹ *Gaudium et Spes* elevates the love of the spouses to one of the purposes of marriage along with the procreation and education of children. The document clearly shows that married couples can grow in holiness through the married state:

For as God of old made Himself present to His people through a covenant of love and fidelity, so now the Savior of men and the spouse of the Church comes into the lives of married Christians through the sacrament of matrimony. He abides with them.⁴⁰

Gaudium et Spes teaches that marriage fuses human and divine love, enabling spouses to make a gift of themselves to one another. Christ is present in each aspect of marriage. The document goes on to counter centuries of misunderstanding by stating that marital love is expressed uniquely through sexual intercourse.⁴¹ The bishops counteract eighteen centuries of fear and suspicion about sexuality and directly address marital relations as something that is good and honorable. Vatican II changed the perception of sexual intercourse as something tolerated and potentially sinful to something that within marriage is a good.⁴² *Gaudium et Spes* states, married love

³⁹Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), no. 48, “Documents of the II Vatican Council,” http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (accessed January 14, 2011).

⁴⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 48.

⁴¹ Ibid., 49.

⁴² Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 171. “While finding that a virtually unanimous judgment for virginity and a common suspicion of sinfulness in sexual intercourse threatened to block marriage’s

is uniquely expressed and perfected through the appropriate enterprise of matrimony. The actions within marriage by which the couple are united intimately and chastely are noble and worthy ones. Expressed in a manner which is truly human, these actions promote the mutual self-giving by which spouses enrich each other with a joyful and ready will.⁴³

It is through this union that spouses become a two in one flesh union “and such intimate joining of what was at first separate is itself holy.”⁴⁴

Mackin affirms that the sacrament of marriage includes the goodness of sexuality.

“The sacrament makes possible the integration of sexuality into the sanctification that baptism begins and continues. It rescues it from remaining always a vagrant element. Marriage the sacrament gives eros a place in holiness.”⁴⁵

The 1983 revisions to the *Code of Canon Law* reflected the updated theology of marriage while maintaining continuity with the past. Örsy states that the insights of the Council were incorporated into the institutional structure and language of the old canons.⁴⁶ The 1983 *Code of Canon Law* contains the doctrinal principles concerning marriage as being a sacrament, the sign of the sacrament being a covenant or contract of a

eventual acceptance among the sacraments, we found that at the same time marriage began to be drawn into the economy of Christian holiness via the wedding liturgy.”

⁴³ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 49.

⁴⁴ Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 64. Mackin notes that sexuality is an a priori good since God included sexuality as an integral part of creation.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 597.

⁴⁶ “The result is a somewhat uneasy coexistence of two diverging trends, one upholding the primacy of the institution, the other the importance of human persons. Also, the understanding of marriage appears now in a broad religious context through the doctrine of the covenant, yet the highly juridical language of the contract is still present in the many traditionally formulated canons.” Örsy, *Marriage in Canon Law*, 37.

special nature, marriage as a special partnership which involves the entire life of the contracting parties and the purpose of marriage is “the common good of the spouses who enter into this special companionship for the procreation and education of offspring.”⁴⁷ Much of the wording in canon law regarding marriage is taken from *Gaudium et Spes* (no. 48).

The fact that the law of the Church reflects its theological and pastoral developments shows the deep change in the view of marriage:

The present Code, following the decrees of the Second Vatican Council, emphasizes the special role of Christian matrimony and the Christian family within the mission of the Church thus shedding new light on the power of the Church over matrimony of the baptized by reason of its sacramental nature.⁴⁸

Mackin remarks that canon 1055 describes the act by which the partners create the marriage. “It is an act of covenanting, not of contracting. What this act does is not to exchange rights, but to create a partnership, a most inclusive partnership—‘a partnership in the whole of life.’”⁴⁹ Mackin believes the understanding of marriage as a contract locked the theology of marriage in partial paralysis for many centuries. “As long as Roman Catholic teaching defined marriage as a legal bond created by a contractual exchange of rights and obligations, this contract-matrix could offer little to the understanding of the sacrament.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Gramunt et al., *Canons and Commentaries on Marriage*, 3.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁹ Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 12.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 13.

In 1981, John Paul II wrote *Familiaris consortio* which reinforced the understanding of marriage as covenant. The document avoids juridical laws and legal definitions. Instead the Apostolic Exhortation is pastoral and reflects the reality of marriage and family life. *Familiaris consortio* views marriage within the framework of authentic marital love. Married couples can be instruments of God's love for one another and in their covenantal bond can love God through their love for one another.⁵¹

In the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, Benedict XVI recollects that past generations viewed eros negatively, as something that degenerates into vice. Benedict stipulates that "Purification and growth in maturity are called for; and these also pass through the path of renunciation. Far from rejecting or 'poisoning' eros, they heal it and restore its true grandeur."⁵² A new understanding of marriage is emerging that integrates eros, agape, love and sex.

The Covenant of Marriage

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states,

The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament.⁵³

⁵¹ Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 571.

⁵² Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, (December 25, 2005), no. 5, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html (accessed April 16, 2011).

⁵³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1601.

This catechetical understanding of marriage took centuries to develop. It needs to be explained clearly and reflected upon by couples in order to be comprehended and lived. The Church presents a beautiful and rich theological portrait of marriage. Married couples are called to apply the theology of marriage to their daily lives.⁵⁴ Catechesizing married couples on the theology of marriage will help them integrate Catholic doctrine with their daily lives.

The use of covenant language in the *Rite of Marriage* is made possible as a result of Vatican II's renewed understanding of marriage. The concept of marriage as covenant opens up many new ways of thinking about marriage. Marriage as a covenant highlights the necessity of both the unitive love of spouses and the procreative dimensions of marriage. Entering into a covenant unites the couple and their human love for one another to God's divine love. God's love opens them up to the abundant fruitfulness of a relationship with God, which includes the gift of new life. A covenantal understanding of marriage allows for the fuller transformation of married life as an image of Christ and his Church.

Seven years after Vatican II, the Jesuit author Paul Palmer sought to place marriage within a covenantal framework in his article "Christian Marriage: Contract or Covenant?"⁵⁵ Palmer investigates a more positive and hopeful outlook of marriage as

⁵⁵ Paul Palmer, S.J., "Christian Marriage: Contract or Covenant?" *Theological Studies* 33 (December 1972): 617-665.

covenant. He provides a basic understanding of covenant through examining the origins of the word:

The term “covenant” transliterates the Latin *convention* or *conventus*, and is derived from the verb *convenire*, which simply means to come together or to convene, and, in the present context, to form a covenant (*foedus*) or an alliance (*societas*) or a pact (*pactum*), words which refer to covenant. A covenant itself is a solemn agreement between nations, peoples, or individuals, affecting a relationship that is binding and inviolable.⁵⁶

Ancient peoples understood the indissoluble and binding aspects of the covenant as being “derived from the divine sanctions attached to the covenant agreement.”⁵⁷ Thus a covenant is not an agreement between two parties, as a contract is, but is instead an agreement between two parties one of which is God. By invoking God through a covenant oath the swearing party asks God to become not just a witness of the covenant but also the author and guarantor of the covenant. Only God can initiate such a bond and only God can guarantee the necessary grace for it to succeed.

Palmer contrasts a covenant with a contract in order to highlight the uniqueness of a covenant:

Contracts deal with things, covenants with people. Contracts engage the services of people; covenants engage persons. Contracts are made for a stipulated period of time; covenants are forever. Contracts can be broken, with material loss to the contracting parties; covenants cannot be broken, but if violated, they result in personal loss and broken hearts. Contracts are secular affairs and belong to the market place; covenants are sacral affairs and belong to the hearth, the temple, of the Church.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Palmer, “Christian Marriage,” 618.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 639.

The understanding of covenant has major implications for marriage and how couples live the sacrament. Now marriage is not a mere contract between two parties to give themselves to one another, it is now an agreement of lasting love that has God as its author and guarantor. A contract might imply ownership or transfer of some object, whereas a covenant implies a total surrender and abandonment (complete self-donation) to one's spouse and to God. Since God is guarantor of the covenant, whenever a member of the covenant feels they are unable to fulfill their aspect of the covenant, they need to turn to God who guarantees assistance and the grace necessary to get through any obstacle. Whereas in a contract a person lends themselves or their service, in a covenant the person gives themselves away, transforming their relationship. God provides the grace needed to transform the couple and make a marriage successful, if a couple is open to God's assistance and direction in their lives.

Covenants were understood by the Hebrew people as the means God used since the beginning of time to form a relationship with God's people.⁵⁹ The Jewish people and early Christians were very familiar with covenant language which is used throughout the Old Testament. By entering into a covenant of love, persons find their means of redemption. Married couples find salvation through living out their covenant vows within

⁵⁹ Scott Hahn, *A Father Who Keeps His Promises: God's Covenant Love in Scripture* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1998), 23. See also Palmer, "Christian Marriage: Contract or Covenant?" 629. Palmer notes that, "The prophets had extolled Yahweh's love for Israel in terms of covenant love which is redemptive."

the domestic church. Marriage takes on a redemptive aspect and is freed to move beyond a mere escape from the pains of concupiscence that it was once envisioned as being.

In *What God Has Joined: The Sacramentality of Marriage*, Peter Elliott proposes that covenant is the best way to understand and describe marriage as a lived sacrament because it provides “an inclusive description of sacramental marriage, derived from the ‘great mystery’ of Christ and his spouse, the Church.”⁶⁰ The image of the mystery of Christ and the Church is incorporated in the understanding of covenant because Christ covenanted himself to his Church. For Elliott, the married couple participates in the great mystery of the new covenant established by Christ to forge a new, more intimate relationship with his people. Because they share in this mystery, their “marriage reflects that permanent covenant relationship in its own abiding structure as a personal covenant relationship between man and woman.”⁶¹ Just as Christ laid down his life for the Church, now a husband and wife lay down their lives for each other and bless one another on their path toward lives of holiness. In their marital lives together, they consecrate one another and make each other holy by being living sacraments for one another.⁶²

In the article “Life Together: A Catechesis of Marriage as Sacrament,” Michael Lawler stresses the importance and vitality of the covenant theme. Lawler states that the marriage covenant “encompasses both the ‘gift-receipt’ and ‘mutual surrender’ aspects of

⁶⁰ Peter Elliott, *What God Has Joined: The Sacramentality of Marriage* (New York: Alba House, 1990), 170.

⁶¹ Ibid., 176.

⁶² Ibid., 182.

a contract but humanizes the meaning of these terms insofar as it removes any sense of ‘bargaining’ or ‘erasure of self.’”⁶³ He places covenant in personalistic terms by viewing it as a conscious and deliberate gift of self that makes a person fully human rather than diminishing or objectifying oneself in contractual terms. Covenant becomes an act of the whole self in which both spouses willingly participate for life. “To covenant is to commit mutually to explore the religious depth of life together and to respond to that depth in light of a mutual covenant to Christ.”⁶⁴

The couple’s marriage is a participation in the mystery of Christ and they now reflect Christ to the world in a new way. As single persons they lived their baptismal covenant relationship in a unique manner, but as a married couple they will learn to live in a new covenantal relationship with each other and the world. Elliott believes this is a vital point that couples ought to know. “Christians entering marriage have the right to know and believe that marriage is taking up and using the sanctifying grace of baptism in a unique way.”⁶⁵ The grace of baptism empowers the couple to live out their marriage vows and share Christ to the world. If reflected upon and assimilated, understanding the transformational nature of marriage can have serious implications for the spirituality of their marriage and family life.

⁶³ Michael G. Lawler, “Life Together: A Catechesis of Marriage as Sacrament,” *The Living Light* 36 (Spring 2000), 11.

⁶⁴ Lawler, “Life Together,” 11.

⁶⁵ Elliott, *What God Has Joined*, 182.

Without a unique marital spirituality, couples have only monastic or religious models of holiness to follow. St. Francis de Sales notes the need to adapt spirituality for each person and state in life. “The practice of devotion must also be adapted to the strength, activities, and duties of each particular person.”⁶⁶ While some general principles may be drawn from monastic spirituality, the context in which the married person is growing in holiness is completely different. The documents of Vatican II call married couples, along with all laity, to be leaven in the world and positively affect the temporal order through living out their baptismal graces. Marriage is a different reality from religious and monastic life and must be respected on its own terms in order for a true marital spirituality to emerge.

When a couple understands that they are entering into a sacred covenant, they are enabled to find guidance and role models from all covenanted married couples who have gone before them. Understanding the covenant of marriage helps couples understand their place in the life of the Church and salvation history. Today’s married couple can join figures in the Scriptures, such as Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Joseph and Mary, and all those who have entered the marriage covenant before them.⁶⁷

In “Marriage Rites as Documents of Faith,” Mark Searle sees the unity of past and present as an anamnesis whereby the present couple is in effect made present to those

⁶⁶ de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 44. de Sales notes the laughable and confusing aspects of someone trying to live a spirituality and devotional life that is not one’s own.

⁶⁷ See Hahn, *A Father Who Keeps His Promises*, 35. Hahn highlights what a covenant is and how it is revealed in the Sacred Scriptures. He proceeds through the covenant events in Sacred Scripture which culminate in the fulfillment of covenant promises in the New Covenant of Jesus Christ.

who have gone before them in marriage.⁶⁸ A married couple enters into a privileged and special relationship with God and with others who are in the same covenant relationship with God. Now the couple has role models and mentors that unite them to the Communion of Saints and the Body of Christ in a unique way. The couple unites their present lives with salvation history and the Christian tradition.

German Martinez highlights how, through marriage, a couple participates directly in salvation history:

In fact, both the liturgical action in general and specifically the marriage ritual celebration, which expresses the various gifts and needs of married persons, are inseparable in understanding the vocation of marriage. The marriage liturgy celebrates the actualized economy of salvation mirrored in the life experiences of married Christians and their families and thus provides the basic setting and the symbolic interpretation for understanding the sacramental reality. The sacramental reality becomes in turn the heart of the liturgical experience and of marriage spirituality itself.⁶⁹

The ritual action of marriage reveals the couple's calling and vocation. Through their participation in the *Rite of Marriage* their lives are forever transformed and they participate directly in the economy of salvation.

The same rite that transforms their lives provides ongoing opportunity for reflection. "The action of worship in itself with its multifold meanings, as well as the concrete marriage ritual, provide the central theological perspective for a revitalized

⁶⁸ Mark Searle, "Marriage Rites as Documents of Faith: Notes for a Theology of Marriage," in *Vision: The Scholarly Contributions of Mark Searle to Liturgical Renewal* edited by Anne Koester and Barbara Searle (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 244.

⁶⁹ Martinez, *Worship: Wedding to Marriage*, ix.

theology of marriage.”⁷⁰ For a theology of marriage to impact daily life, a couple’s wedding day will have to be more than just a celebrative experience. “The critical mediation of theological reflection is also necessary because there is no true celebration without an authentic faith vision.”⁷¹

While clearly taught in modern Church documents, it took almost two millennia for the Church to formally embrace this covenantal understanding of the sacrament of marriage. The 2003 *National Directory for Catechesis* “teaches that marriage is a covenant of love in which God participates as an active member.”⁷² The 2006 *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* expounds on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*’s covenant understanding of marriage. “The sacrament of marriage is a covenant, which is more than a contract. Covenant always expresses a relationship between persons.”⁷³ It is the reality of covenant language that allows marriage to be understood as more than a mere contract between persons bestowing certain rights and obligations. A contract only captures a small understanding of the reality that is taking place in marriage. While useful as juridical terminology, it is not as useful for understanding the lived reality of marriage.

It will be helpful for couples to learn in marriage preparation and in post marriage mystagogical catechesis the benefits, blessings and life-changing effects they experience

⁷⁰ Martinez, *Worship: Wedding to Marriage*, ix.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² USCCB, *The National Directory for Catechesis*, 143.

⁷³ USCCB, *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, 281.

when entering into a unique covenantal relationship with God and with each other through the *Rite of Marriage*. When a couple comes to understand that through their marriage vows they are now living in a unique covenant with God, they will acquire not just a new understanding of marriage but a new way of living in God that will provide the grace and strength they need to handle the highs and lows of married life. The *Rite of Marriage* changes their lived experience from one of individuals following the will of God to a newly formed domestic church united in Christ and following his call for their marriage and family life.

Understanding the covenant of marriage has the ability to challenge the prevailing notions and misunderstandings of married life within the Church which do not adequately contribute toward developing a marital spirituality. The covenant of marriage offers a couple daily opportunities for a life of holiness within marriage.

Overcoming Misunderstandings about Marriage

Sadly, many false past articulations about marriage and family life contribute to present day misunderstandings about marriage. In “Christian Marriage: Contract or Covenant,” Paul Palmer writes, “it must be admitted that marital love, with its affective overtones and sexual involvement, has rarely been discussed by the Fathers of the Church or by the church’s theologians.”⁷⁴ Today, false notions are being corrected, but notions still persist that marriage and marital conjugal love is a sign of human weakness or not as

⁷⁴ Palmer, “Christian Marriage,” 643.

holy as religious life.⁷⁵ False notions of marriage and its conjugal component viewed as an accommodation for lustful passions must be changed in order to develop a spirituality of marriage.

In the recent pastoral letter *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan* the United States Bishops seek to clarify understandings about marriage and highlight the value of marriage. "The Church teaches that marriage is an authentic vocation, or divine call. As a vocation, marriage is just as necessary and valuable to the Church as other vocations."⁷⁶ Marriage is not a vocation of the weak but a necessary vocation, and like the priesthood, a divine calling from God.

Palmer hoped that the restoration of an understanding of covenant within marriage could assist in correcting erroneous or incomplete understandings of marriage while working to reduce the number of couples who divorce. "With the loss of the covenant ideal in contemporary society, re-marriages are becoming alarmingly common even among baptized persons, including Catholics."⁷⁷ The CARA report on marriage confirms that divorce affects twenty-three percent of adult Catholics and eleven percent

⁷⁵ Laura Levitt, "Covenant or Contract? Marriage as Theology," *Cross Currents* 48 (Summer 1998): 173. Levitt argues against Eugene Borowitz's understanding of marriage as a covenanted relationship in the Jewish tradition. She believes that his theology tended toward the oppression of women and the promotion of the understanding of marriage as a "social contract that gave free men access to women's bodies through the contract of marriage." She believes Borowitz's application of covenant does not go far enough to eradicate old notions of marriage that persist and still denigrate women.

⁷⁶ USCCB, *Marriage: Love and Life*, 43.

⁷⁷ Palmer, "Christian Marriage," 656.

of these are either re-married, living with a partner or widowed.⁷⁸ With a comprehensive marriage preparation program that sees marriage within a covenant framework and a growing number of marital enrichment programs that assist married couples with their spiritual and practical needs, the tide of divorce can be curbed by creating a Catholic culture that supports marriage.

For much of the Church's history, discussion about marriage focused on marital obligations and demands and the necessity to persevere in this indissoluble union by embracing the cross. There is great need for those preparing for marriage or in post marriage enrichment programs to focus on the positive and life-giving aspects of marriage as well as its demands and obligations. While all of these aspects are necessary, the difficult aspects of marriage will be received better if they are couched in and tempered with the abundant joy and life-giving love that marriage also contains.

In "Christian Family Life: Some Pastoral Priorities," Brian Hearne articulates the need for reform:

There is grave reason for disquiet about the way the Church helps its members to understand the meaning of the sacrament of marriage, to prepare for it, and to live it faithfully. The insistence on the laws of the Church about marriage seems often to frighten people. It would appear that there is a great need to foster a deeper understanding of the richness of Christian marriage, and to enable people to see that the Church's laws flow from the innermost meaning of marriage, and are not extrinsic and unrealistic demands. On-going catechesis at the parish and community level is indispensable if many marriage problems are to be nipped in the bud.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 3-4.

⁷⁹ Brian Hearne, "Christian Family Life: Some Pastoral Priorities," *African Ecclesial Review* 24 (January 1973): 292.

Hearne rightly notes the need for a clear articulation of marriage that fosters an understanding of the richness and joys of marriage. Understanding Church teaching on the sacrament of marriage will help address married couples' needs and societal misunderstandings about marriage. Knowing the Church's teachings and experiencing the sacramental grace that marriage provides enriches marriages. Parish and diocesan programs using the *Rite of Marriage* can provide a hopeful outlook on marriage that articulates the "innermost meaning of marriage." Merely juridical and technical language alone will not curb the tide of divorce and the misunderstandings about the richness and truth of marriage.

German Martinez examines the inadequacy of past marriage rituals to combat misunderstandings about marriage:

Unfortunately, the sacramentalization often failed to provide a fundamental direction for life and the grounding of a Christian identity, that is to say, a spirituality. There are many reasons for this failure. A major reason was the lack of a theology and spirituality based on the dynamic relationship between marriage and the biblical salvific story, centered in the nuptial reality of the "great mystery" of Christ and the new Christian community created by the Spirit.⁸⁰

The revised *Rite of Marriage's* covenant understanding of marriage incorporates biblical and theological concepts. The next challenge is to relate the lived experience of marriage to biblical and theological concepts of marriage in order to build a spirituality of marriage.

⁸⁰ Martinez, "The Newly Revised Roman Rite," 138.

Fortunately, the negative outlook on married life and conjugal union was dealt a serious blow with the renewed theology of marriage and family life after Vatican II. The Council viewed marriage within the context of the biblical salvific story and showed how Christ was intimately involved in and the author of marriage. The Council sees marriage as a covenanted reality that embraces the totality of the couple's life. "When the fathers of Vatican II speak of marriage as a covenant of love and fidelity, they are speaking of marital or conjugal love, of a love that is human, embracing the total person, body and soul, mind and heart."⁸¹ The Council opened up a new possibility for a fully integrated marital spirituality that embraces the whole person in their marital union.⁸² Marriage is now seen as not just a part of the Church, but the Church itself in miniature, a domestic church. The image of domestic church allows for a spirituality that could see all of married life as a source of holiness.

Covenant and Marital Holiness

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, "The marriage covenant, by which a man and a woman form with each other an intimate communion of life and love, has been founded and endowed with its own special laws by the Creator."⁸³ Many couples do not realize that marriage itself is a graced state of life.

Familiaris consortio describes the unique grace of the marriage sacrament:

⁸¹ Palmer, "Christian Marriage," 644.

⁸² Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 49.

⁸³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1660.

For this reason, Christian spouses have a special sacrament by which they are fortified and receive a kind of consecration in the duties and dignity of their state. By virtue of this sacrament, as spouses fulfill their conjugal and family obligations, they are *penetrated with the Spirit of Christ*, who fills their whole lives with faith, hope and charity. Thus they increasingly advance towards their own perfection, as well as towards their mutual sanctification, and hence contribute jointly to the glory of God.⁸⁴

Married couples receive a special consecration for their unique duties and state in life. *Familiaris consortio* highlights that, just as a priest is set aside for ministerial ministry, so too are married couples set aside for their married lives. This understanding of married life and domestic church has not been as fully developed theologically as priestly ministry, but it is the lived reality for the majority of Catholics. Through the sacrament of marriage, the couple's lives are filled with the Spirit of Christ to live out the theological virtues in marriage.

It is through a life of holiness within marriage that the couple attains not only their own holiness, but mutually assists one another on their journeys toward heaven.

John Paul II states in *Familiaris consortio*,

The sacrament of marriage is the specific source and original means of sanctification for Christian married couples and families. It takes up again and makes specific the sanctifying grace of Baptism. By virtue of the mystery of the death and Resurrection of Christ, of which the spouses are made part in a new way by marriage, conjugal love is purified and made holy: 'This love the Lord has judged worthy of special gifts, healing, perfecting and exalting gifts of grace and of charity.'⁸⁵

⁸⁴ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 56 (italics mine).

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Marriage specifies our baptismal apostolate and marriage itself becomes a means of grace and sanctification for the couple. The love of the spouses is purified and made holy through the sacrament of marriage. In the sacrament, their human attraction and love becomes a means of holiness and supernatural love.

The *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* highlights this transformation of human love to divine love. "By their mutual fidelity, the spouses continue to make present to each other the love of Christ and lead each other to the greater holiness through the grace they receive from the Sacrament."⁸⁶

The revised marriage rite has a renewed ability to form those who understand the covenant of marriage. The rite itself is a means to educate and form the couple. The couple departs the Church a new reality, but to discover the implications of the change the couple will need time to reflect (mystagogy) on the sacramental vows. Reflection could lead to new ways of viewing married life.

The Covenant of Marriage and Developing a Marital Spirituality

The implications of marriage as a covenant, as seen in the *Rite of Marriage* and Church documents, can have serious and life-giving consequences for a couple seeking to live a comprehensive and integrated marital spirituality. Marriage played an important role throughout history, yet marriage being recognized as a sacrament was not alone enough to create a unique marital spirituality. The 1969 *Rite of Marriage* understanding

⁸⁶ USCCB, *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, 283.

of marriage as covenant provides a theology of marriage from which an integrated spirituality for marriage can begin to develop.

In a time when divorce is such an easy option, it is a most pressing need in the Church to develop a vibrant, life-giving and realistic spirituality for married life. Remaining faithful to the covenant of marriage can be difficult and requires continual surrender and dependence on God, qualities that run contrary to a society that promotes individualism and self-reliance. The United States bishops recommend turning to God for support, "For all who seek to find meaning in their marriage will do so when they are open to accepting the transcendent meaning of marriage according to God's plan."⁸⁷

The *Rite of Marriage* which captures the transcendent meaning of marriage as a covenant has several implications for married couples. First, the social and prophetic aspects of married life will be free to emerge. A deeper sense of the need for and participation in the Church's liturgical and Eucharistic life will be fostered. Finally, as couples view their married life as a domestic church they can begin to form an integrated marital spirituality that accounts for nature and grace, the ordinary and the supernatural.

Social Implications: A Prophetic Symbol

The covenanted union that takes place through the *Rite of Marriage* is to have an effect on and in the world. Marriage and marital spirituality are lived realities in the world, they are not abstractions. The couple concretely represents Christ to the world. In "Life Together: A Catechesis of Marriage as Sacrament," Michael Lawler describes how

⁸⁷ USCCB, *Marriage: Love and Life*, 6.

a married couple prophetically represents and images the relationship of Christ and his Church to the world:

To say that marriage is a sacrament is to say that it is a prophetic symbol, a reality with a double meaning. On the one hand, it reveals and celebrates the covenant union between a man and woman. On another level, that union becomes a symbol revealing and celebrating the covenant union between Christ and Christ's Church.⁸⁸

Lawler discusses two possible understandings of the prophetic symbol of the sacrament of marriage. In the first meaning of marriage as a prophetic symbol, the couple reveals Christ and his love to one another. The union of man and woman is a profound physical and spiritual reality revealed in marriage. The spouses celebrate their covenant relationship in the whole of their lives together.

Lawler's second meaning of the couple being a symbolic prophetic witness is found in the couple's interaction with the Church and society. As a couple becomes aware of the spiritual aspects of marriage they are empowered to live in new ways. The couple's covenant union symbolizes the union between Christ and the Church to the world. When a couple becomes aware of these symbolic meanings of marriage as sacrament, they can gradually discern how marriage's spiritual reality will impact their lives together and their relationship with society at large.

In "The Newly Revised Roman Rite," German Martinez nuances the social implications of the couple's married life. "The personalist view of the marital encounter

⁸⁸ Lawler, "Life Together," 15.

is balanced with marriage's social implications and ministerial vocation.”⁸⁹ The marriage rite itself and the fact that witnesses must be present to represent the community acknowledge that marriage has social implications. Couples are not meant to only care for themselves and their marriage alone. They are also to have concern for the common good. A marital spirituality is one that reaches out and embraces all of created reality, just as God's covenant love embraces all of the created order. Thus the couple is able to fulfill *Familiaris consortio's* call for married couples to be prophets in society, sanctifying one another and the world.⁹⁰

Liturgical and Eucharistic Dimensions of a Marital Spirituality

The couple's wedding liturgy and the weekly Eucharistic liturgy help the couples discover and live their marital spirituality. If the couple understands the *Rite of Marriage* and the covenant they are entering, the sacramental liturgy can become “the best interpreter of the content of faith and human experience. It provides the spirituality needed by the challenging call to a liberating Christian discipleship in marriage.”⁹¹ The wedding liturgy and the rite have built in within them a spirituality for married couples. The liturgy itself is able to not only clarify faith and human experience for the couple; it can provide them with a deeper appreciation of their marital covenant and spirituality.

⁸⁹ Martinez, “The Newly Revised Roman Rite,” 134.

⁹⁰ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 55.

⁹¹ Martinez, “The Newly Revised Roman Rite,” 134.

German Martinez discusses how the sacrament can build a foundation for a marital spirituality. “Together with the other sacramental moments of the Christian journey, this ritual celebration becomes a school of prayer and faith for the spouses. It is both a point of arrival and a point of departure in their Christian journey.”⁹² If couples are willing to engage in serious reflection on their marriage and the vows that created it, they are able to incorporate a new wealth of Christian wisdom into their lived covenant experience.⁹³ Martinez notes that “the salvific and Pascal concept of the covenant of God with the people, and of Christ with the church, whose sign is the love of the spouses, provides the sacramental source of concrete existential marriage spirituality.”⁹⁴ The Pascal mystery becomes the couple’s sacramental sign in the covenant with God.⁹⁵

A marital spirituality that neglects a sacramental perspective would miss a vital aspect of covenant love. For when the understanding of covenant is applied to a marital spirituality, the Eucharist becomes central as a model for married life and source of marital grace. As is seen in the *Rite of Marriage*, the covenant bond that the couple enters is rooted in liturgy and must be continually fostered through the liturgy.

⁹² Martinez, *Worship: Wedding to Marriage*, 128.

⁹³ “Too often church weddings remain at the superficial and conventional level, ceremonious and pompous, but devoid of religious significance.” Ibid., 137.

⁹⁴ Martinez, “The Newly Revised Roman Rite,” 136.

⁹⁵ Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 15. Hughes affirms the Pascal understanding of marriage. “Surely every sacrament is a celebration of the death and rising of Jesus and our participation in that mystery. Surely every sacrament invites us to deepen our own conversion and to commit ourselves anew to a vision of God’s reign.”

The Eucharistic liturgy is to have pride of place in a marital spirituality because it is the Eucharist that is the model and actualization of the couple's covenant. The couple's marital covenant shares in the New Covenant of Christ that is established with the world through his Pascal Mystery, culminating in the Eucharist.

Martinez sees the sacramental foundation of marriage as having three phases:

The remote phase of preparation initiated with the primary foundation of baptism, the present phase of concrete actualization of the dignity and holiness of marriage in Christ; and the continuation phase of spiritual formation through Sunday Eucharist, "the source and climax of the Christian life" during the marriage journey.⁹⁶

The sacramental journey begins in baptism and takes unique shape in marriage. The Eucharist sustains, strengthens and spiritually forms a couple. Martinez continues,

The symbolic action in which the core meaning of marriage and Eucharist intersect is the couple's sharing in the Lord's Eucharistic body and blood—the nuptial banquet of Christ's love. Both, marriage and Eucharist are sacraments of love: the former, as specific sign, flowing from the latter, the total sign of the mystery.⁹⁷

Marriage is a specific sign of Christ's love that flows from and is enriched by the complete sign of the mystery, the Eucharist.

The Eucharistic liturgy also offers catechesis and formation on Christian life.⁹⁸ It presents an adult faith formation that would help married couples in their daily life,

⁹⁶ Martinez, "The Newly Revised Roman Rite," 139.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 141.

⁹⁸ Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 2. "Understanding and loving the liturgy presupposes that the world of the liturgy becomes our world, that its words, gestures and objects, and the basic patterns that give it a structure become home to us, familiar, cherished, handed on from parent to child, from age to age." For liturgy to be formative it requires not only good liturgy, but an openness to formation from those present at the liturgy.

addressing practical questions of the couple. When the Eucharistic liturgies, especially homilies, fall short in this formative aspect, couples need other resources to help them. The Eucharist can always provide a spiritual support, but the practical application to life and marriage may require other forums.⁹⁹

In *Familiaris consortio*, John Paul II also highlights the centrality of the Eucharist in a marital spirituality. “The Eucharist is the very source of Christian marriage....In this sacrifice of the New and Eternal Covenant, Christian spouses encounter the source from which their own marriage covenant flows, is interiorly structured and continuously renewed.”¹⁰⁰ John Paul II shows how a couple, by participating in the Eucharist, enters into the new and eternal covenant of Christ. Their marriage is a renewal and specific participation in the same covenant bond that they created in their baptism.

The Word of God and the Eucharist are essential elements of a marital spirituality. The Word will nourish and foster the covenantal understanding of the spouses as united with God, neighbor, ancestors and each other in an intimate and sacred manner. The Eucharist will keep the couple bound up in the mystery that is Christ who nourishes and makes their covenantal relationship possible. The Eucharist nourishes and continually ratifies their marital covenant. For “according to tradition, the Eucharistic covenant is the

⁹⁹ “The content of adult catechesis should be as comprehensive and diverse as the Church's mission. It should help adults to better understand the faith of the Church as well as its practical application in Christian living.” USCCB, *The National Directory for Catechesis*, 190.

¹⁰⁰ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, 86. John Paul II devotes a section of this Apostolic Exhortation to “Marriage and the Eucharist.” He shows the intimate bond that exists between these two covenant realities.

seal of the covenant of marriage.”¹⁰¹ Thus the Eucharist not only represents, images and strengthens a couple’s marriage, it is the very life and meaning of their marriage.

Moving toward an Integrated Marital Spirituality

Just as marriage rituals and the theology of marriage have evolved over the centuries, so too has marital spirituality. Spirituality, understood as the study of the spiritual life and its lived practice, has been articulated by the Church from its early inception. Yet many early Church writings do not adequately address marriage as a lived reality. Early writings often included misunderstandings about marriage and sexuality. Marital spirituality needs to be rooted in the real situations of families in order to avoid an “idealism that easily makes spirituality slip into spiritualization. But this is not so simple, since the reality of family life implies a whole host of varied experiences.”¹⁰² Therefore a marital spirituality must integrate the ordinary life of the married couple with their sacramental and spiritual experiences in life.¹⁰³ A truly integrated marital spirituality is incarnational, blending both nature and grace.

¹⁰¹ German Martinez, “The Newly Revised Roman Rite,” 136.

¹⁰² Marco Fabri dos Anjos, “Building a Spirituality of Family Life” in *Concilium: The Family* edited by Lisa Sowle Cahill and Dietmar Mieth (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1995), 99.

¹⁰³ “Just as husbands and wives receive from the sacrament the gift and responsibility of translating into daily living the sanctification bestowed on them, so the same sacrament confers on them the grace and moral obligation of transforming their whole lives into a ‘spiritual sacrifice.’” John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 56.

In *What God Has Joined*, Peter Elliott lays out five priorities that accompany the grace of marriage and contribute to an integrated spirituality of marriage.¹⁰⁴ Elliott's first priority entails believing in the life and power of the sacrament of marriage. The couple places their trust in God and not only in their own resources. This is not always easy. Even Jesus' own disciples questioned Jesus when he taught about marriage's lasting nature.¹⁰⁵ Elliott's first priority reveals that a couple cannot successfully live without God's abundant grace acting in their lives and marriage. If a couple is faithful in their commitment of marriage, God will in turn be faithful to them in providing all that they need. With God's grace active in their lives they can communicate grace to each other and consecrate each other. His second priority is the necessary embrace of the cross and resurrection that all couples must undertake. Christ was faithful to his Father's will and persevered to the end with "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."¹⁰⁶

Elliott's third priority calls married couples to commit to peace in their lives and in the world. By committing to peace, they and their family contribute to world peace. Their lives of peace will be a witness and a challenge to a world that lives in unrest. A

¹⁰⁴ dos Anjos, "Building a Spirituality of Family Life," 99. Some others who have developed guidelines for a marital spirituality are mentioned in dos Anjos' article. dos Anjos mentions that the 1980 Synod on the Family (proposition 36) developed a spirituality of the family under six headings which families have a sense of: Creation, Covenant, Cross, Resurrection, families are seen as a Sign, and as Eschatological Hope. dos Anjos goes on to develop four guidelines for a marital spirituality which include: the call to holiness, understanding of human love, gratuitousness in the light of Christ's loving-giving, and the calling to be people of God (102-104).

¹⁰⁵ See Mt. 19: 10 (NAB).

¹⁰⁶ Hebrews 11:1 (NAB).

fourth priority is living in the Eucharistic covenant. The fourth priority reaffirms the essentiality of the Eucharist for a marital spirituality. The final priority calls all couples to a persevering love. Elliott readily admits that there will be times of turmoil and pain, but if the spouses continue to cling to Jesus by trusting in Him and the grace of the sacrament both in their marriage and in the Eucharist. Couples will be able to embrace the cross while living lives of peace and work through difficulties by experiencing the healing light of the resurrection.¹⁰⁷ Elliott's priorities are one example of how the promises and vows the couples shared on their wedding day can be lived out in a marital spirituality.

Elliott's priorities provide a dynamic and hopeful framework for a marital spirituality that includes many essential aspects including the need for trust in God and one's marriage, the need for peace, a continual turning to the Eucharist as the model for the couple's marriage and the perseverance in love through difficulties. Elliott's priorities provide some basic principles for an integrated understanding of marriage and marital spirituality.¹⁰⁸

In order to appreciate fully Elliott's priorities, a couple must first understand the sacrament of marriage and see their lived reality as spiritual. So often couples do not

¹⁰⁷ Peter Elliott, *What God Has Joined*, 180-190. I have summarized the five priorities that Elliott lays out. The final priority of perseverance does not address the possibility of abuse in marriage in which one still must rely on the love of Christ while perhaps also separating themselves from the abuse to seek safety and healing. Perseverance in love never means putting up with abuse and deprecation of one's rightful dignity and respect as a human being. Also see USCCB, "When I Call for Help" (Washington DC: USCCB Publishing, 1992) <http://usccb.org/laity/help.shtml> (accessed December 29, 2010).

¹⁰⁸ See Martinez, "The Newly Revised Roman Rite," 131-132. German Martinez highlights three similar themes from the rite including: marriage as the divine source from which its goodness, unity, purpose, force and strength are derived; marriage's human bond making an indissoluble covenant which images God's relationship with his people; and sacramental marriage as signifying and sharing in the mystery of grace where Christ encounters the spouses.

realize their marital vows grant them access to a world of grace capable of transforming their married lives. While spiritually uplifting, Elliott's priorities do not discuss how the grace of the sacrament is lived out in the secular, ordinary, and mundane activities of daily life. His priorities provide an excellent model for seeking God, but they do not address the daily life and activities of a married couple. The priorities fail to show how simply being and living out one's marital vows and commitment, including all its tedious and mundane activities, can be sanctifying.

An integrated marital spirituality understands that the ordinary aspects of marriage can become opportunities for grace. In the mystery of the sacrament, doing laundry has a redemptive quality. Taking the car to get the oil replaced can mediate grace to one's spouse. Changing diapers can be sanctifying. These ordinary experiences of grace must be included in a spirituality of marriage and family life for it to be adequate. A sacramental and incarnational marital spirituality include the ordinary aspects of married life.

In *Family Spirituality: The Raw Ingredients of Faith*, Leif Kehrwald proposes that ordinary marriage and family life is holy in itself. Kehrwald affirms, "There is no more effective or natural atmosphere to nurture one's raw faith than the joys, sorrows, and regular stuff of household life."¹⁰⁹ He believes that "simply by being and having regular household life, families are holy."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Leif Kehrwald, *Family Spirituality: The Raw Ingredients of Faith* (Chicago: Assisting Christians to Act Publications, 1994), 11.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

Kehrwald indicates that the means to transform the ordinary into the holy is spirituality. Spirituality unites human experience to God's sacred presence.¹¹¹ A marital spirituality takes into account and incorporates one's daily activities. Kehrwald recommends,

Instead of eliminating those 'distractions' which comprise a great deal of our day (children, work, meal preparation, shopping, driving, etc.), why not seek truth and wholeness from within the 'distractions' themselves? Therefore, a family spirituality would see the activities of family life not as obstacles to faith, but as vehicles of faith.¹¹²

Kehrwald shows that integrating faith and daily living is essential for all states in life. "Amid the chaos and clutter of everyday living, amid the confusion and brokenness of strained relationships, or perhaps amid the solitude of a single person dwelling, God is present and active."¹¹³ God is filling couples with grace through their daily activities.

The administration of grace from God to the couple and from spouse to spouse begins sacramentally at the marriage celebration and continues to be lived out in their daily lives. In "Marriage Rites as Documents of Faith," Mark Searle affirms, "the couple do not merely minister the sacrament to each other: they become sacrament in assuming, fully, consciously, and actively, the sacramental role or vocation that the liturgy celebrates."¹¹⁴ In marriage the couple acts as minister of the sacrament and administers the grace of the sacrament to each other, thus creating a new relationship between them.

¹¹¹ Kehrwald, *Family Spirituality*, 2.

¹¹² Ibid., 3.

¹¹³ Ibid., 46.

¹¹⁴ Searle, "Marriage Rites," 245.

They are sacraments in the sense that their lives are now visible signs of invisible grace. The spouses actualize their royal priesthood, begun in baptism, in a new way to each other. They continue to minister the sacrament of marriage to each other throughout their lives together and their relationship moves beyond a merely contracted marriage to become a covenantal reflection of Christ and his Church.

In the marriage covenant, grace is a lived and loving relationship with God. Jesus sets the example for love by willingly giving his whole self to all who live in covenant with him. The grace bestowed upon spouses in marriage is the gift of themselves. The more the couple is able to selflessly become gift for the other, the more grace is actuated in their married life. As each spouse becomes more of a gift to the other, the more they image Christ.¹¹⁵

In their covenanted relationship spouses can be confident that they are no longer just two individuals struggling to make their marriage work, but two beloved children of God who have the power and grace of God at their disposal in times of need. Elliott affirms that, "Marriage does not depend only on the resources and skills of the couple, but on God."¹¹⁶ A couple is not alone in their marriage; in fact their marriage is unique because God is intimately involved. "The abiding reality of the grace of marriage is God's constant offer to spouses of a healing and elevating work, never separate from

¹¹⁵ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 13. "Their belonging to each other is the real representation, by means of the sacramental sign, of the very relationship of Christ with the Church." Later in article 17 the document states that in God a couple comes to know who they are as a family. "The family finds in the plan of God the Creator and Redeemer not only its identity, what it is, but also its mission, what it can and should do."

¹¹⁶ Elliott, *What God Has Joined*, 181.

their cooperation, from their actions.”¹¹⁷ God is an intimate dynamic force within the couple's marriage if they choose to allow God to work in their lives and relationship.¹¹⁸

This sacred and permanent bond is strengthened and enhanced through the daily choices and actions of the spouses. In the sacrament of marriage, ordinary actions of the couple can point to and be a sign of the covenantal bond between Christ and his Church. Due to their covenanted relationship, the non-sacramental ordinary activities of life participate in the sacramental. Thus in an integrated spirituality for the sacrament of marriage, the secular has the potential to become sacred.

Conclusion

The Second Vatican Council's renewed covenant understanding of marriage provides an ample theology for the development of an integrated and holistic marital spirituality.¹¹⁹ The fruits of Vatican II's marital theology are reflected in the 1969 *Rite of Marriage*. Marriage understood as a covenant enriches the theology of marriage and has been affirmed since Vatican II. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* have continued Vatican II's covenant language

¹¹⁷ Elliott, *What God Has Joined*, 181.

¹¹⁸ USCCB, *The National Directory of Catechesis*, 143.

¹¹⁹ Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 5. Hughes notes that "After the Council, talking about liturgical reforms provided an opportunity to make the language of and about the liturgy more accessible to the community." This accessibility assisted couples in being able to see the wedding liturgy as a formative event that could help them live out their faith in married life.

when discussing marriage. “The covenant between the spouses is integrated into God’s covenant with man.”¹²⁰

The *Rite of Marriage*’s brief theology of marriage outlines a covenantal understanding of marriage that has major implications for developing a robust spirituality of marriage. The rite allows for an integrated and holistic spirituality that includes ordinary life, social interaction, and sacramental experiences. The covenantal perspective of marriage helps correct misguided notions of marriage. A renewed marital spirituality can free couples to live out the richness and beauty of their covenant in the world as a model of the love of Christ for his Church.

Through the transformational power of the marriage rite, the secular has the ability to become sanctifying. It is here in the ordinary secular reality that married couples “live and move and have their being.”¹²¹ The vows change the couple and the way they relate to the world. Through consent, the couple creates a sacred bond, a covenant with each other and with God.¹²² Since this covenantal bond has God as its author and guarantor, once created it is indissoluble.

The sacrament of marriage is lasting and fruitful because the couple’s decision has the backing, insurance and guarantee of God. The rite states that the couple gives “irrevocable consent” to one another, which creates an irrevocable bond between the

¹²⁰ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1601 and 1639. Also see *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, 281.

¹²¹ Cf. Acts 17: 28 (NAB).

¹²² USCCB, *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, 281.

couple.¹²³ This bond creates for each of them a spiritual posture of response to God and each other. This new orientation of the grace of the sacrament of baptism is now focused upon each other, God and the world.¹²⁴ The couple's daily life and relationship, including all the ordinary circumstances of life, become a means of grace. In the covenant relationship, there is no practical decision, no ordinary activity, and no menial task that falls outside of the relation to this sacred covenantal bond. Even the most ordinary activities, especially the ordinary activities, can support or detract from their covenantal relationship.

The challenge remains to move this rich, dynamic theology of marriage as seen in the *Rite of Marriage* into the lived, everyday experience of married couples. For the *Rite of Marriage* to bear fruit in daily life, couples need to understand the vows and promises from their wedding day that began their marriage covenant. On their wedding day they professed the core teachings of married life to one another. In marriage they are daily living out the vows for better or worse. The couple can experience the power of the sacrament of marriage by taking time to re-examine their vows and to reflect on how they live the sacrament of marriage in their daily married life.

¹²³ ICEL, *The Rites*, no. 2, 720.

¹²⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1968), no. 25. "Christian married couples, then, docile to her voice must remember that their Christian vocation, which began at baptism, is further specified and reinforced by the sacrament of matrimony."

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The project provides married couples an opportunity to enrich their marriage through catechesis and theological reflection on the sacrament of marriage utilizing an online blog. Theological reflection, a reflective process that relates a person's life experience to the Christian faith, provides a methodology for couples to engage in a mystagogy on the sacrament of marriage. Mystagogy, the time after the reception of a sacrament for reflection on the sacrament and its implications for one's life, is an opportune time for theological reflection. The project also integrates mystagogy and blogging in such a way that they work in conjunction with each other to enhance the couple's reflective process. Using theological reflection as a method of mystagogy creates a dialectical conversation between faith and experience so that each informs and enriches the other.

The theological reflection process offers a methodology that allows spouses to understand the meaning and implications of their professed vows and the vow's impact on their daily lived experience. Following reflection, the couple will better understand the covenant union lived out in a domestic church that was formed on their wedding day. They will be able to see their daily lives as opportunities for grace that transforms the ordinary activities of life into extraordinary moments of grace.¹

¹ "Christian spouses and parents are included in the universal call to sanctity. For them this call is specified by the sacrament they have celebrated and is carried out concretely in the realities proper to their conjugal and family life." John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 56.

The reflective process enables spouses to examine their lived experience in order to plumb its richness and depth. In *The Art of Theological Reflection*, Patricia O'Connell Killen and John de Beer reveal theological reflection's lifelong implications. The authors postulate that learning to recognize the process that teaches wisdom from ordinary life events is the basis for theological reflection.² Killen and de Beer believe this process can become intentional in a person's life and reveal deeper meaning in ordinary events allowing couples to learn from their experiences through reflection. The intentional use of theological reflection to gain insight and meaning from a life event (such as one's wedding day) makes theological reflection particularly appropriate for the project. Killen and de Beer present theological reflection as providing a systematic and flexible process for married couples to use as a means of integrating their faith into daily life. The project uses theological reflection because it makes the reflective process intentional and focuses on specific experiences to aid couples growth in wisdom.

This chapter will examine mystagogy and theological reflection as a means for couples to apply their marital promises and vows to their married life. The mystagogical process will use theological reflection as its methodology to assist couples in discovering the spiritual nature of marriage. Theological reflection will aid couples in integrating their Catholic faith with ordinary daily experience of their married life. The reflective process in this project will provide faith formation utilizing new media. A blog will allow couples to learn the Church's teachings on marriage and to share reflections with their

² Patricia O'Connell Killen and John de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), xi.

spouse and other couples online. Each aspect of the project's method: mystagogy, theological reflection and social media will be examined through related Church documents, theological and secular commentary about these subjects.

Mystagogy

The project's purpose is to provide by way of an online blog a mystagogical reflection on the sacrament of marriage. The *National Directory for Catechesis* states that mystagogy

is the phase of liturgical catechesis that aims to incorporate the neophytes more deeply into the mystery of Christ through reflection on the Gospel message and the experience of the sacraments they have received. It gives them the opportunity to relive the great events of salvation history and help them to open themselves to the spiritual understanding of the economy of salvation.³

Married couples will benefit from the process of reflection on their experience of marriage as they recall the great event in salvation history, their wedding day.

Mystagogical reflection helps couples acquire a deeper spiritual understanding of the role that their marriage plays in their life journey.

Familiaris consortio highlights the importance of mystagogy calling for a marriage preparation that is "similar to the catechumenate."⁴ Modern marriage preparation is meant to be a formalized and systematic presentation of the faith similar to the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. Yet mystagogy is missing from most sacramental preparation programs. The catechetical and reflective process of preparation

³ USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis*, 117.

⁴ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 66.

is meant to continue after the wedding day. *Familiaris consortio* highlights the vital need for mystagogy in marriage:

Once more there appears in all its urgency the need for evangelization and catechesis before and after marriage, effected by the whole Christian-community, so that every man and woman who gets married celebrates the sacrament of matrimony not only validly but also fruitfully.⁵

In order for marriage to be more than valid and bear fruit in the couple's life together an ongoing process of evangelization and catechesis is needed after the marriage ceremony. Mystagogical reflection can provide the needed post-marriage formation.

Mystagogical reflection aids a couple in viewing the sacrament of marriage as a lived mystical expression of Christ in the world.⁶ Ideally those entering married life have knowledge of what to expect, a desire to know more and a willingness to enter more deeply into the life of faith.⁷

Mystagogy: Grounded in Experience

The experience of the *Rite of Marriage* for couples can be evangelizing and catechetical. The *National Directory for Catechesis* affirms that,

Catechesis both precedes the Liturgy and springs from it. It prepares people for a full, conscious, and active participation in the Liturgy by helping them understand its nature, rites, and symbols. It stems from the Liturgy insofar as it helps people to worship God and to reflect on their experience of the words, signs, rituals, and symbols expressed in the Liturgy; to discern its implications of the participation in

⁵ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 68.

⁶ John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae* (October 16, 1979), no. 23.
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_16101979_catechesi-tradendae_en.html (accessed August 31, 2010).

⁷ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 66.

the Liturgy; and to respond to its missionary summons to bear witness and offer service. And the Liturgy itself is inherently catechetical.⁸

The richness of the *Rite of Marriage* can transform a couple's married life through the process of mystagogy. Reflection on the words, signs, rituals and symbols after the wedding transforms the couple's understanding of their experience of marriage.

Kathleen Hughes suggests that mystagogy is not a new process. She writes that the mystagogical method is "a method that flourished in the early church, although relatively untested in contemporary liturgical studies."⁹ Early Christians used mystagogy for neophytes as a post-baptismal reflection on the mystery of the rites they experienced. By the early medieval period mystagogy, like the catechumenate, had fallen into disuse.¹⁰ During the middle ages when baptism switched from primarily adults to infants, "mystagogy was no longer appropriate or useful."¹¹

Hughes sees the importance of reviving and maintaining the rich tradition of mystagogy. "Mystagogy is a word borrowed from Greek; it means, literally, the 'interpretation of mystery' or the 'teaching of mystery.'"¹² Mystagogy allows the rich meaning found in the faith tradition to come alive through reflection on the "experience

⁸ USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis*, 110.

⁹ Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 8.

¹⁰ Ibid., 12.

¹¹ Ibid., 13.

¹² Ibid., 9.

of the liturgy in new yet ancient ways.”¹³ Hughes points out that “the sacramental experience continues through a period of reflection on the journey and its celebration.”¹⁴ Sacraments are meant to be reflected upon before, during and after their celebration.

Mystagogy begins after the marriage liturgy when the couple can pose questions about their experience of various ritual elements and what they meant.¹⁵ The spouses should be able to describe the liturgy in their own words and what it meant for them to say their vows. They can reflect upon “the deeper symbolic meanings of each word and ritual action.”¹⁶ The process of theological reflection provides structure and form to this mystagogical reflection.

Kathleen Hughes shows that mystagogy is an extremely personal encounter with one’s experience:

Personal experience is the other indispensable focus of mystagogy. Thus, imagination and memory are critical to the mystagogical process. The key to mystagogical reflection is that it is subjective rather than objective; it is about my experience and your experience of an encounter with God through the sacramental celebration.¹⁷

¹³ Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 9.

¹⁴ Ibid., 13. Later on page 15, Hughes notes that, “The period of Mystagogy is the least developed part of the RCIA process. The extension of this process to other sacraments is dependent in part on a greater attention to the practice of mystagogy in the Easter season.”

¹⁵ “The most critical element for successful mystagogy is well-celebrated rites. Excellent, careful, well-planned and well-executed liturgy is first-level mystagogy.” Ibid., 16. Liturgy itself can teach. If the wedding liturgy is done well, it provides rich symbols and memories for couples to contemplate for years to come.

¹⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹⁷ Ibid., 15.

Mystagogy requires people to understand their experience in order to identify with and learn from it. "In all cases, its function was to help its hearers enter the world of the liturgy, walk around inside it, explore their experiences of its sights and sounds and smells, savor its memory, ponder the meaning of what was said and done, and live out of its vision."¹⁸ Mystagogy encounters the sights, sounds and smells of the ritual so that learning is not only theoretical but experiential and tangible.

In *Theological Reflection: Connecting Faith and Life*, Joye Gros sees the need for reflection to help couples put their feelings and beliefs in dialogue with Christian tradition. She believes that many ritual symbols and actions can be taken for granted by the couple. The deeper meaning is lost unless the couple examines the symbols and actions.¹⁹

Reflection assists the couple in looking at a familiar experience with a fresh perspective. Uniting the wedding event with the faith tradition allows couples to continue to celebrate their marriage through reflection. Sacramental reflection constitutes a catechesis enabling "the believer to reflect on the meaning of the sacrament received by implementing a thorough experience of mystagogia following the celebration."²⁰

¹⁸ Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 9.

¹⁹ Joye Gros, O.P., *Theological Reflection: Connecting Faith and Life* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002), 13.

²⁰ USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis*, 114.

Mystagogy is not meant to be just for neophytes. All the baptized can benefit from mystagogy.²¹

Gros proposes that examining one's experiences allows for new insights and the ability to see life more deeply and clearly. The examination process allows a person "to see the wonders God has done and is doing in our lives."²² Experiences carry ideas and feelings that allow people to see God's continuing presence and action in their lives.²³

Sacramental Imagination

For mystagogical reflection to be effective, a sacramental imagination is needed to enter deeply into one's experience. In the article, "Images and Worship," Mark Searle reveals the necessary development of a Christian's individual and collective imagination and the role imagination plays in sacramental life. The intersection of imagination and sacrament is particularly necessary in the sacrament of marriage if a couple is to unite their individual lives and live a unique marital spirituality that was inaugurated with the exchange of vows. A well formed imagination is essential not only for conducting good

²¹ Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 13. On page 10, Kathleen Hughes cites some common characteristics of the mystagogical process: "the sacramental rites are inspiration and focus; the approach to the rites is sequential; the experience of the participants is valued; memory and imagination play a key role; the language employed is one of poetry rather than prose, of metaphor and image rather than didactic exposition."

²² Gros, *Theological Reflection*, 11. On page 8 Gros also notes that, "Our experience is complex in that what happened to us in the past acts as a filter for our present experiences."

²³ *Ibid.*, 9. Later on page 10, Gros states, "The Judeo-Christian Tradition can be seen as a constellation of human experiences that have been recognized as revealing God's presence and care for the world."

liturgy but also for living out the call and demands that liturgy makes on those who participate.

Wedding vows themselves make demands of faithfulness, fruitfulness, fidelity and freedom. This is clearly evident in the sacrament of marriage where a couple comes to the sacrament as two individuals and leaves the sacrament as one body living a new mysterious and yet concrete reality as a communion of persons. To live in mystery and engage in mystagogical reflection requires a sacramental imagination.

Searle mentions that good mystagogy discusses what happened sacramentally and engages the multitude of associations evoked by the ritual and prayer and opens the person to a spiritual reality that is not visible.²⁴ Mystagogy practically reveals how the concrete words and gestures “yield a glimpse of the world invisible.”²⁵ Mystagogical reflection on a blog moves from the lived sacramental experience to its applications for life in the world. The reflective process contributes to a mystagogical catechesis of marriage which can assist a couple in developing their unique expression of marital spirituality.

After the wedding, a couple leaves the Church a new entity, a new reality before God and the world. In many ways they are the same, yet they are radically transformed in the sacrament. A sacramental imagination enables the couple to see themselves and their relation to one another as forever changed. The couple is changed not just through their

²⁴ Mark Searle, “Images and Worship,” *The Way* 24 (April 1984): 112.

²⁵ Ibid.

own decision, but changed through the *Rite of Marriage*. Mystagogical reflection is a means to assisting couples in seeing life with new eyes, eyes of faith.

Searle rightly notes that this glimpse of the invisible world coming from the visible is not achieved simply by reforming the rites and the texts of the Church (although this can assist in achieving a new vision). Developing a sacramental imagination is more than merely developing a program for couples. Developing a sacramental imagination allows a couple to personally encounter the liturgical visible signs and symbols.

Searle believes that using sacramental imagination in mystagogy is something each person can do and will lead to “an exploration of the possibilities of a more contemplative approach to liturgical participation.”²⁶ Through mystagogical reflection, participants explore their vows using sacramental imagination to see new possibilities of how to live the sacrament of marriage each day.

Learning to apply a symbol or ritual action to one’s life requires imagination. Symbols call for a person to identify with their meaning. The imaginative aspects of mystagogy will challenge some participants to enter into a way of seeing and thinking that is not common. Mystagogical reflection engages more than just the cognitive aspects of a person and their experience; it encourages a person to be open to new meaning.

Mystagogy as Communal Lifelong Faith Formation

The *National Directory for Catechesis* calls for a renewal in the use of mystagogy because “mystagogy represents the Christian’s lifelong education and formation in the

²⁶ Searle, “Images and Worship,” 113.

faith."²⁷ Mystagogy is useful as adult faith formation. Kathleen Hughes suggests that if mystagogy is lifelong and “for all believers, then it follows that it is a lifelong commitment to learning and deepening, knowing and understanding and loving.”²⁸ Mystagogical reflection is a constitutive element on a person’s lifelong journey toward God. Hughes sees the use of mystagogy as an important “form of catechesis appropriate to all practicing believers.”²⁹ She believes that the reflective process will help people break out of an individualistic religious mentality through sharing their faith with others. Mystagogy helps the married couple realize that they now form an intimate communion that draws them outside of themselves to their spouse, God and neighbor. The faith community provides ongoing faith formation that can support a marriage throughout its duration.

In *The Art of Theological Reflection*, Killen and de Beer discuss how the reflective process draws persons into community. Mystagogy unites people on a common journey to share and interpret their experiences while moving toward insight.³⁰ Sharing one’s experience allows others to relate to it. Sharing their marital experiences unites married couples and draws them into community with others who share their vocation.

²⁷ USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis*, 117.

²⁸ Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁰ “Living from a standpoint of exploration in this way draws us into community. In a paradoxical fashion, as we increasingly enter our own experience as a first step in the movement toward insight, both our desire and our need increase for companions and for sources of wisdom from outside ourselves that can help us interpret our experience.” Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 17.

Mystagogical reflection is not meant to be done alone. "The Christian community, past and present, offers companionship in the process of moving toward insight."³¹ As married couples share common experiences with each other, the bonds of community are enriched.

Theological Reflection

Theological reflection is a way of viewing everyday situations and events from the eyes of faith. What happens at home, work or during play can all contribute to a cohesive pattern of life. Everyday life, reflected upon, can be a path to holiness. Using theological reflection as a method for mystagogy allows for a mystagogical reflection process enriching a couple's marriage.

Familiaris consortio states that "the whole Church is obliged to a deep reflection and commitment, so that the new culture now emerging may be evangelized in depth."³² The whole Church, including married couples, participates in evangelization by reflecting on the sacraments. Theological reflection begins a process of evangelization by evangelizing oneself before moving to reach out to others. Other lives will be evangelized as married couples reflect upon, understand and embrace the sacrament of marriage.

The *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* states how some couples lose the sacramental vision of their married life:

³¹ Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 46.

³² John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 8.

Some families may not understand themselves as a domestic church. Perhaps they consider their family too broken to be used for the Lord's purposes. They need to remember that a family is holy not because it is perfect, but because God's grace is at work in it.³³

Mystagogical reflection using theological reflection helps couples see their call and path to holiness amidst the daily joys and struggles of married life.

The *General Directory for Catechesis* states that God is acting and revealing himself through revelation and Christian tradition.³⁴ Exploring one's faith tradition through the process of theological reflection allows the treasure of faith to transform lives.³⁵ Theological reflection remembers the past that gives meaning to the present and direction to the future.³⁶

Killen and de Beer provide a definition of theological reflection that values human experience:

Theological reflection is the discipline of exploring individual and corporate experience in conversation with the wisdom of a religious heritage. The conversation is a genuine dialogue that seeks to hear from our own beliefs, actions, and perspectives, as well as those of the tradition. It respects the integrity of both.³⁷

Theological reflection challenges people to explore their experience and relate it to the Christian tradition.

³³ USCCB, *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, 376.

³⁴ USCCB, *General Directory for Catechesis*, nos. 36 and 37.

³⁵ Gros, *Theological Reflection*, 11.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

Theological Reflection: Uniting Experience with Church Tradition

Human experience is vitally important in the process of theological reflection.

The *National Directory for Catechesis* states,

Human experience is a constituent element in catechesis. It is the human element in the person's encounter with the word of God. Human experience provides the sensible signs that lead the person, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, to a better understanding of the truths of the faith. They are the means through which human beings come to know themselves, one another, and God.³⁸

Appreciating the value of human experience requires entering into experience on a deeper level. Superficial living does not allow for deep reflection and meaning. Using the five senses and noticing what is taking place can lead to discoveries of meaning and insight that can change the way one views the world and their place in it.³⁹

Theological reflection requires people to enhance their ability to notice and describe their experiences. Typically, people do not discover the deeper meaning of events immediately.⁴⁰ Delving deeper into experience allows the fundamental questions of life emerge.⁴¹ Killen and de Beer admit that theological reflection may seem awkward at first because it requires paying attention to reflective movements that have been done

³⁸ USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis*, 97.

³⁹ Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 17.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, x.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 77. On page 55, Killen and de Beer state, "We call our life stories or lived narratives the action source. In the movement toward insight we begin with this source most frequently."

unconsciously until now. By practicing processes of theological reflection couples will develop skill and comfort with theological reflection.⁴²

Kathleen Hughes recalls that early Christians spoke about the mysteries of initiation after the newly baptized had a personal experience of the rites. The “visual testimony of the rites” made neophytes more open to teaching.⁴³ Following the experience of marriage, couples will be more capable of discussing the experience and how the Christian tradition may impact their lived experience of marriage. The ideal of marriage is confronted with the reality of marriage. Faith and life intersect.

Theological reflection enriches a couple’s marriage and faith life by teaching them to discern God's presence in their lives and marital experiences. It allows them to look deeper into their lived experience and find God in the midst of life. Killen and de Beer discuss how theological reflection puts experience into a genuine conversation with religious heritage. The Christian tradition becomes a reliable source of guidance to discover the meaning of what God is doing in a person’s life.⁴⁴ New meaning is discovered by allowing experiences to reveal their innate spiritual quality. By uniting experience with formal tradition, a new theological language is applied to one’s experience. “The tradition source includes authoritative Scriptures, doctrinal teachings,

⁴² Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 79. On page viii, Killen and de Beer state, “Unless adult Christians engage in critical and conscious theological reflection, the Christian community's faithfulness to the gospel and its authentic witness to that gospel in the world diminishes.”

⁴³ Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 11.

⁴⁴ Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, viii.

stories of denominational heroes and heroines, saints, church history, official church documents, and the like."⁴⁵

In *Theological Reflection: Connecting Faith and Life*, Joye Gros discusses how the fragmentation of life causes many people to long for integration.⁴⁶ Theological reflection is a model and method that assists people in the process of finding this integration. The author proposes theological reflection as a means to find congruence and meaning in life. Likewise, Gros proposes that theological reflection provides the framework to look deeply into ordinary life experiences.⁴⁷

Gros challenges people to view tradition as more than just what they learned in early religious education. While religious education is important in faith development, the tradition used "in theological reflection is the doctrines, dogmas, teachings, and understandings of sacred Scripture."⁴⁸ In theological reflection, married couples relate their wedding and marital experience with Catholic tradition. The faith tradition provides new questions and understanding about their experience. Although it may feel awkward at first, using theological reflection can become a natural and regular strategy helping couples become aware of the deeper dimensions of life.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 55. The online mystagogical reflection project made use of each of these sources for reflection and insight.

⁴⁶ Gros, *Theological Reflection*, xii.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 49.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 57.

The Project's Theological Reflection Process

In *The Art of Theological Reflection*, Killen and de Beer discuss a process of theological reflection that includes five parts: experience, feelings, images, insight, and action.⁵⁰ The clearly defined steps and concise process of theological reflection presented by Killen and de Beer make their description of theological reflection particularly useful for this project. The participants are unfamiliar with theological reflection and will need clear and concise instructions to theologically reflect on a life experience. This project integrates the five steps of theological reflection in the online blog.

Each aspect of theological reflection takes a person to a deeper level of understanding. While the movement is organic, it does require a person to learn and embrace the process. At any point a person may experience resistance, which is natural, but ought not to end the process prematurely. Only in completing the process can a person truly see the relationship between life and faith.

Killen and de Beer see the profoundly divine aspect of human experience:

Theological reflection is the process of seeking meaning that relies on the rich heritage of our Christian tradition as a primary source of wisdom and guidance. It presumes the profoundly incarnational (God present in human lives), providential (God caring for us), and revelatory (source of deepening knowledge of God and self) quality of human experience.⁵¹

⁵⁰ “Think of them as related in a circular spiral: action, by leading to new experiences in our lives, propels us back to experience. The movement is this: When we enter our experiences, we encounter our feelings. When we pay attention to those feelings, images arise. Considering and questioning those images may spark insight. Insight leads, if we are willing and ready, to action.” Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 21.

⁵¹ Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, xi.

Seemingly ordinary experiences reveal God's active involvement in life.

Theological reflection begins by reentering an experience. Busy lives, preoccupation with other thoughts, prejudices or preconceived ideas may block potentially life changing meanings from emerging from life's significant events. When a person reenters their experience with an open mind it allows something new to emerge. The newness may be a revelation to the person and can come from events that happened long ago. To reenter the experience a person narrates the experience and describes it in detail.⁵² The narrative process allows the symbolic and interconnective aspects of the experience to emerge.

Through theological reflection couples discuss their marital experience in depth, determine what aspects to reflect upon and deliberately incorporate the Christian tradition into their reflection. In order to focus the experience and reflection, a singular event must be isolated.⁵³ In this project, the event will be the sacrament of marriage which began with the wedding promises and vows. As the experience is described, feelings will naturally emerge and be noted in the process. The thoughts, feelings and experience from the wedding are clearly recalled. The feelings from the experience provide an emotional context for the facts described in the first step of theological reflection.

⁵² Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 24. On page 25, the authors state, "The classic guidelines of telling 'who' did 'what,' 'when,' 'where,' and 'how,' provide the outline."

⁵³ "We cannot reflect on experience in its entirety. We need manageable pieces of experience in order to reflect, so we take a single event or issue and focus on that for reflection. We freeze experience in a moment of time and separate it into aspects or sources." Ibid., 59.

Throughout the descriptive recollection process a temptation is to prematurely seek meaning by asking, why. Done too early, this can derail the reflective process. As the experience and associated feelings are described, Killen and de Beer ask that participants let images develop in their minds. The images symbolize a person's experience and try to capture the totality of their response to reality in a given situation.⁵⁴ The authors believe that images are less rationalized and therefore can better include the feeling of the event. The images can lead the reflective person to a new and potentially profound insight.

The final step of theological reflection as described by Killen and de Beers moving from the insight in the fourth step to concrete action in the final step. The authors acknowledge that overcoming the human tendency of inertia to move from insight to action requires prayer, planning and other people.⁵⁵ Insights are not created by the person, but given to them as divine gifts. Insights, if engaged, allow the person to see new meaning in their experience and make better sense of their life. Faith becomes integrated with life.

As married couples employ theological reflection they begin to better understand what happened to them on their wedding day. Couples may discover new meaning from their wedding day as images emerge. Killen and de Beer note that theological reflection helps people make sense of what happened to them. They assert that theological

⁵⁴ Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 37.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 44.

reflection will provide “integrity, coherence, and significance” to life.⁵⁶ Couples will find marital support from recalling why they married and the meaning of their marital love. Lacking meaning, some couples lose the will to stay married. Knowing why they married and what they committed to on their wedding day can add renewed strength to a marital commitment.

By focusing reflection on the experience of sharing their wedding promises and vows, couples can plumb the depths of the *Rite of Marriage* and its implications for their life. The words of the rite will have new meaning in their present lives as they incorporate their lived marital experiences and apply the vows to their present daily lives. Now the couple is empowered to look at their vows with the wisdom of experience.

Asking probing questions to engage one’s experience is essential. “The questions for considering the key feeling or image form the narrative and make this reflection theological.”⁵⁷ Questions based on the *Rite of Marriage* used in this project for theological reflection will aid participants in unpacking symbolic and complex liturgical language.

As couples allow thoughts and images to come to mind, it is important for the couple to express their reflections and images in some form. Killen and de Beer anticipate a wide variety of expressions to assist the process of expressions. Giving shape to the feelings, images and insights that arise exteriorizes the reflection and moves it

⁵⁶ Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 45.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 73.

beyond mere thought.⁵⁸ This project will use an online blog to allow the participants to express their reflections. The group can affirm or challenge the shared reflections while also learning from each other. “Reflection on the important event of life in light of Christian faith” not only teaches couples the skill of theological reflection but enhances their meaning and lived experience of marriage by incorporating Christ’s teaching into their married life.⁵⁹

A simple framework for theological reflection allows couples to integrate the faith and the lived experience of their marriage commitment. Couples who are not comfortable or familiar with tradition or theological concepts will need help accessing and applying the faith tradition to experience. Done well, theological reflection becomes an effective adult catechesis that relates the content of the faith to life experience.⁶⁰ Killen and de Beer write that theological reflection helps people understand how the Christian tradition encountered “in liturgical, spiritual, or educational settings is the fruit of a human reflective process.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ “Regardless of the particular reflective process we use, we must give shape and form to the feelings, images, insights, and musings that come to us during reflection. We can write or draw them in a journal, verbalize them in a prayer, sculpt them in clay, or express them in dance. We can use whatever medium is comfortable and effective, but in some way we must exteriorize our reflection, move it out of the realm of thoughts.” Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 80.

⁵⁹ USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis*, 117.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁶¹ Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 75.

Theological Reflection: Moving from the Ordinary to the Divine

Mystagogical reflection entails using theological reflection as a method for mystagogy. Theological reflection offers couples a methodology to better understand the meaning and implications of their professed vows on their daily marital life.

Kathleen Hughes views mystagogy as a “mode of theological reflection.”⁶² As a mode of theological reflection, mystagogy helps couples to examine their marital vows and see how their present married lives compare to what they professed. Reflection helps couples remember and recapture their initial feelings of love and hope for the future, counteracting negative feelings that may have crept into marriage. Theological reflection renews the couple’s commitment, enriching their marriage. The reflective process allows the sacrament to become “a process of growth into an intimate friendship and a deepening peace”⁶³ for spouses. Through practice, couples will come to a deeper intimacy uniting their two wills in a common endeavor.

Kathleen Hughes believes that the mystagogical task for a person is

to reflect on their personal experience of celebration and what it triggered in their inner world, to move from a vague awareness of the mystery dimension of their lives to a greater conceptual and affective clarity, and to find a proper way to continue to allow the experience and expression to inform one another.⁶⁴

Couples can easily go through the wedding ceremony without understanding its rich symbolic meaning. They might even be disappointed by how ordinary the event was.

⁶² Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 16.

⁶³ USCCB, *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, 381.

⁶⁴ Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 15.

This is seen when couples want to personalize their wedding by writing their own vows or creating their own symbols so that their marriage ceremony is unique and different. Understanding the richness of the ritual could temper the desire for uniqueness. Hughes notes that their “initial disappointment is dispelled by wonder and awe as the ordinary becomes a vehicle for the divine.”⁶⁵

Married couples can also miss the richness the *Rite of Marriage* has for their lives. By getting lost in the ordinary daily tasks of married life, couples can lose a sense of purpose or fail to see the meaning of their marital responsibilities. Without meaning, married life can become drudgery.

A mystagogical form of theological reflection affords the couple a new look at their vows and their life together. Kathleen Hughes declares, “Spiritual perception reveals the inner meaning of the ordinary—of rite and accompanying word, since ritual words also formed part of the reflection and reinterpretation which is mystagogia.”⁶⁶ Killen and de Beer believe the theological reflection process can change lives. Ordinary life and ritual action, upon reflection, take on new meaning. Regular theological reflection forms people using the language of the Christian tradition.⁶⁷ Christian tradition and the Word of

⁶⁵ Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 11.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁶⁷ Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 83. The author states that theological reflection transforms people by the renewal of their minds so that they can discern God's will (Rom. 12:2).

God provide consolation and challenge to the couple and lead them to deeper reflection on the meaning of their choices and actions.⁶⁸

New Media as Pastoral Ministry

It is not uncommon for Catholics to believe that once a Catholic couple is married they will find their support network within the parish and that special programs are not necessary for them to successfully live their marriage vows. The *National Directory for Catechesis* says that, "Catechesis specifically for adults should be offered through all the stages of married life and should be the model for all other forms of catechesis in Christian marriage."⁶⁹ Couples in all stages of married life need support that adapts to their changing marriage. *Familiaris consortio* states,

Like every other living reality, the family too is called upon to develop and grow. After the preparation of engagement and the sacramental celebration of marriage, the couple begins their daily journey towards the progressive actuation of the values and duties of marriage itself.⁷⁰

Support is necessary as couples actuate the values and duties of marriage in a largely secular society.

Familiaris consortio calls the Church to begin new outreaches and enter the world of married couples and family life in order to know and serve its needs:

⁶⁸ Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 114.

⁶⁹ USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis*, 142.

⁷⁰ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 65.

Since God's plan for marriage and the family touches men and women in the concreteness of their daily existence in specific social and cultural situations, the Church ought to apply herself to understanding the situations within which marriage and the family are lived today, in order to fulfill her task of serving.⁷¹

Familiaris consortio anticipated the importance of this new means of communication. "It is well known that the means of social communication 'affect, and often profoundly, the minds of those who use them, under the affective and intellectual aspect and also under the moral and religious aspect,' especially in the case of young people."⁷² The Church must learn and enter the online world in order to assist modern Catholics.

The *National Directory for Catechesis* underscores the impact technology has in the United States. "The revolution in information technology provides the Church with unprecedented new ways to proclaim the Gospel in the United States."⁷³ Later the document adds, "The age of the computer has opened up the whole new world of cyberspace. As with all communications media, all the dimensions of cyberspace can be used as effective catechetical instruments."⁷⁴ The *Directory* claims that "the effective use of mass media has become essential for evangelization and catechesis."⁷⁵

⁷¹ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 4.

⁷² *Ibid.*, no. 75.

⁷³ USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis*, 25.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 290.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

The need for the effective use of new media is echoed by Pope Benedict XVI in his message for the forty-third World Communications Day, “New Technologies, New Relationships: Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship.” The Holy Father notes that new digital technologies are fundamentally shifting the way people communicate and even relate to one another. Benedict XVI points out,

Young people, in particular, have grasped the enormous capacity with the new media to foster connectedness, communication and understanding between individuals and communities, and they are turning to them as means of communicating with existing friends, of meeting new friends, of forming communities and networks, of seeking information and news, and of sharing their ideas and opinions.⁷⁶

Benedict XVI, rather than simply dismissing new technology, claims the interactive nature of new media “facilitates more dynamic forms of learning and communication, thereby contributing to social progress.”⁷⁷ The highly interactive nature of new media brings people together. Married couples often feel they live in isolation, especially when children are young. The Internet allows them to feel connected to others in similar life situations. The longing for communication and communion is natural and flows from humanity’s communal nature being made in the image and likeness of God.⁷⁸

The interactive nature of social media can help fulfill the *National Directory for Catechesis*’s call for adult catechesis that involves adults themselves in the process of

⁷⁶ Benedict XVI, Message for the 43rd World Communications Day, “New Technologies, New Relationships: Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship” (May 24, 2009) http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090124_43rd-world-communications-day_en.html (accessed October 6, 2009), 1.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 2.

teaching and learning, especially from one another.⁷⁹ Properly structured, online interaction facilitates mystagogical reflection. On a blog, married couples can teach and learn from each other's reflections on their experience and their promises and vows.

While the potential exists for great development using new media, Benedict XVI points to the importance of content. The modern world cannot just focus on the capacity to link people together, but also the quality of the content that the Internet is circulating. Information on the Internet should promote "a culture of respect, dialogue and friendship."⁸⁰ This information ought to build up the human person, human culture and marriage.

The reality in many parishes is that marriage ministry stops after the wedding. Ninety percent of Catholics married in the Church report having talked to their priest about the sacrament of marriage and the majority of them also attended other forms of marriage preparation.⁸¹ Yet only fifty-one percent of engaged couples discussed their religious views with their fiancée. Among couples that rarely attend Mass, only ten percent report having talked about their religious views before marriage.⁸² There is a great need to help couples discuss the sacrament of marriage before and after marriage, especially since Catholic couples infrequently discuss their religious views.

⁷⁹ USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis*, 192. See also NDC, 104, "The participation of adults in their own catechetical formation is essential, since they have the fullest capacity to understand the truths of the faith and live the Christian life."

⁸⁰ Benedict XVI, "New Technologies," 2.

⁸¹ Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 70.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 75.

The lack of discussion on faith and religion leads to a lack of action. Fifty-four percent of Catholic couples rarely or never pray with their spouse (other than Mass), sixty-eight percent rarely or never read the Bible with their spouse and fifty-nine percent of Catholics rarely or never participate in parish activities with their spouse.⁸³ Many couples do not understand the vast spiritual resources they have available to them in the sacrament of marriage and the Catholic Church. A new pastoral outreach is needed to assist couples in discussing the relevance and importance of religion, prayer and their marriage vows.

In *American Catholics Today*, the authors point out that “Catholics today do not need the Church as much as they used to. Younger generations of Catholics are less attached to the Church.”⁸⁴ Catholics, like other segments of the population are turning to the Internet and social networking sources to find fellowship and gather new information. To be effective evangelists, Catholics will have to venture into these tools of new media. In order to fulfill *Familiaris consortio*'s call for ‘concrete action’ and to show the family special love, effective pastoral outreach to married couples will have to include new media elements. If modern Catholic couples find their marital support in a variety of secular areas, the parish becomes less central to their lives.

In addition to the potential advances new media can make, the dangers must also be acknowledged and counteracted. Pope Benedict XVI warns, “It would be sad if our

⁸³ Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 77 and 79.

⁸⁴ D’Antonio et al., *American Catholics Today*, 149.

desire to sustain and develop on-line friendships were to be at the cost of our availability to engage with our families, our neighbors and those we meet in the daily reality of our places of work, education and recreation.”⁸⁵

In *Strong Fathers, Strong Daughters*, Meg Meeker verifies that in modern culture, couples and their families are spending more and more time on the computer. “Kids spend, on average, 6.5 hours per day with media. Twenty-six percent of the time, they are using more than one device. This means that 8.5 hours’ worth of media exposure per day is packed into 6.5 hours. (This is equivalent to a full-time job.)”⁸⁶

The mystagogical reflection on an online blog must not be an end in itself. Even reflection, via a blog, can turn in on itself and lead one to believe that they have no need for a larger community of faith. While reflections can lead to the conclusion that community is essential and active participation in a parish is beneficial to a couple, the tendency to stay connected only online is still present.⁸⁷

The use of an online blog has the ability to help couples come in contact with the truth and beauty of their marriage while at the same time developing a community of

⁸⁵ Benedict XVI, “New Technologies,” 3.

⁸⁶ Meg Meeker, M.D., *Strong Fathers, Strong Daughters: 10 Secrets Every Father Should Know* (Washington, DC: Regeneray Publishing, Inc., 2006), 22.

⁸⁷ Hugh Hewitt, *Blog: Understanding the Information Reformation That’s Changing Your World* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books Inc., 2005), 155. Hewitt, like Benedict XVI, notes a potential danger on the Internet and with blogs, yet encourages people to still venture into this frontier. “But potential for evil and mischief shouldn’t stop anyone from exploring and using the new world of the blogosphere, any more than caution ought to have stopped people from looking into television or radio when they made their appearances.”

couples on the same journey.⁸⁸ On the blog, the events and experiences of their lives intersect and unite around a common reality, their wedding day. Each couple has the common experience of saying their vows on their wedding day. Through mystagogical reflection, the deeper meaning of their marriage can be unearthed to yield benefits for all the couples who enter the online process.

Any online interactive evangelization will need to be aware of the dangers and work to explicitly welcome and draw couples into the larger community, a live community. Online tools have wonderful potential to reach out and draw people together, but it can never replace the genuine human need for face to face interaction and love. Blogs and other new media have the ability to “facilitate forms of co-operation between people from different geographical and cultural contexts that enable them to deepen their common humanity and their sense of shared responsibility for the good of all.”⁸⁹ The shared experience must encourage participants to move to action based on the insights learned through the online medium. If the online experience stops with participants only feeling connected and does not lead to genuine human connectedness, it is merely a false sense of community.

By embracing the world of new technologies and realizing their strengths and weaknesses, the Church has the ability to reach Catholics and married couples it may not

⁸⁸ “Life is not just a succession of events or experiences: it is a search for the true, the good and the beautiful. It is to this end that we make our choices; it is for this that we exercise our freedom; it is in this—in truth, in goodness, and in beauty—that we find happiness and joy.” Benedict XVI, “New Technologies,” 2.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 3.

have reached through other means. An enhanced knowledge of the technological world is necessary to engage Catholics and married couples using new media.⁹⁰

Mystagogical Reflection Using an Online Blog

When the 2007 CARA study, “Marriage in the Catholic Church” asked how married couples most want to learn more about Church teaching on marriage, forty-one percent said they wanted printed materials at their parish followed in a close second with thirty-nine percent requesting online resources (e.g., websites, emails, or blogs).⁹¹ While printed resources are often used in churches to educate parishioners, online resources are a rarely used and often untapped medium for catechesis. Younger generations requested online resources as their top preference for education, while the more traditional methods of retreats, mentor couples and homilies were their least requested medium. An added evangelizing advantage of the blog is that those who rarely attend Mass are most likely to express interest in online resources (and least likely to be interested in or acquire printed materials at the parish).⁹²

Online resources allow for groups to form around common interests and needs.

The *National Directory for Catechesis* notes the communal desire of people.

"Community life takes place in affinity groups of those with like interests or of those who

⁹⁰ “So also today, the proclamation of Christ in the world of new technologies requires a profound knowledge of this world if the technologies are to serve our mission adequately.” Benedict XVI, “New Technologies,” 3.

⁹¹ Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 38.

⁹² Ibid., 39.

associate at work, at school, or in other environments, such as over the Internet or via frequent face-to-face meetings."⁹³ Engaging Catholics in an online forum will meet the *Directory's* call for monitoring the rapid social and cultural trends in order for catechesis to be effective at introducing Christ to the people of today and uniting them in a modern communal setting.⁹⁴

The project's marriage blog will serve as a medium to connect people who share the common experience of a Catholic wedding. The blog assists mystagogical reflection by serving as a modern day small group and journal for people to theologically reflect upon their marriages and share their experiences with one another.⁹⁵

The Blog

In *Blog: Understanding the Information Reformation That's Changing Your World*, Hugh Hewitt notes that blogging, while being wildly popular, is also changing the way people share and receive information. Blogging began in 1999 and by 2005 there were over 4 million blogs in existence.⁹⁶ A blog can quickly reach many people with potentially new life changing information. Blogs are easy to start and do not require a lot

⁹³ USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis*, 27.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁹⁵ "When incorporating theological reflection into our faith practice it is valuable to keep a journal of theological reflections and musings and to review it periodically." Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 82.

⁹⁶ Hewitt, *Blog*, ix.

of computer knowledge. Blogging is helpful for those who may not have technical computer skills but do have a desire to share the Gospel using social media.

Blogging for Dummies by Susannah Gardner and Shane Birley provides a simple definition for a blog. A blog, derived from the word weblog, “is a chronologically ordered series of web site updates, written and organized much like a traditional diary right down to the informal style of writing that characterizes personal communication.”⁹⁷ Blogging allows for a wide variety of formats and styles and can be about whatever subject the author selects.⁹⁸

In *The Rough Guide to Blogging*, Jonathan Yang confirms that blogs are being used for a wide variety of purposes and allow for deep discussions on topics.⁹⁹ Yang estimates that “just over twenty percent of United States Internet users read blogs” with twelve percent (about twenty four million people) having blogs.¹⁰⁰

Yang provides an extensive description of a blog:

A blog, or weblog, is a special kind of website. The main page of each blog consists of entries, or posts, arranged in a reverse chronological order—that is, with the most recent post at the top. Typically, each entry is a short chunk of text, often with links to other websites, though photos are often included, and posts can

⁹⁷ Susannah Gardner and Shane Birley, *Blogging for Dummies*, second edition (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2008), 9. Another text that provides an overview of blogging is *The Huffington Post Complete Guide to Blogging*, editors of the Huffington Post (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2008).

⁹⁸ “The topic or topics you write about should excite you and hold your interest, and they can be about absolutely anything.” Ibid., 22.

⁹⁹ Jonathan Yang, *The Rough Guide to Blogging* (London: Rough Guides Ltd., 2006), 138. Later on page 143, Yang states, “Blogs can take discussion from the classroom—where time constraints often lead to shortened sound bites—onto the infinite land mass of the Internet.”

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 6.

also contain audio or video. Typically, a blog will also include the ability for readers to leave comments—making the whole affair much more interactive than a traditional website—as well as a list of the author’s favorite blogs, known as a blog roll.¹⁰¹

Hugh Hewitt notes the responsibility of the receivers of blog information. Each communication exchange requires recipients to think about the shared information in new ways. Receivers of information have a new responsibility to critically reflect on the information received.¹⁰² Hewitt observes that the way people acquire information is rapidly changing and sometimes the necessary reflection on the new information is being reduced or lost.¹⁰³ Presenting a mystagogical form of theological reflection on a blog will assist participants perform the necessary reflection on new information being presented.

Hewitt anticipates the challenges blogging will present for faith groups seeking to reach out to people.¹⁰⁴ The Church must capture people’s attention in order to spread the gospel. To share the message of Christ, people must trust the institution sharing the information. The Church needs to keep up with a rapidly changing society as people shift how they search for and acquire new information. If the Church does not have an Internet

¹⁰¹ Yang, *The Rough Guide to Blogging*, 3.

¹⁰² Hewitt, *Blog*, xiv.

¹⁰³ Ibid. The author notes that this change has happened throughout history with inventions such as the printing press, telegraph, telephone, radio, television and Internet.

¹⁰⁴ “People’s attentions are up for grabs. Trust is being transferred. If you or your business—or your faith, or your family—depend upon the steady trust of others in you, your institution, or your product, suddenly you are at sea.” Hewitt, *Blog*, xvii.

presence and people now use the Internet as a primary means to learn, the Church will not have an online voice to connect with people.¹⁰⁵

The vast amount of information and rapid rate at which information can be acquired online has affected people's patience in searching and waiting for information. "The attention span of most Americans—never long to begin with—is getting shorter and shorter. Authors cannot afford to hide their most important points in the back of the book."¹⁰⁶ Key information needs to be presented quickly and succinctly. In online mystagogical reflection the important questions must be clearly noted to help people target their key experiences and apply Christian tradition to them.

Since blogging is a nearly cost-free opportunity to share information and introduce new ideas, there are a vast number of blogs for people to read. Anyone who wants to share information can now easily create a forum to share their opinions. In order to get people to read one's blog, the author must earn credibility. Authority alone no longer carries the weight it once did and "doctrine" is easily produced and disseminated by anyone using the Internet. Information must be compelling to be heard. Truth can get lost amidst a sea of competing ideas. In order for the gospel to reach "all nations"¹⁰⁷ and people, the Church must go where people are going.

¹⁰⁵ Hewitt, *Blog*, xvii and 47-59. Hewitt compares the new information reformation to the Reformation that split Christianity in the sixteenth century. In this case the author states that the Roman Catholic Church was not able to respond to the new wide dissemination of the new information (Scripture) to an increasingly literate society.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰⁷ See Matthew 28: 19 (NAB).

Blogging for Dummies by Gardner and Birley discusses how success for a blog can be measured in a variety of ways. Number of readers, number or quality of comments, meeting a selected goal (fund raising, product sales, etc.) or even simply writing a blog post can all be means to measure success.¹⁰⁸ The authors mention that there are many aspects that make a blog successful. “Lots of elements work together to make a blog work well, from a well designed layout to fancy technical widgets, but none of these things can substitute for good content aimed at the right audience.”¹⁰⁹

In this project, creating a successful blog for mystagogical reflection will require individuals and couples to comment on the blog. Commenting on blogs encourages interaction with the author of the blog and other participants while creating valuable group reflection.¹¹⁰ Online interaction allows participants to read about others’ experiences and insights. Participant reflections can help move other participants to deeper insight.

Readers can comment on the author’s post or even comment on the comments of other participants, creating a virtual community built around a common topic. The author has the opportunity to interact with the blog participants, dialogue with them, get feedback and reactions about posts and share advice.¹¹¹ Gardner and Birley postulate that

¹⁰⁸ Gardner and Birley, *Blogging for Dummies*, 24.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 147.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 16. On page 25, Gardner and Birley state, “Comments are what make blogs really different from a Website; the opportunity to interact and converse with the creator of a Website and with other readers is almost unique to blogs.”

¹¹¹ Ibid., 26.

“most blog readers read and enjoy the comments left by others and often form a strong community feeling for fellow visitors.”¹¹²

Conclusion

Uniting couples around blog reflections on their marriage vows will build a virtual mystagogical reflection community. Using theological reflection as a method of mystagogy on the sacrament of marriage will assist couples to learn to integrate the Church’s teachings on the sacrament of marriage with their daily lived experience. Couples will recall their wedding experience and the feelings and images of the day. The theological reflection will lead to insights that will empower new meanings and actions in the couple’s life together. New media will reach and unite couples that might never normally interact and help them form an online community. This project’s model and method can be adapted for use as a tool across a broad spectrum of adult catechesis.

¹¹² Gardner and Birley, *Bloggng for Dummies*, 157.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

The 2007 CARA study, “Marriage in the Catholic Church: A Survey of U.S. Catholics,” found that seventy-one per cent of Catholics say they have heard that marriage between two baptized people is a sacrament.¹ Most Catholics do know marriage is a sacrament, but there is still need for ongoing reflection to allow this sacred reality to be lived out in daily life. Much of the richness and depth of the *Rite of Marriage* can be lost without a mystagogical reflection on the vows and promises from a couple’s wedding day. Catholic married couples participating in an online mystagogical reflection on marriage can enhance their ability to live out the sacrament of marriage as a daily reality.

This chapter will discuss the implementation of the four week online mystagogical reflection blog. Anticipating who the blog participants would be impacted the formatting and design of the project. Seeking younger married couples required a means that would make attendance convenient and meet the couples’ unique needs. The blog format is intended to engage couples amidst their busy lives. The role of the facilitator helps guide and direct the discussion as well as foster interaction when needed. The facilitator also seeks to meet emerging needs and questions throughout the reflection process. The registration process sought helpful information about participants and their

¹ Gray et al., *Marriage in the Church*, 40.

knowledge of Church teaching on marriage. The four week mystagogical reflection process, including participant comments, will be discussed in this chapter.

Reaching Married Couples

The candidate developed an online marriage enrichment blog to assist Catholic married couples reflect on their vows. The blog provides a convenient, easily accessible and flexible means for couples to learn more about their faith and to reflect on the meaning and implications their marriage vows have in their present lives. Mystagogy on the sacrament of marriage is not an opportunity that is often provided for couples.

The blog is intended to meet the needs of busy couples who may not have the time, energy or desire to travel to a parish for a marriage enrichment program. Some couples who no longer attend Mass or Church activities may feel more comfortable and open to participating in an online blog to support their marriage. They can learn about their faith and marriage while remaining at home and somewhat anonymous.

The blog can serve as a means to overcome some of the reasons couples will not attend Church or Church activities for adults. In *A Concise Guide to Adult Faith Formation*, Neil Parent discusses research as to why Catholic adults do not attend adult faith formation programs. The most common reason is busy schedules and other family or social responsibilities (twenty percent). Other reasons include: considering themselves non-joiners (nineteen percent), programs do not meet their needs or are scheduled at inconvenient times (eighteen percent) and feeling alienated from Church teaching or

practice (thirteen percent).² Parent makes the argument that catechetical leaders need to put more emphasis on adult formation that is independent and self-directed because modern adult life is busy.

The Internet can be a vehicle in adult faith formation that will change educational paradigms. The addition of online formation is necessary as church attendance declines and people are increasingly learning less about the Catholic faith through traditional modes.³ The use of an online blog has the potential to overcome some of these challenges and to reach people that traditional face to face programs do not.

The Catholic Church in the United States is experiencing a changing pastoral reality. Social media and the Internet are changing the way people receive information about the faith and even pastoral care. It is essential for those in pastoral leadership to notice and respond to the changing reality in order to better meet the needs of those being served. This project recognizes the changing pastoral reality and reaches out in a new way to married couples.

The project's purpose is to design, pilot and evaluate an online interactive blog that will offer married couples opportunities to theologically reflect on the sacramental vows they committed themselves to on their wedding day; understand that their path to holiness is intimately related to their sacramental vows and is now expressed in their daily interactions together in their domestic church; and share reflections in conversation

² Neil A. Parent, *A Concise Guide to Adult Faith Formation* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2009), 125.

³ Ibid., 85.

with their spouse and in writing with other couples in the online blog community. Additionally, the project will provide additional online marriage enrichment resources on a blog roll as a gateway to other resources on marriage and the Church. Through the online experience, couples will have a new appreciation of their married life and a deeper understanding of the Church's teachings on marriage and how they apply and enrich their daily life.

Project Format

The project provides education and dialogue leading to a deeper spiritual understanding of marriage. The pilot group consisted of eight Catholic couples of various ages and regional locations. The project was conducted completely over the Internet via an online blog. The participants were given reflections each Monday and Thursday for four weeks beginning on Monday March 8, 2010. The blog provided the couples with an opportunity to reflect theologically on their wedding vows and on how their vows impact their daily life. Each of the eight sessions included: an educational component, guidelines to facilitate the couples' reflection and discussion, and an opportunity for participants to share a verbal reflection with their spouse and a written reflection with blog participants. The reflections were composed by the candidate using the *Rite of Marriage* and other materials found in the bibliography of this project.

The online blog reflections were designed following the theological reflection model proposed by Patricia O'Connell Killen and John de Beer in *The Art of Theological Reflection* and Joye Gros' *Theological Reflection: Connecting Faith and Life*. Killen and

de Beer provide an in depth description of theological reflection, while Gros provides a concise method for theological reflection that is accessible for Catholics not possessing theological formation. The systematic presentation of theological reflection found in Killen and de Beer's work provide clear directions for using theological reflection. The five steps for theological reflection of experience, feelings, images, insight, and action were followed and adapted to meet the needs of the project.⁴

Gros provides a broad overview of theological reflection that incorporates the writings of several authors on theological reflection. The overview reveals how theological reflection can be readily adapted to a variety of situations and experiences. The flexibility of theological reflection is useful since the candidate will be applying theological reflection to a sacrament that does not often have a mystagogy following the sacrament.

Gros also provides an in-depth analysis and presentation of how to conduct a group theological reflection process. She shows the varied styles and formats in which theological reflection can be conducted. Gros also highlights the roles of the facilitator and participants. Her discussion of the practical application of theological reflection aided the candidate in adapting the group reflection experience to a new online medium. The preceding chapter explored the methodology using theological reflection as mystagogy.

⁴ See Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 20.

The project's online transformative mystagogical experience can be used by an individual, couple or a group.⁵ Following Gros' recommendation that "a good size for a faith-sharing group is from eight to ten people,"⁶ the candidate sought eight couples as the maximum number of participants. If too many couples were included in the project, reading the blog comments would be cumbersome for participants. If there were too few couples participating, the reflections may be sparse and not inspire deeper reflection. In many cases couples responded to blog posts with one comment as a couple. Although more people responded as individuals than the candidate anticipated, the number of responses was not large enough to negatively impact dialogue.

Facilitator's Role

Joye Gros highlights the essential role of the facilitator in the process of theological reflection:

The facilitator provides both the physical and interpersonal climate that welcomes and encourages faith sharing. It is important for the facilitator to be prepared and to know the goals, the purpose, and the direction of the group. Faith sharing requires reciprocity between the faith story and one's own story. It requires the sharing of one's own story with others and listening attentively and reverently to their stories.⁷

The facilitator creates the environment for sharing. By setting the goals, purpose and direction of the group, the participants are able to share their specific experiences within a clearly defined context and for a defined purpose. In this project, the purpose was

⁵ Gros, *Theological Reflection*, 28.

⁶ Ibid., 36.

⁷ Ibid.

presented to participants in pre-blog registration e-mails and was evaluated by them at the conclusion of the experience.

The facilitator works to develop and enhance group interaction. The facilitator may need to share his or her own story, but with the goal of fostering group interaction.

Gros points out,

As facilitator your work is to encourage dialogue among the group members. You create a safe group environment by encouraging thoughtful listening and stressing that all sharing is confidential; what is shared is the group remains with the group. Allow many ideas and perspectives to surface without needing to resolve them. Invite and welcome differences. Diversity of opinion and life experience is a gift.⁸

Initial dialogue focuses around the couple's wedding experience. The wedding is selected as the first object of discussion because it is the common event that unites all the participants. The wedding day is also generally easy for married persons to share with others. The facilitator's role was to direct the sharing so that it became mystagogical reflection.

A key to fostering interactive discussion is for the facilitator to develop interactive questions for reflection. The candidate spent a great deal of time crafting specific questions that would foster discussion.⁹ The blog questions are open ended to help participants recall their experience and integrate the faith tradition. It was important to avoid using religious jargon and overly technical theological language that might alienate participants and reduce interaction. Good questions are simple and direct so that they are

⁸ Gros, *Theological Reflection*, 36.

⁹ "How the questions are asked is very important. It is important that you spend time formulating good questions." Ibid., 43.

clearly understood and allow for personal reflection and sharing. Gros posits that theological reflection participants are more engaged if the questions are simple.¹⁰ The challenge for the facilitator is to create a straightforward reflection with clear and direct questions for reflection.

After participants share their reflections, the facilitator summarizes comments and begins to find themes in the sharing about marriage. If comments go off track, the group is re-directed to the goal of faith sharing and mystagogy. Since sharing is optional, participants are encouraged but not forced to comment.

Being an online blog, some participants feared that their sharing would not be confidential. Anyone with Internet access can view a blog, so confidentiality is a challenge that needs to be addressed. During the first week of the blog, one participant e-mailed the candidate a concern about confidentiality. To mitigate the concern, the candidate enabled a function of the blog that allowed for anonymous comments by participants. Individuals or couples could share without having to reveal their names, thus protecting their confidentiality. Two participants made use of this option. The other participants posted comments using their names. As another protection, the blog domain address was not published. Only group members knew the blog web address and could access the blog. A last protective feature was making the blog non-searchable. Enabling this option ensures that non-members would not come across the blog in a web search.

¹⁰ Gros, *Theological Reflection*, 32.

Since the group is diverse in age, years married, theological experience and many other aspects, it is up to the facilitator to ensure that every participant feels welcomed and engaged in the reflection process. To encourage the integration of faith and life, the facilitator may need to initiate themes that correlate participants' experience with the Christian tradition.¹¹ Gros notes that facilitators "provide the group with the 'anchor' for theological understandings consistent with our faith Tradition."¹² The facilitator assists participants in relating their experience to the teachings of the Church.

The candidate initially felt that moving from experience to Christian tradition would be one of the more challenging aspects of the project. Couples are comfortable sharing their marriage experience, but are less familiar with integrating the faith with their experience. The candidate highlighted possible points of integration between faith and life in the reflection posts and blog comments to assist and model integration for participants.¹³ In the fourth blog post, the candidate responded to a participant comment by highlighting how Church teachings are often validated by sociological findings. In the next post's reflections, the candidate discussed how the differences of spouses contribute to the complementarity between a man and a woman. Many couples grasped these

¹¹ Gros, *Theological Reflection*, 53.

¹² *Ibid.*, 49.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 50. The facilitator must know the tradition and be able to integrate it with their own experience as well as with participants' shared experiences. "Facilitators look for the theological themes engaged in the process. Fidelity to the Tradition requires an understanding of the doctrines and teachings of the Church."

examples and were able to expand upon them in their response posts.¹⁴ One participant did not see the point of theological reflection and had a more difficult time integrating faith and life.

Blog Creation

Before this project, the candidate had never regularly monitored or created a blog. The candidate was aware that blogs were versatile, flexible, and able to create community among participants, but had little personal experience with blogging. *Blogging for Dummies* by Susannah Gardner and Shane Birley provided simple and clear directions for creating a blog. The blog creation process was made even easier by using www.blogger.com, a website that provides step by step instructions and means to create a blog.¹⁵ Blogger.com is a free website that makes creating a blog easy. The candidate created a Google account, named the blog and chose a simple template for the blog design that could be easily upgraded in the future.¹⁶ The blog template was created in about half an hour. After writing each reflection, the candidate reverse dated the posts so they would appear in the correct order. The process was easy to follow, even for a novice.

¹⁴ Chapter Six of the project will examine participant reflections and the evaluative process.

¹⁵ Gardner and Birley, *Blogging for Dummies*, 28. The candidate created the blog for this project on Blogger.com, “one of the Web’s oldest and most well-known blogging companies.” On page 27, the authors’ state, “Hosted blog software is a blogging tool that lives on the Web server of a company that provides blogging services. When you use hosted blogging software, you use the company’s Web server to post your blog, and the company provides you with a Web address... You don’t need any of the resources that a normal Web site requires—a domain name, Web site hosting, HTML, or FTP software—to create a blog.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

In creating an online blog for married couples (see Appendix C) to reflect upon and share their wedding and marital experiences, a simple set of instructions were developed to direct and aid reflection. While younger couples would already be familiar with the blog format, the use of theological reflection as mystagogy would be new for participants.

The challenge of blogging is to create an environment in which couples are engaged and want to share comments. Frequently used methods to elicit blog responses include asking participants to tell their stories, asking participants to answer questions, or responding to key themes that participants share and allow the blog to move in a potentially new direction led by couple responses.¹⁷ No one is forced or will receive any compensation for taking the time to read and interact with the blog. The blog must be interesting and engaging enough to generate participation. Gardner and Birley's *Blogging for Dummies* notes that "when you blog, much depends on the quality of your writing and your ability to make a connection with your readers."¹⁸ It is essential to know the audience and know what they are looking for. The registration process and pre-blog questionnaire helped the facilitator get to know the participants and their interests.

The majority of the time spent on building the blog was devoted to creating the posts and the questions for theological reflection. The reflection posts and questions are

¹⁷ Gardner and Birley, *Blogging for Dummies*, 158.

¹⁸ Ibid., 142.

the key to effective mystagogical reflection. The candidate also spent time finding helpful marriage links for a blog roll that couples could use for additional marriage resources.

Once the initial blog draft was complete, the candidate piloted the blog with colleagues. They provided helpful feedback that revealed the need to simplify the blog. While there is a plethora of information to discuss on marriage, a blog requires a very clear direction or risks losing the interest of readers.

Having established a small group of pre-screened participants, the candidate decided to not establish guidelines for commenting for this pilot program. Guidelines for commenting help reduce rude, unwanted or offensive comments by setting clear commenting rules.¹⁹ Some blogs are moderated so that all comments are screened by the facilitator before being posted. While deemed unnecessary for this project, guidelines for discussion or moderated comments may be needed in future blogs that are open to the public.

Participant Recruitment and Advertising

In order to initially reach the widest group of relatively young married couples, the candidate developed an announcement to go out in the weekly Archdiocese of Washington Young Adult Ministry electronic newsletter (see Appendix A). This newsletter is e-mailed to over one thousand and five hundred young adults. Within minutes of the e-mail being sent, the first interested person responded. Within two days,

¹⁹ Gardner and Birley, *Blogging for Dummies*, 170. The authors make suggestions for guidelines such as not allowing use of bigoted speech, sexually explicit material, violent or crude humor, unlicensed copyrighted material, etc.

five couples who were married less than five years were interested in participating. Some couples who requested to join the blog learned about it from forwarded e-mails from their friends. One couple from North Carolina asked to join the blog after they received an e-mail about the group from someone they knew in northern Virginia. Online ministry presents a new dynamic allowing people from all over the world to participate by using the Internet.

The candidate hoped to have at least two couples that were married for more than ten years. These couples would provide a diverse perspective based on their marital experience. At a gathering of family life ministry leaders in the Archdiocese of Washington, the candidate asked if any of the leaders knew of couples that could benefit from this experience. The leader couples were asked not to participate in this pilot experience, but instead suggest other couples. From the invitation, four couples were suggested. One couple was not able to participate, two were selected and accepted, and one agreed to be on a waiting list. One couple had to drop out due to the husband's travel schedule for work. He felt that he could not share the reflections with his wife as he had hoped and asked that they discontinue the process. The candidate asked the couple on the waiting list to take their place.

Seven of the nine initial contacts requesting to participate in the blog came from wives. The CARA study on marriage indicates that "Women are slightly more likely than men to express interest in learning more about topics related to Church teaching on

marriage.”²⁰ This was affirmed in the project. A concern was that only the female spouses would actively participate in the blog. Fortunately, the comments in the blog and the evaluation responses revealed that both the husband and wife participated together in the experience.

When searching for participants, it was hoped that among those invited to participate some non-active Catholics and mixed marriage couples would respond to the inquiry. The responses did yield a variety of participants with regard to knowledge of Church teaching and activity. Unfortunately, no non-practicing couples or couples in mixed marriages registered for the blog.

Once couples were selected, they were directed, via e-mail, to www.zoomerang.com to take an online pre-blog questionnaire (see Appendix B). The online pre-blog questionnaire sought information about the participants to provide a basic understanding of who they are and their beliefs about marriage. The questionnaire allowed for responses of "completely agree," "mostly agree," "not sure," "mostly disagree," or "disagree." Participants could rate their answers to provide a sense of their interest or knowledge about selected statements of Church teaching.

Some open ended questions were presented to compare the couple's answers in the pre-questionnaire with the evaluation survey to see if new theological language and terminology was used or there was more depth to the evaluation answers. The integration of theological language would be one indicator that couples had learned faith concepts

²⁰ Gray et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 3.

and were able to apply them to their lives. The pre-blog questionnaire also helped the candidate get a sense of the theological formation of the participants. In future surveys, a specific question about theological formation or classes taken will be added.

Participant Information

Information on the participants was gathered in the twenty-five question pre-blog online survey that the participants received after registering via e-mail (see Appendix B). Most participants completed the survey after being asked once, but three reminder e-mails were sent out to those who had not completed the survey. Of the sixteen participants who completed the blog experience, fifteen completed the registration survey. Once the majority of participants had completed the questionnaire, the start date was set for Monday, March 8, 2010.

Because the invitation to join the blog was primarily sent out over the Internet, several people from all over the region requested to participate in the blog. Four of the individual participants were from the Archdiocese of Washington, four were from the Archdiocese of Baltimore, six were from the Diocese of Arlington and one couple resides in North Carolina.

All of the individuals in the blog were Catholic. Six of the eight couples were married five years or less. One couple was married eleven years and another twenty years. This provided a diversity of marital experience.

Four of the couples that completed the blog had participated in some type of marriage enrichment program in the past. Four of the couples had not participated in any

marriage enrichment program to date. The two longer married couples had both participated in marriage enrichment programs. Four of the six recently married couples had not participated in any marriage enrichment to date. Half of the couples had no marriage enrichment experience affirming the need for additional enrichment opportunities for the newly married.

A series of statements were shared with participants. They were asked to gauge their response to the statement using a scale of “completely agree,” “mostly agree,” “not sure,” “mostly disagree,” and “disagree.” The majority of couples felt they knew the Church’s teachings well. Forty-one percent of the participants completely agreed with the statement, “I feel I know the teachings of the Catholic faith very well,” while forty-seven percent mostly agreed and twelve percent were not sure. None of the participants disagreed with this statement. When asked about the statement, “I feel I know the Catholic Church’s teachings on marriage very well,” thirty-five percent completely agreed and sixty-five percent mostly agreed. The couples felt they knew the Church’s teachings on marriage better than they knew Church teaching in general.

Overall, couples tended to believe the Church’s teachings about marriage. Eighty-eight percent of the participants completely agreed that marriage is a calling from God with the remainder mostly agreeing with the statement. Ninety-four percent completely agreed that marriage is meant to last a lifetime with only one other individual mostly agreeing.

All the participants completely (eighty-eight percent) or mostly agreed (twelve percent) that marriage can bring a husband and wife closer to God. Every participant also answered ‘yes’ to the question, “Do you feel that God is present in your married life?” and “Do you live out the sacrament of marriage in your daily life?” When given definitive choices (yes or no), all participants said yes. The evaluation later revealed that some participants had questions about these beliefs.

There was diversity of opinion by participants on other aspects of Church teaching on marriage. Eighty-two percent of the individuals completely agreed that “in marriage, each spouse is meant to give their whole selves to their spouse.” Twelve percent mostly agreed and one person (six percent) mostly disagreed with the statement. Seventy-six percent of participants completely agreed that they experience God in their marriage, while eighteen percent mostly agreed and one person was not sure. Seventy-one percent of the participants completely agreed that married love is not perfect, but it is holy. Twenty-four percent mostly agreed and six percent were not sure.

Only one participant said no to the question, “Is marriage a means to grow closer to God?” One participant also answered no to the question, “Do you see your married life as a small version of the Church?”

The open ended registration questions provide insight into the participants’ thoughts about marriage. The participant is free to describe and define key terms using their own language. They were asked to define in their own words: sacrament, marriage, domestic church and covenant. Eight participants described sacrament as grace from God

while five participants viewed sacrament as a gift from God. Three related it to the Church and two to the rite of marriage. One participant said, “A sacrament is a specific sign of grace and a visible rite in the Catholic Church. There are seven sacraments and all are an outward sign of spiritual grace through Christ.” Some of the answers revealed prior catechesis, while others showed a more general understanding of the terms.

Couples were asked to define marriage in their own words. Ten responses referred to marriage as a union of a man and woman, five responses mentioned it being a sacrament and another five as being life-long. Three used the word commitment in their definition of marriage.

When asked to define covenant, seven participants included God in their definition. Four viewed covenant as an agreement and another four as a promise or vow. Three included the sense of covenant being a contract, while two saw it as a pact and another two as a bond. One person said that covenant, “Could simply be an agreement or contract, though for me the word connotes an agreement which is ‘game-changing,’ an agreement that affects the underlying worldview and motivations of those in agreement.” The response, while lacking theological language regarding the covenant, does show that the person has an understanding that goes beyond a mere contract.

When asked to define domestic church ten participants included the word family as part of their definition. Two people did not know what domestic church meant and four thought it referred to the local parish. This was one of the more misunderstood terms; six out of the sixteen participants did not know nor had a misunderstanding of the

term. One participant had a profound understanding of domestic church saying, “Although I’ve never heard it specifically defined, my understanding is that this is a term that describes the family as the smallest unit of the Church, with a responsibility to educate, minister, spread the Gospel, etc.”

When asked who is the minister of the sacrament of marriage ten participants answered the spouses. Five said it was God and one the priest. This is another area in which couples could grow in understanding Catholic teaching about marriage.

When asked if the participants felt that God is present in their married life, fourteen said yes and two were unsure. While answering affirmatively some participants showed a desire for more spiritual practices in their marriage. “I am not 100 percent sure all the time, but I’d say yes. He helps us to forgive and get over things quickly and to become better persons and spouses.” Two participants talked about sharing their faith in marriage but felt that their faith lives were more separate than they liked. Another said God was present through prayer, but that they did not pray enough. These open ended answers revealed that participants had an understanding that God was present in their married life, but they were not sure how or did not take the time to enhance their marital spirituality.

When asked how the participants live out the sacrament of marriage in their daily lives six people said through prayer, four through their vows, two by being and staying together and one through the support they show each other. Others talked about communication and doing things for each other. One couple said they fulfill their “vows

to love and support each other. Although I feel that the hustle and bustle of our daily lives often takes over our marriage.” The couple is aware that the busyness of life minimize God’s role in their relationship.

Fifteen of the participants felt that marriage is a means to grow closer to God and one person was unsure. “It can be, if you love your spouse and do your best to make your marriage great along with wanting to grow closer to God. But marriage alone is not necessarily a means to grow closer to God.”

Twelve of the participants felt that their married life was a small version of the church and three participants were unsure. One participant said, “Sounds horrible to answer no, but our daily lives do not necessarily mimic Church in a literal sense.”

Another said, “Yes, but with a caveat, because I know the answer is ‘supposed to be’ yes, and I do see how we live out the sacrament of marriage in doing good and spreading love to people outside of our marriage, but very, very rarely consciously think on a daily basis about the work of my family in terms of that imagery/analogy. I hope that makes sense.”

This participant highlighted the fact that rarely do they, or most couples, consciously reflect on the fact that they are a small version of the Church. They started to think deeper about the concept of their marriage being a domestic church. Often, theological terms like domestic church are used in Catholic programming without participants truly understanding what this or other theological terms truly mean. It is helpful for couples to understand theological terms so they can consciously apply the Church teaching and language to their marriage.

The pre-blog questionnaire showed that while the majority of couples believed the Church's teachings on marriage, that there is room for growth. Using the blog as a tool for mystagogical reflection will provide an opportunity for couples reflect on the Church's teachings on marriage and to view their marriage in a new way, through the lens of faith.

The Four Week Mystagogical Reflection

Over the four week mystagogical reflection process, the candidate proposed reflections through blog posts for participants (See Appendix C). Each reflection had one or more questions to help focus and encourage participant interaction with the material. These thought provoking questions were designed to elicit couple interaction followed by commenting on the blog with participant reflections. The first post asked participants to discuss with their spouse and write about their wedding day, a common bonding experience shared by all participants. By introducing potentially new theological concepts about marriage, the couples were challenged to reflect upon how they are living out their marriage vows in their daily lives. On their wedding day they invited God into their marriage, now they are examining how they live out their vows each day.

As couples shared on the blog, other couples were able to view and comment on each other's thoughts. It was not only the candidate introducing new ideas, but participants themselves offering reflections on marriage. The candidate continually monitored the blog and posted responses to participant comments to affirm participation and contribute to the online conversation. The candidate posted his own reflection to

model the type of depth and specificity he was looking for. Occasionally participants would send the candidate e-mails directly with questions or comments that they did not wish the larger group to see.

The first blog post asked couples to reflect upon and share their memories of saying their wedding promises and vows on their wedding day. This elicited sixteen responses, the most of any post. The couples readily shared their wedding memories and feelings to get the blog started. Most couples reported being excited and nervous on their wedding day; one participant shared how it was “all a blur.” Another participant said, “I really experienced what life was about” on his wedding day. Using vernacular language, couples touched on many religious themes of marriage. One person said, “The biggest thing that I remember is the peace I felt in knowing God had made this man for me and had made me for him.” Another participant felt that the day “symbolized the real change that took place when we said our vows.” She knew in her heart that through the wedding she had reached “the fulfillment of our vocation.”

The foundational aspect of the blog was for the couple to recall and reflect upon their wedding day, especially the experience of saying and consenting to their marriage promises and vows. Each spouse was asked to write down the event in the order in which it happened. They were asked to avoid making judgments about the experience by using words such as, “should,” “ought,” “if only,” and other similar words. Avoiding pre-determined judgments about the wedding experience allows for new insights to emerge.

After writing their experiences, the spouses were asked to read their reflections aloud to themselves and then to their spouse. As they read their narration out loud they were to notice any feelings and emotions that arose.²¹ This initial post was the basis for further reflection.

In the next post, the couples were asked to read and comment on the definition of marriage as found in number 1601 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and how this relates to their married life. From the nine comments, no one disagreed with the statement. Most participants saw their marriage as a covenant even if they had not thought of it that way before. One participant said, “The distinction between civil society’s definition of covenant versus the Catholic Church’s definition stood out to me and made me think about how we should turn to God more often in our marriage to ask for assistance.” The reflection helped this participant see the sacrament of marriage as more than a civil contract. She saw God’s active role in her married life and God’s ability to assist them. Another participant shared, “I definitely reflected on our wedding vows since our wedding day. Especially during hard times! What the *Catechism* says feels true to me.” This comment shows an emotional response to the theological definition that seems authentic to the participant. The blog will enhance the visceral response to the statement by gradually developing a deeper theological understanding of marriage.

The second week of the blog asked the couples to reflect specifically on their wedding promises and vows. Most couples concentrated their reflections on their

²¹ Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 27.

wedding promises. One participant shared about living her faith as a young family. “We both feel that we need to become more active in our parish to strengthen our faith and teach our children about God. But going to Church as a family is so difficult with the girls being so young.” The participant asked for feedback from other participants about worshipping with children. Other couples with children responded to her inquiry. This interaction allowed the blog to be spontaneous and meet the couples’ needs while still meeting its stated purpose.

When reflecting on the definition of marriage and their vows, many couples talked about how children help them see the truth of the definition of marriage or help them live out their vows daily. The themes of having children and raising children were common throughout the blog. The newly married couples are presently reflecting on their vows within the context of being a young family.

Another participant used covenant language discussed in the first week’s reflections in her comment to the second week’s post. “Those words, a covenant, have taken on a completely new meaning for us as we approach our six year anniversary.” She goes on to show the variety of ways they live out their covenant through prayer, loving their children, love notes and even smiling at one another. The participant understands and shared with others about how the ordinary can be holy.

Another participant commented on the value of mystagogical reflection: “The surprise is you can’t read about these things before marriage. Marital love seems to make the words come to life and that life gives new meanings and perspectives.” Discussing

what marriage will be like before marriage is important to prepare for sharing the wedding vows with one another, but is of limited value. The engaged couple does not have actual lived marital experience to discuss. The participant realized it is also necessary to talk about your vows after marriage when a person has a new perspective enriched with experience. It is in married life that the couple acquires new meaning and significance of their vows.

In the second week of the blog, the wedding promises post yielded fourteen comments on Monday, yet only five comments were posted on the Thursday reflection of the vows. Many couples felt they were too busy or had already said what they wanted in the first post. The evaluation revealed that two posts in one week required too much time for most couples to complete.

In the third week of reflection, the candidate was not sure how blog participants would respond. The blog post built upon the reflections from the previous two weeks of the experience. The blog post asked participants to allow an image to develop in their mind. The image was to arise from a synthesis of the content from their previous reflections using sacramental imagination to see the sacrament in a new way. Developing an image was not as difficult for the couples as the candidate anticipated and in the end ten comments were made. The couples came up with pertinent images such as being in a hug, encircled in arms; a dance; hands interlocked; and a wedding cake topper. The final image seemed peculiar but the participant gave a profound explanation. “First of all—the feeling of being ‘on top of the world (or cake)’ and that together with God’s help we can

overcome any adversity that comes our way. Secondly, a cake topper is of a man and woman, but one piece, not two. We are united as one in God's eyes." The participant was able to take a secular object and find spiritual meaning in it. The participant integrated faith with life.

In the second reflection of week three, the couples were asked to incorporate the faith tradition with the image to lead to new insights. Again with seven comments, the couples continued working through the synthesis. The candidate intentionally went first to model the type of response being sought. Couples came up with themes such as the psalm response, "You Are Near" and the song *Ave Maria*. Others discussed themes from 1 Corinthians 13, the wedding feast at Cana and the holy family. This final theme helped the participant to see her relationship to Mary, the saints and how marriage is a path to sainthood for her. The reflection enabled her see her faith as more real and practical than she once imagined:

It seemed strange at first to find myself thinking of myself so directly in relation to Mary, the mother of Jesus (it seemed so daunting at first), but it really helped me to connect to her as well as to other saints. It makes me think that holiness is attainable, that marriage is truly a vocation, and that being married is part of the way that I am meant to get to Heaven (and bring others with me!).

The first reflection of the fourth week was a chance to incorporate all the feelings, reflections and images from the previous three weeks of reflection and from these develop an action plan. The candidate asked seven questions to help couples turn their reflections into concrete action within their domestic churches. The evaluation revealed

that seven questions are too many questions for one post. The couple's eight comments showed they understood the main point of the final reflection.

One couple said the reflections helped them explore parts of their marriage they may not have otherwise. The blog "made us reflect on things that we may not normally take the time to do." Other participants mentioned plans that included: attending Church as a family more often, renewing their wedding vows publicly, having an "opportunity to reflect on our wedding and our marriage," and make more positive comments to each other. While many couples mentioned being glad to have had the opportunity to share with their spouses and others, one couple said, "Through this, we have realized concretely how although we both are wanting to strengthen our marriage, it doesn't happen automatically! We have agreed to have regular 'marriage meetings' with the express purpose of focusing on our love relationship." The couple realized that this mystagogical theological experience is just the beginning of their lifelong need for marriage enrichment.

One person said that taking time to ponder their marriage each week was a good habit to get into. Another couple said, "We also feel the main thing it has done for us is help us remember the connection between the promises we made and our daily lives. It was good to look at the concrete ways we are living out our promises. We are both encouraged to see how much the others strive daily to fulfill these with love." The couple realized how their vows impact their daily life. Having an interactive blog experience

helped couples not only reflect on their sacrament, but also to grow from and benefit from other couples' reflections during the mystagogical experience.

The final post on the blog asked couples to evaluate the project. Originally the candidate wanted to add a reflection and ask the couples to complete the evaluation, but decided that would be too many activities in one post. The couples were directed to the online evaluation available at www.zoomerang.org. Several follow up e-mails were sent requesting that participants complete the evaluation. Some couples evaluated the blog jointly and other couples evaluated the blog individually. In the end fifteen of the sixteen participants who completed the four week process reported completing the blog evaluation. The next chapter will review the evaluation responses.

CHAPTER 6

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

The three purposes for designing an online blog for mystagogical reflection are: to offer married couples catechetical opportunities for mystagogical reflection on their sacramental vows, to help couples understand the Church's teaching that sacramental marriage is holy and is lived out in daily interactions together, and to offer opportunities to share their reflections with their spouse and with other couples through written online reflections. The project also offered the opportunity for marriage enrichment by highlighting additional marriage resources.

This chapter will evaluate the online mystagogical reflection project, the use of a blog and the participants' understanding of the Church's teachings on marriage. After evaluating the project, areas for improvement will be discussed so the project can be used by parishes and dioceses to enrich marriages.

Project Evaluation

The blog comments and the evaluation survey both affirm that the three primary purposes for the project mentioned above were met. The couples' responses during the blog experience reveal that they entered the theological reflection process, pondering how their marriage vows are lived out in daily life. The participants' comments on the blog report that the blog reflections were discussed with their spouse. In posting comments on

the blog, participants shared their reflections with other members of the online community. Some couples posted comments and completed the evaluation as a couple, highlighting that they wanted to experience mystagogical reflection together. Most comments explicitly stated the participants' thoughts, feelings, reactions and discussions to the blog posts.

The eighth and final reflection post on the blog asked the participants to complete an online survey of their experience (see Appendix D). The purpose of the evaluation was to determine if the theological reflection process on a blog met the desired goals of the project. The evaluation contained sixty-eight questions. Many of the pre-blog questionnaire questions were repeated in the evaluation to facilitate a comparison of the responses and language used before and after the blog. A series of new questions were asked to give participants an opportunity to self report on their experience with the blog. The majority of the evaluation questions used a range of answers that included: "strongly agree," "agree," "no opinion," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." All but one participant completed the evaluation.

The evaluation revealed that all the couples to some degree engaged the material and discussed it with their spouse. One hundred percent of the participants agreed that they shared their reflections and comments with their spouse (thirty percent 'strongly agree' and seventy percent 'agree'). When asked what they liked most about the blog one participant said, "I liked reading what my spouse wrote, and having him read what I wrote." Another said they liked, "talking with my hubby about it and reflecting on the

postings. I did enjoy writing my reflections even though it was very hard.” Three people responded that they both enjoyed and benefited from reading other participants’ comments.

In the evaluation, all the participants stated that they believed that God is present in their married life. Two participants in the pre-blog survey did not believe God was present in their married life. All the participants in both the pre-blog and post-blog surveys believed that they live out their sacrament in their daily lives. They also unanimously answered “yes” in the evaluation to “marriage is a means to grow closer to God” and “understanding married life as a small version of the Church.” Before the blog began, one person was unsure about marriage as a means to grow closer to God and three were unsure about marriage as a smaller version of the Church. Each of the questions that examined the relationship of faith to married life showed an improvement, indicating that the blog may have contributed to a better understanding of Church teaching about marriage and how to live Church teaching in daily life.

The evaluation also sought information from the participants that was not in the registration survey. After going through the reflection process, ninety percent of the participants strongly agreed (forty-five percent) or agreed (forty-five percent) that the blog was relevant for their lives today. Even though one participant did not agree, the blog has proven to be a relevant tool for married couples. Asked more specifically, eighty-three percent of participants thought the topics of the blog were related to their life

and how they live their marriage each day. One participant had no opinion and one disagreed.

Eighty percent of the participants felt the blog was easy to follow, while one participant had no opinion and another disagreed. Sixty-three percent of participants responded that the blog facilitated and enhanced their learning, while eighteen percent had no opinion and eighteen percent disagreed. The same percentages were true for the question on whether or not the blog format encouraged participants to express their thoughts and reflections. Some reasons for people disagreeing with these statements surfaced in the open-ended questions. Some participants were not comfortable sharing on a blog where anyone could view their comments. These participants would have preferred a face to face group or another means that would better protect their identity and reflections. Chapter five discussed several measures used by the facilitator to mitigate the participants' confidentiality concerns.

One of the key purposes of the blog was to assist couples in better understanding the Church's teachings on the sacrament of marriage. Twenty-seven percent of participants strongly agreed and thirty-six percent agreed that the blog helped them understand Church teachings on marriage better while nine percent had no opinion and twenty-seven percent disagreed. The blog helped fifty-four percent of the participants realize they would like to know more about the sacrament of marriage while forty-five percent had no opinion. Participants felt they grew in their knowledge of Church teaching about marriage or realized they wanted to learn more. Some participants felt they began

the blog with a good knowledge of the faith and the blog simply affirmed what they already believed. One couple said, “Many of the topics have already been discussed by us. However, it is good to have these topics refreshed, and by doing it through a different medium was very helpful.”

The evaluation showed that the blog facilitated a deeper understanding of Church teaching on marriage and clarified uncertainty about who is the minister of the sacrament of marriage. In the registration survey only sixty-two percent of the participants correctly answered that the couple is the minister of the sacrament. In the evaluation, seventy-five percent of participants said that it was the couple themselves and another three participants believed that God was the minister.

All the participants felt the blog designer had a good understanding of the Church’s teachings on marriage.

Ninety-one percent of the participants read and understood the purpose of the blog as stated by the candidate. One participant disagreed. Thirty-six percent of participants agree they would recommend the blog to a peer and another twenty-seven percent strongly agreed. Eighteen percent had no opinion and another eighteen percent disagreed. Sixty-three percent of participants are willing to recommend the blog to a peer.

Evaluating the Blog Format

Using a blog for theological reflection is a new concept within Church ministry. The candidate hoped that using a blog would allow for interaction between participants regarding the material presented in the reflection posts. Two other online formats that

were considered for the project were a website and Facebook. A website could present information in a systematic and meaningful way, but would not allow for interaction between participants. Facebook would allow for interaction, but Facebook is primarily for quick thoughts and updates, not serious reflection. While using a blog for theological reflection is new, as Chapter 4 noted, blogging is a familiar medium for millions of people, who frequently read and enter comments on them.

While the majority of participants reported experiencing positive results from the blog reflections, there was great diversity of opinion about the format of the blog. Two participants strongly agreed that future marriage reflections should have a format similar to the pilot program. Four participants agreed while two had no opinion and three disagreed. The evaluation helped clarify what participants felt was missing from the blog.

Fifty-four percent of participants felt there should be a face to face meeting with the other couples. Twenty-seven percent had no opinion and only eighteen percent thought that a face to face meeting would not have enhanced the marriage enrichment blog. Most couples, while finding the blog helpful and educational would like to meet face to face with other couples to share their thoughts and insights on marriage. Some even felt they could be more honest and share their struggles better in a live group setting.

The candidate hoped that most couples would desire a face to face component, but wondered at what cost couples would go to make this happen. Even though the majority of couples desired a face to face meeting with the other couples, when asked if they

would be willing to travel more than 20 miles to meet with other couples, only one participant strongly agreed, five agreed and another five disagreed. Couples seem to want group interaction but many are not willing to travel for the experience.

Another important question was how long the blog should be conducted. If the time was too short, important information could be missed. If the blog lasted too long, participant interest might wane. Seventy-two percent of the participants felt that four weeks was the right amount of time for the blog and eighty-two percent of participants disagreed that the blog should be shorter. Twenty-seven percent thought it should be longer, while thirty-six percent disagreed that it should be longer.

Before the project, the candidate felt that most couples would want more reflections in a shorter amount of time. He was surprised to find that twenty-seven percent of participants strongly agreed and fifty-five percent agreed that they would have preferred to have had fewer reflections over a longer period of time (i.e. one reflection a week for eight weeks). One person had no opinion and one person disagreed. Throughout the open ended question segment participants reported not having enough time to think about and share the reflections with their spouse.

None of the participants wanted to have more reflections in a shorter period of time. Eighty-one percent of participants disagreed with the statement, "I would have preferred to have had more reflections over a shorter period of time (i.e. a reflection every other day for two weeks)." Participants felt they did not have enough time in the week for more than two reflections and once a week would have been better.

Participant responses also widely varied on the number of posts they felt would be ideal for the blog. One person thought that ten or more would be ideal and one person thought one was enough. Aside from these two extremes, two participants felt four was ideal, three felt six and another three felt eight was the ideal number of posts. Taking into consideration the other evaluation results, participants would have liked one post a week for six to eight weeks. One couple suggested, “One post per week (for three to four weeks) with an aspect of marriage to read about. Then discuss one or two questions. We found it difficult to keep up with two posts a week and felt a little overwhelmed with the amount of discussion we were asked to have and the amount of questions to choose from.” Another participant liked the format and reading what others had to say, but did not like contributing to the blog herself. “I would rather share my reflections with people in person, rather than through a blog. It seems so permanent and official putting it out there on the blog.”

One participant thought that the blog would need to be more like other blogs that allow people to freely express their opinions about matters. “I think the only way for a blog to be effective would be to have very proactive topics that people would be strongly opinionated about. Or, have a short anecdote and ask folks to comment on the story.”

The evaluation helped the candidate gauge how often participants utilized the blog. Six participants said they read all the blog posts while one participant each said they read seven, six, five, four and two of the posts. While most people read most of the posts, only two people reported commenting on all the posts. Three commented on seven of the

posts, one participant on five posts, three on three of the posts, one person on two posts and one person commented on only one post. This question showed that most participants were actively involved in commenting frequently on the blog.

When asked in the open ended section about why participants did not read or comment on the blog they gave a variety of answers including: travel for work, the topic for the post “did not pull me in or spark an idea,” posts were too lengthy, not being able to be at the computer at the same time as my wife, family constraints, etc. One participant said, “I had the best of intentions to reply, but kept getting sidetracked because of work and sick children.” Another said that it was “hard to find time to read the blog and then coordinate time with my husband twice a week to both discuss and post.” One person noted the complexity of each post and the number of questions asked. “There were a lot of questions within each post. They required a lot of thought, and it was a little hard for me to decide which question to tackle first, or which one to focus on more than others. It took a lot of time and thought.” This highlighted the need to reduce the number of questions per post and simplify the blog for focused thought and reflection.

The candidate simplified the blog after an initial preview of the project from others in ministry. Even with a less complicated format, the candidate realizes that a more straightforward arrangement is needed for future blogs. Participants should not have to figure out which question is more important than another. Only the most important questions should be asked. The number of questions will be reduced in future blogs to a maximum of one or two questions per post.

One participant gave a lengthy reply with several reasons for not more actively participating in the blog. He mentioned time limitations as the primary reason for not participating more in the blog. He thought one post a week would allow more time for thinking over the post, discussing the post with his spouse and writing a response. The participant felt the “nature of the reflections seemed forced, like the one about the image of marriage, where it seemed that the blog had a particular answer in mind and format for my thoughts/image.” He felt the posts were too abstract, leading to abstract and impractical conversations with his wife, causing him to lose interest in the blog. Finally, the participant believes that,

It seemed like a number of the other couples ‘had it together,’ put on their church faces, and gave the Sunday school teacher the answers they wanted to hear...but never admitted their true questions/concerns/challenges that I know they must have if they’re human. I guess I’m saying that it felt kind of fake.

This post, while a minority opinion, showed to the candidate the importance of working to make the blog practical and engaging. If the blog is to reach out to all Catholics, including those who have drifted away from the Church or to couples in mixed marriages, it cannot be too abstract or overly theological. The blog ought to model theology immersed in life, since it is asking the participants to consider integrating the faith with their daily life more explicitly.

When asked to comment on the project’s statement of purpose and contribution to ministry (see Appendix D, questions 62 and 63), the participants said the project’s purpose was useful. They stated that the blog fulfilled its intended purpose and was a contribution to ministry. One participant said, “I thought this was thoughtfully and

sensitively developed and orchestrated. Ways to place the Internet at the service of marriage enrichment efforts in the Church is a critical undertaking.” Another participant said he thought the intent of the blog was good but that having four to five posts focusing on the vows and wedding day was unexpected. He desired more time between reflections. He said it took time to talk to his wife and think over the reflections. Before he had a chance to talk to his wife, another post would be arriving.

The majority of the couples spent a sufficient amount of time reading and reflecting on the blog posts and writing their responses. Twenty seven percent spent twenty or more minutes per post. Another twenty seven percent spent fifteen to twenty minutes formulating and responding to the posts. Eighteen percent spent ten to fifteen minutes and twenty-seven percent spent five to ten minutes with each post. Over half of the respondents spent fifteen minutes or more reading, reflecting on and responding to the reflections. Cumulatively this is equivalent to about two hours over the month long process. This would be about the same amount of time spent in an evening session for marriage enrichment.

The evaluation revealed that the participants saw the potential of the blog format for other couples. Seventy-eight percent of participants felt the marriage enrichment blog would have been beneficial to other married Catholics (twenty-two percent had no opinion). A similar question showed that thirty-six percent of participants strongly agreed that the marriage enrichment blog would positively enhance a couple’s experience of marriage. Another twenty-seven percent agreed and thirty-six percent had no opinion.

Couples responded with a variety of answers when asked, “If a marriage enrichment blog was designed to help strengthen your marriage, what additional topics would you like to see?” Nine participants would like to have marriage enrichment on communication skills and eight participants on praying as a couple. Other participants would like to see a blog on: serving others as a married couple (five participants), reading scripture as a couple (four participants), and developing a closer relationship with Christ (three participants) and financial skills (two participants). The candidate assumed that both communication and financial skills would score high. He was pleasantly surprised at the participants’ level of interest in spiritual development.

Affirming the CARA study, “Marriage in the Catholic Church: A Survey of U.S. Catholics,” the blog evaluation revealed that the most commonly preferred means to learn more about Church teaching on marriage by the blog participants is online resources. This is followed by mentor couples and retreats and homilies. Only three participants prefer to receive information through printed materials from the parish. The reflective experience and evaluation validates that younger couples prefer information about Church teaching through online resources.

Ninety percent of participants agree the marriage reflection blog provided them with an accessible means to enrich their marriage (one person disagreed). Fifty-four percent now feel they have a better appreciation of how their spouse understands the sacrament of marriage. The blog helped couples discuss their faith and marriage while working toward developing a common marital spirituality.

Only four participants reported viewing the marriage resources on the blog roll. This aspect of the blog, while not the core of the experience, could be further highlighted in future blogs to help couples find additional marital resources. The participants reported visiting the Archdiocese of Washington's *Marriage Matters*® website, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishop's *For Your Marriage* website and World Wide Marriage Encounter's website.¹ Future facilitators will need to find more links and resources that couples find useful.

Web links or downloadable resources that couples could print and display would enrich the blog experience. For example, a copy of the vows that couples can print and put on their refrigerator would enhance the experience. The posted vows would serve as a daily reminder of the sacramental nature of their marriage. Other resources on prayer, communication skills, etc. could be developed to remind couples of the enrichment process and of what they learned.

Participant Understanding of Church Teaching

One of the key goals of the project was to help couples become aware of and to live out their marriage vows in daily life. Couples attain a new way of looking at their marriage through theological reflection on their vows. Reflection leads to integration of the sacramental experience with daily life.

In the pre-blog questionnaire, all the participants reported that they felt they knew the Catholic Church's teachings on marriage well. It is a positive step forward to have

¹ See <http://www.adw.org/family/marriage.asp>; <http://foryourmarriage.org/> and <http://www.wwme.org/> (accessed February 24, 2011).

fifty-four percent of participants strongly agree and agree that after participating in the marriage reflection blog, they believe they have a better understanding of their faith and fifty-four percent a better understanding of the meaning of marriage. Even though they began the experience feeling knowledgeable about their faith, more than half of the participants ended the project reporting they grew in understanding of Church teaching and their faith. The self report evaluations from participants showed mystagogical reflection assisted Catholics who feel well informed in achieving a deeper understanding of marriage and faith.

Twenty-seven percent strongly agreed and thirty-six percent agreed that the blog helped them better understand their marriage as a domestic church. Twenty-seven percent had no opinion and one person disagreed. These findings were affirmed by the open ended responses as well.

The percentages were the same when participants were asked if the blog helped them better realize that God is present in their daily married lives. While similar in notion to the previous question, it shows that couples do see God as active in their marriages. Oddly when asked, “Do you feel that God is present in your married life?” in the pre-blog questionnaire all the participants said ‘yes.’ After the blog, one person felt comfortable answering ‘no.’

All but three participants developed a better understanding of marriage as a covenant. Three participants strongly agreed and five agreed that they now better

understand their marriage as a covenant. Two participants had no opinion and one person disagreed.

The couples' responses to the open ended questions on the blog and in the evaluation used more theological terminology than their original answers in the registration survey. The words the participants used in the evaluation reflected the language used throughout the blog. Participants became more comfortable using theological language and fewer misunderstandings of the key terms. When defining sacrament in their own words couples referred to sacrament as God's gift, grace and power from God. Two participants said their answers were the same as the registration survey for each term they were asked to define. When writing about covenant every response included the word "promise" in it. Respondents qualified their understanding of promise with notions of being instituted by God or including God in this lasting and abiding promise

When defining marriage, participants universally mentioned marriage as the unity or bond between a man and woman. Most responses mentioned God along with permanence and being open to life. Permanence and openness to life were not mentioned in the pre-blog questionnaire responses of participants. These two attributes of marriage, which are professed by the couple in their vows, were prominently mentioned in the evaluation responses. Both of these aspects were key dimensions of the couple's blog reflections and they were frequently reported in the evaluation responses, indicating a potentially new or deeper understanding of married life.

Couples' responses about the family as a domestic church showed some changes from the registration survey. The pre-blog questionnaire revealed the domestic church to be one of the least understood theological concepts for participants. One couple said their marriage was a "mini reflection of the Church where we live out our call to holiness and service to God through serving our family day in and day out." This couple said that their domestic church included "sharing as a couple and as a family in our spiritual beliefs." Another said that the domestic church was "the living out and working out of family life in such a way that Christ is honored and revered in each person and in the family as a whole—reflecting God's love to the world." The blog comments and evaluation responses revealed a deeper understanding of domestic church as well as more astute examples of how God is a part of their daily life than were shared in the registration survey.

When discussing how they see their marriage as a small version of the Church one respondent said,

We are our own community sharing our faith together. Our community of two reaches out and touches our family, our friends, and sometimes even strangers. Our love light shines like a beacon, and its glow touches others. Our little church encourages others to be open to love for your spouse and to let others know that you love each other.

Most of the couples felt God's presence in their married lives through their children and in their daily activities. Participants said they live out the sacrament of marriage in their daily lives through prayer, sacrifices, playing together, and witnessing the faith to their children. One participant said, "We strive to be one of heart, mind and

body. We have made each other our number one priority, even above the children and we are committed to living our vows every day.” Similar to this response, the evaluation included frequent references to the couples’ vows being lived out in daily life.

Evaluation responses reported various actions that enable marriage to be a means of growing closer to God. Some of the behaviors mentioned in the evaluation included: thanking God for one’s spouse, thanking God for the blessings of marriage, being open to life, serving one another, giving witness to others through their marital love growing, and especially their children. One person said, “In and through our broken humanity, God’s grace shines through! This amazes me. I am astounded as I reflect upon the grace of this sacrament.” Another said, “It helps us to learn to love deeper by knowing so much about someone and still loving them. It also teaches us about God’s love.”

When participants were asked if they believed the marriage enrichment blog would be able to contribute to ministry as proposed by the candidate, most respondents simply said “yes.” One participant said, “This is new technology and it is very comfortable for younger couples. I think that this is a great way to reach out to young couples on their level and allow them to benefit from the message that you are sharing.” One respondent said it was a fortunate use of technology that could “reach out to couples regardless of location and a common meeting time.” One couple said they thought this would contribute to ministry and that a lot of people would be interested in trying “something like this.” While seeing the benefits of the online tool, the same couple also noted aspects of the experience that were not helpful to their reflection:

My hubby and I do better when we are meeting with other people face to face, away from the chores and routine of home. It was very hard to make time to reflect about the postings together and write our reflections. When we attend meetings or events with other people, it gives us a space and time for reflection where we can't be distracted by everyday responsibilities. I would say though, that the little time we were able to spend on this was fruitful for our marriage. Reading what other people wrote was very inspiring as well. And I know we should try to spend more time doing this kind of thing at home. It was a good exercise to try to do this, even though I don't think we did a very good job.

Areas for Improvement

While the blog achieved its stated goals, the evaluation process detailed some key areas that could advance the mystagogical reflection taking place on a blog as well as some practical improvements that would enhance the experience for participants. One enhancement would be including a simple set of directions on how to sign up for a blog. Clear instructions are needed to facilitate the experience for people unfamiliar with blogs. While the vast majority of participants quickly and easily began the blog, two couples had a harder time understanding how to register for the blog. Everyone was registered before the first week and the blog proceeded smoothly. Having clear blog registration instructions would have enhanced participant experience.

The blog comments and the evaluation process show that the mystagogical reflection that took place on the blog needs to be simplified. The length of the blog's reflections was adequate but fewer questions on each post will help future couples enter into the process without feeling overwhelmed. Whenever the candidate asked more than two questions, no one answered all the questions. It would help focus the blog and reflections if everyone had responded to one or two common questions. Fewer questions

could also increase interaction between participants since they will be commenting on the same question. Participants also suggested having not more than one post a week to allow them additional time for reading, reflecting, discussing and writing their responses.

In future pre-blog questionnaires, specific questions about participants' catechetical formation and religious education experiences will be added. Information on participants' theological formation will give the facilitator a better knowledge of the participant's background and familiarity with theological concepts. Killen and de Beer write, "Without study of Scripture, Church history, or our religious heritage in some form, theological reflection rarely can deepen beyond the level of knowledge at which the individual or group begins."² Knowing in advance the participants catechetical backgrounds can help the facilitator tailor the blog and better guide the process.

The couples' common experience of the sacrament of marriage is vital to the success of the blog. Reflection on the blog helps couples recall their marital experience and learn to see it in a new way. The blog is not meant to be catechetical instruction alone, but it does allow couples to reflect on basic theological concepts and apply them to their lived marriage experience. The blog allows for a learning process that moves some participants beyond what they already knew.

A significant part of the success of the blog and learning process occurred from the couples' interaction with one another. The *National Directory for Catechesis* states, "The effectiveness of catechesis depends to a great extent on the vitality of the Christian

² Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 78.

community in which it is given."³ Learning will better take place in a vibrant online community. The more theological formation participants have, the deeper their theological reflections and interactions will be. The blog participants reported knowing their faith well and in many cases this was reflected in their comments. The challenge is to also make sure that all blog participants feel included and their reflections valued.

Future blogs could be designed for Catholics of various levels of theological knowledge. Other blogs could seek new avenues to reach non-practicing married Catholics and be designed to specifically meet their needs. Blogs could be developed for couples experiencing a variety of marital issues such as infertility, questions about being a good father or mother⁴, communication issues, etc.

The challenge for future blogs will be to assist participants in moving to more active participation in their parish community. The blog is not meant to be an end in itself, but ought to foster a vital and active virtual community that leads to a vital personal community life in the parish. The blog can serve as an invitation to more active parish participation.

One way to foster a more dynamic interpersonal experience in the blog would be to offer the final reflective experience in a parish setting. Most of the reflections can take place in the normal blog format with the final reflection being conducted as a group

³ USCCB, *The National Directory for Catechesis*, 100.

⁴ Susannah Gardner and Shane Birley, *Blogging for Dummies*, 134. The authors recognize “Mommy bloggers” as a large pre-existing group on the Internet that uses blogs as an outlet to share their feelings and struggles raising children. This group is already familiar with and used to blogging so simply adding a catechetical component to the interactions could be relatively easy.

experience in the parish. The final reflection would bring the couples together. Couples would already virtually know one another, but in the final reflection could get to know each other and the parish in a more personal manner.

The marriage enrichment blog can also serve as evangelization tool. Active Catholics, non-practicing Catholics and non-Catholics alike may be attracted to a marriage enrichment blog. The topic or themes can vary depending on the audience the facilitator wishes to reach. In order for the blog to be an effective means of evangelization would require developing effective outreach to non-practicing Catholics and the unchurched.

Other blogs can be designed specifically for various nationalities and ethnic groups. The blog format offers a wide variety of adaptations and possibilities for marriage ministry.

Conclusion

It is the Church's responsibility not just to prepare a couple for their wedding day but to support them in fruitfully living out their sacramental vows. Catechesis through mystagogical reflection using theological reflection following the wedding assists new couples in understanding the images and events that took place in the sacrament. Understanding the wedding's liturgical words, images and events can empower a couple to incorporate them into their daily life. Self-appropriation of the liturgical rites and symbols by the couple is the beginning of living out an integrated marital spirituality derived from the *Rite of Marriage*. The marriage enrichment blog assists couples in

appropriating that which they already possess, the grace and power of the sacrament of marriage.

Through a deeper understanding of the wedding vows, a couple begins to understand the implications of the rite for their lives and discover a map for a marital spirituality within the rite that will assist them throughout their married life.

Mystagogical reflection allows a couple to encounter the *Rite of Marriage* anew. The encounter opens them up to a new understanding of God's covenant love for them.

Mystagogy enables the couple's married life to become a sharing in the divine. Even though much of married life may not "feel" holy, it is holy. Through the marital covenant, the ordinary activities become opportunities for spouses to imitate Christ's selfless love.

The online blog on the sacrament of marriage seeks to fulfill the call of the *National Directory for Catechesis* to dioceses and parishes to offer catechesis on the sacrament of marriage that

explains the effects of the Sacrament of Matrimony: the establishment of a perpetual and exclusive bond between the spouses that is sealed by God himself; the perfection of the mutually exclusive and permanent love of the couple, the strengthening of their indissoluble unity, and the experience of the foretaste of the Kingdom of God.⁵

This project is a model for dioceses or parishes to use to provide mystagogy following the sacrament of marriage. Mystagogical reflection serves as a means to enrich couples' experience of married life and open them up to the unique possibilities of holiness that marriage presents for them.

⁵ USCCB, *The National Directory for Catechesis*, 143.

The project created a model of mystagogical reflection and marriage enrichment utilizing online tools to provide an interactive community for couples to grow and share in their understanding of marriage as a means of holiness. The online resource is readily available for marriage ministers to utilize or to assist them in creating similar programs to use in their places of ministry. It provides a tool for ministers and couples to grow in their understanding of the sacrament of marriage using a new medium.

The project designed, piloted and evaluated an online interactive blog that offers married couples an opportunity for mystagogy on the sacrament of marriage. In the project, couples theologically reflect on the sacramental vows they made on their wedding day; to understand that their path to holiness is intimately related to their sacramental vows and is now expressed in their daily interactions together in their domestic church; and to share their reflections verbally with their spouse and in writing with other couples in the online community.

Through the online experience, couples reported experiencing a new appreciation of their married life and a deeper understanding of the Church's teachings on marriage and how those teachings apply to their daily life. Future use of online resources will continue to enhance the Church's ministry and outreach to married couples.

Appendix A

An invitational announcement was sent through the Archdiocese of Washington Young Adult Ministry newsletter. This invitation was directed to the Young Adult community in hope of attracting newly married couples.

Online Marriage Enrichment

Looking to enrich your marriage without having to leave your home? Whether you are active in the Catholic Church or not, this is an opportunity for you and your spouse to take time to reflect back on your wedding day, your vows and how they impact your life today. If one or both of you are Catholic and your marriage was in the Church, consider reading and commenting on eight online marriage enrichment blog posts.

This blog is part of a doctoral dissertation project that explores new ways of helping married couples grow closer to one another and God. For more details contact Peter Murphy, Director of the Office for Family Life at 301-853-4546 or murphyp@adw.org.

Appendix B

Zoomerang Survey Results

Marriage Reflection Blog Pre-Questionnaire

1. Name		
Confidential		
2. E-mail address		
Confidential		
3. City and State		
Confidential		
4. Sex		
Male	9	56%
Female	7	44%
5. Years Married		
1	20	
2	one year and 9 months	
3	5	
4	5 1/2	
5	20	
6	5 next month	
7	11	
8	1	
9	3.5	
10	almost 4	
11	3	
12	almost 5	
13	3.5	
14	11	
15	5 1/2	
16	12	
17	5+	
6. Your religious affiliation		
1	catholic	
2	Roman Catholic	
3	Catholic	
4	Catholic	
5	R. Catholic	
6	Catholic	
7	Catholic	
8	Catholic	
9	Catholic	

- 10 Roman Catholic
- 11 Roman Catholic
- 12 Roman Catholic
- 13 Catholic
- 14 Catholic
- 15 Catholic
- 16 Roman Catholic
- 17 RC

7. Your spouse's religious affiliation

- 1 catholic
- 2 Roman Catholic
- 3 Catholic
- 4 Catholic
- 5 R. Catholic
- 6 Catholic
- 7 Catholic
- 8 Catholic
- 9 Catholic
- 10 Roman Catholic
- 11 Same
- 12 Roman Catholic
- 13 Catholic
- 14 Catholic
- 15 Catholic
- 16 Roman Catholic
- 17 RC

8. Before participating in this program, I have participated in marriage enrichment (any program/activity to assist you strengthen your marriage via communication, spirituality, finances, etc.)?

Yes	10	59%
No	7	41%
Total	17	100%

9. Please state the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements: I feel I know the teachings of the Catholic faith very well.

Completely agree	7	41%
Mostly agree	8	47%
Not sure	2	12%
Mostly disagree	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%
Total	17	100%

10. I feel I know the Catholic Church's teachings on marriage very well.

Completely agree	6	35%
Mostly agree	11	65%
Not sure	0	0%
Mostly disagree	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%
Total	17	100%

11. Marriage is a calling from God.

Completely agree	15	88%
Mostly agree	2	12%

Not sure	0	0%
Mostly disagree	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%
Total	17	100%
12. Marriage is a commitment meant to last a lifetime.		
Completely agree	16	94%
Mostly agree	1	6%
Not sure	0	0%
Mostly disagree	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%
Total	17	100%
13. In marriage, each spouse is meant to give their whole selves to their spouse.		
Completely agree	14	82%
Mostly agree	2	12%
Not sure	0	0%
Mostly disagree	1	6%
Disagree	0	0%
Total	17	100%
14. I experience God in my marriage.		
Completely agree	13	76%
Mostly agree	3	18%
Not sure	1	6%
Mostly disagree	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%
Total	17	100%
15. Married love is not perfect, but it is holy.		
Completely agree	12	71%
Mostly agree	4	24%
Not sure	1	6%
Mostly disagree	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%
Total	17	100%
16. Marriage can bring a husband and wife closer to God.		
Completely agree	15	88%
Mostly agree	2	12%
Not sure	0	0%
Mostly disagree	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%
Total	17	100%
17. Define these terms in your own words: Sacrament -		
1	A sacrament is a specific sign of grace and a visible rite in the Catholic church. There are 7 sacraments and all are an outward sign of spiritual grace through Christ.	
2	Action to make one more holy...	
3	A gift from God that enables us to become closer to him	
4	Baptism, Confirmation, Communion, Marriage, Penance, Holy Order and Anointing of the sick.	
5	A gift of grace from God through the Church	
6	A gift from God that is acknowledged by the church	

- 7 A gift from God, an opportunity to experience God's love.
- 8 God's grace poured out through a physical symbol
- 9 Something instituted by God that brings grace to a person
- 10 A sign initiated by God that gives us grace.
- 11 A gift from God through which we receive special grace.
- 12 A sign instituted by Christ to confer grace
- 13 Rites given by God to bring us closer to Him in our lives.
- 14 External sign of an internal action of God's grace upon the soul
- 15 Gifts from the Holy Spirit
- 16 Given to us by God. Each Sacrament enters the recipient into a closer, grace filled relationship with God.

18. Marriage -

- 1 Is a celebrated sacrament which includes God's grace. For me it is the true knowing that we are together and that God will be there with us no matter what. When times are hard it is the confidence to focus on getting better and not getting out.
- 2 Lifelong commitment to a chosen person to love and care in good times and in bad ones, to be faithful
- 3 The joining of 2 people in love whose love grows in time and with each family addition.
- 4 When two people make a lifetime commitment to one another.
- 5 A sacrament where a man and woman are bound together as one for a lifetime through the Church
- 6 Blessed bond between a man and a woman
- 7 Bond pledged between a man and woman with the blessing of God.
- 8 Sacrament uniting a man and a woman in which they are the sign and symbol of God's love to each other
- 9 A vocation and divine calling from God between a man and woman that reflects the nature of God- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (faithful, fruitful, permanent, self-giving).
- 10 The union of Man, woman, and God. Both die to the world and live again as new people. Or at least should. Give up old habits, single lifestyle, etc.
- 11 An agreement between a man and woman, sealed by God, where each agrees to love the other for the rest of their lives and to work with the other to grow closer to God.
- 12 One of the sacraments of vocation, the sacrament through which the couple unite to one another for life, committing themselves to love one another with a total gift of self, loving as God loves.
- 13 Holy union of a man and a woman.
- 14 A call to love as God loves, to be an image of the Holy Trinity on this earth, pointing to the eternal wedding banquet in heaven; the union of a man and a woman by God to live out a total, faithful, fruitful life together
- 15 Two souls joined together on a common journey.
- 16 Ordained by God as a sacrament between a man and a woman. The only sacrament administered by the couple marrying with the priest as a witness and preferably with an invitation to God

to be part of the marriage sacrament.

19. Covenant -

- 1 To me it has always meant contract. A contract with God, a contract with your spouse. A real promise defining your behavior.
- 2 An agreement between God and His people
- 3 The covenant of marriage is a vow to God to abide by the vows of marriage
- 4 Agreement with god to uphold the sanctity of marriage.
- 5 A pact in front of, and with, God
- 6 A pact between two parties that should never be broken
- 7 A promise, an oath, an unbreakable vow.
- 8 Promise
- 9 A permanent, divine bond that comes from God.
- 10 Unbreakable bond with god.
- 11 Could simply be an agreement or contract, though for me the word connotes an agreement which is "game-changing," an agreement that affects the underlying worldview and/or motivations of those in agreement.
- 12 A commitment with a unique permanence to it, with a divine dimension to its permanence.
- 13 Agreement
- 14 A binding agreement/contract
- 15 An unbreakable promise.
- 16 Solemn and binding agreement. In the case of marriage, for life with your spouse.

20. Domestic Church -

- 1 To me domestic church is my family. It is God's grace in our daily life as husband, wife, children and parents.
- 2 I don't know. A catholic household?
- 3 Local parish that welcomes families and tries to apply the teachings of God into daily family life
- 4 Our local Parish.
- 5 What we are called to be in marriage. A community of two in God and for others.
- 6 Place of worship in one's local area
- 7 The church at home, the shared experience of God taught and lived by a family.
- 8 Home and family, including spouses and children
- 9 Husband, wife, and their children.
- 10 Our immediate family and our Church Parish family.
- 11 Although I've never heard it specifically defined, my understanding is that this is a term that describes the family as the smallest unit of The Church, with a responsibility to educate, minister, spread the Gospel, etc.
- 12 The family! Within the family each member loves and is loved, and tries to bring the other closer to God and to their eternal destiny. The children learn who God is through the witness of their parents and are brought up into a relationship

- with God and as members of the Church as a whole.
- 13 The family as a microcosm of the whole Church
 - 14 Referring to family life inside the walls of the home; a day to day way of living out the marital vows as spouses and parent; grace and nature working together in the midst of family life
 - 15 The family? (I don't know if I understand the question)
 - 16 The family unit

21. Please answer the following questions in your own words:

Who is the minister of the sacrament of marriage?

- 1 God
- 2 God
- 3 Both the husband and wife.
- 4 God.
- 5 Both spouses minister to each other
- 6 God is the minister of the sacrament of marriage
- 7 I am, we are, my wife and I administer the sacrament of marriage with each other. The priest is a witness and a conduit for the presence and blessing of God.
- 8 spouse
- 9 the man and woman
- 10 God through the Priest.
- 11 The couple administers the sacrament to each other I think.
- 12 the spouses who marry
- 13 man and wife
- 14 one spouse ministers the sacrament to the other spouse
- 15 A priest (I don't know if I understand the question)
- 16 The individuals coming together to marry.

22. Do you feel that God is present in your married life?

Yes	17	100%
No	0	0%
Total	17	100%

- 1 God held us together when we struggled and has made us better together.
- 2 I am not 100% sure all the time... But I'd say yes. He helps us to forgive and get over things quickly and to become better persons and spouses
- 3 I think He blesses our marriage and our love for each other.
- 4 Having children and having a wonderful marriage just makes me believe that God is there giving me this wonderful life.
- 5 when we think of each other, when we make love, when we raise our children, even when we fight
- 6 Our marriage has received so many blessings over the year, and some of these blessings could only be received from God. I feel God's presence in my married life every day.
- 7 He is with me every moment of the day as I am presented with countless choices and opportunities for mistakes.
- 8 We both have faith, but our faith lives are more separate than I would like. My spouse's love and sacrifice for me is a way I experience God's love in my life.

- 9 Guiding us, strengthening us, teaching us, and helping us to forgive each other. Blessing our openness to life.
- 10 In the love that we feel for each other, the commitment we extend, and the patience we try to have.
- 11 I feel He's present because His will is a topic of conversation, we pray (though not enough), attend Mass together, and make decisions about our time with the will of God in mind.
- 12 Through our prayer, through the identity and character of our marriage, through our sense that our marriage is what God has called us to.
- 13 I feel tremendously blessed with my family. As a mother, sometimes I feel like I better understand God's love for us, and Mary's compassion, better than I did as a younger and single person.
- 14 as I receive God's tender love in concrete ways through my spouse's faith, acts of service, the way he lives out his fatherhood...to name a few
- 15 We are blessed with a happy marriage and beautiful children.
- 16 In the gift of ordaining the creation of my wife, just for me. In the gifts of our children, our extended families, our circumstances in life, and essentially everything else.

23. Do you live out the sacrament of marriage in your daily life?		
Yes	17	100%
No	0	0%
Total	17	100%

- 1 By praying together and by being aware that God is pivotal in your marriage.
- 2 I try to be helpful to my husband, support him and encourage him.
- 3 By fulfilling our vows to love and support each other. Although I feel that the hustle and bustle of our daily lives often takes over our marriage.
- 4 Just by doing what I think my wife would do.
- 5 Attempt to, by praying and thinking of my wife and how I can help her be more
- 6 I try.
- 7 I love my wife more than any other being except for God. I am faithful to her and I cherish her. I cannot imagine my life without my wife in it.
- 8 Love, communication, unity.
- 9 I hope that my spouse experiences God's love through me. Some days are better than others.
- 10 We try to focus on the other's needs and love with a spirit of service. We try to remember our vows to cherish each other and to seek strength through our one flesh union. We also pray together daily.
- 11 It is our goal and we do pretty well but there are times where we fail as in being selfish in our time.
- 12 Just living and loving and trying to use the strength and abilities that come from our partnership as a tool for doing

- good.
- 13 Prayer together, shared mission in family life and in raising children, in caring for one another.
 - 14 Every act of being together as a family, doing things for each other, reaffirms our wedding vows.
 - 15 we work at this by praying together in the morning and evening; openness to children; laughing, playing together in the setting of family life and kids among others
 - 16 By staying together as a family.
 - 17 If the premise of marriage is getting the other to heaven, then we are trying to live out the sacrament through morning and evening prayer as spouses and with the children. Loving each other through wanting to help the other achieve their dreams, meet their needs, hear their concerns, sometimes just listening, helping with the needs of the children, and a whole host of other things

24. Is marriage a means to grow closer to God?		
Yes	16	94%
No	1	6%
Total	17	100%

- 1 No often easy but through prayer, and commitment to each other even when it is hard. I have grown closer to GOD through my being together with my husband. For me when I was alone it is easy to get stagnate or to be fearful to get closer to know Christ. With my husband we can challenge each other and also stand with each other even when it is uncomfortable.
- 2 Teaches patience, tolerance, forgiveness. We pray together. Love without condition
- 3 Marriage and family has really made me evaluate my values and how important our Faith is to us.
- 4 Doing something as a team, like going to church together has made us closer to God.
- 5 By trying to be more for each other, we are trying to get closer to God and live Faith, Hope and Love.
- 6 It can be, if you love your spouse and do your best to make your marriage great along with wanting to grow closer to God. But marriage alone is not necessarily a means to grow closer to God.
- 7 We share our feelings with each other daily; we pray together; we work each day to make God a bigger part of our lives.
- 8 My wife and I read the bible every night.
- 9 Encouragement and support in the walk of faith, accountability.
- 10 We are both committed to helping each other get to heaven. We pray for each other, challenge each other, and strive daily to help each stay close to God.
- 11 Absolutely, In giving oneself to our spouse and kids, we imitate Jesus' sacrifice on smaller scale.
- 12 Are you kidding?!?! Have you ever lived with someone else

of the opposite sex?:) Seriously though, I feel it's an opportunity to learn to love more completely because I'm exposed more thoroughly to the person, so I can learn to love those things that would ordinarily be toughest to love. I'm fortunate that my wife doesn't have a whole lot of those. It also requires a great deal of sacrifice, which helps in learning to love, too.

- 13 Nothing like marriage to teach me to live less selfishly!
- 14 Giving of yourself for someone else out of love is a way to be closer to God.
- 15 One way is in the day to day sacrifices and learning to give oneself to the other; also, as we receive and give love to each other, we find ourselves closer to God
- 16 Through our differences, through humor, through the good and tough times and the general challenges of life - as long as we hold the perspective of everything is from God and we are stewards. Marriage is a partnership with two people walking in the same direction (heaven) while holding hands.

25. Do you see your married life as a small version of the church?		
Yes	15	94%
No	1	6%
Total	16	100%

- 1 Each couple that is strong and nourished by GOD forms a small church. Each small church builds the larger church.
- 2 Made of 2 imperfect people but striving to be better to serve God
- 3 Sounds horrible to answer No, but our daily lives do not necessarily mimic Church in a literal sense.
- 4 Just by always doing the right thing or trying.
- 5 As above, we are a community of two that strives to live our vocation and what God calls us to
- 6 We are involved in Worldwide Marriage Encounter, and that is our apostolate. In that movement, we are like missionaries, sharing our belief in making good marriages great ones.
- 7 A community, sharing, giving, holy, a family.
- 8 We have different strengths and weaknesses, and different roles within the family. But we are united by the same mission and purpose.
- 9 Sure, we live, care, and pray together. Supporting one another in the faith.
- 10 Yes, but with a caveat, because I know the answer to this is "supposed to be" yes, and I do see how we live out the sacrament of marriage in doing good and spreading love to people outside of our marriage, but very, very rarely consciously think on a daily basis about the work of my family in terms of that imagery/analogy. I hope that makes sense.
- 11 As above, under the domestic church question
- 12 There are many small sacrifices, and moments of great love, during which I feel connected to God.

- 13 Being part of the body of Christ; living our call to being married in the setting of communion; an expression of "liturgy" in the domestic church, although I want to learn more about this practically.
- 14 In a sense, yes, but I like to think it is a little more democratic.
- 15 It is our responsibility to help each other and the children to know, love and serve God.

Appendix C

DAILY GRACE BLOG

MAXIMIZING THE HIDDEN POTENTIALS AND POWER IN YOUR MARRIAGE

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2010

Welcome to Daily Grace!

Thank you for your willingness to take time to reflect on your wedding day and vows to one another. I pray that your marriage is a *Daily Grace* to you.

Over the next four weeks, you will receive eight e-mails directing you to this marriage blog that will offer eight reflections for your consideration and response. I will post the reflections each Monday and Thursday. Feel free to write as much or as little as you feel appropriate, but do please respond (even if briefly).

Also, feel free to read other participants' comments and respond to them. This will be our means of conversation. I encourage you to interact with one another on the blog as much as possible. I will not moderate the comments unless it becomes necessary to do so.

Before beginning the blog and during the last week of the blog, I will ask you to complete the pre and post questionnaire to help me discern the value of doing theological reflection on marriage via a blog. It is vital that you complete both of these questionnaires. I will e-mail you the questionnaire which can be completed online.

It is hoped that participation in this four week blog will help you to reflect on and dialogue about the continuing importance of the sacrament of marriage in your lives.

Thank you again, for your willingness to participate!

POSTED BY PETER AT [10:00 AM](#) [1 COMMENT](#) (CONFIDENTIAL)

MONDAY, MARCH 8, 2010

[Your Wedding Day 1.1](#)

Welcome to "Daily Grace." This is an opportunity to reflect on your wedding day and the vows you shared with one another that forever changed your life.

As you begin the blog, take some time to pray and remember your wedding day. If it helps, sit down with your spouse and look through your wedding album or watch your wedding video together. Talk to each other about the day. Let yourself remember all the details and the feelings that arose in you.

After you have taken time to recall your wedding day, each of you is invited, individually to write down your reflections on your wedding day. For example, think about who was there? What happened? How did it impact you? What stood out for you? Don't take time to make judgments or interpretations about the day (such as "I should have done...", "If only...", "He ought to have...", "I did that because..."). Simply recount the day in your own words and include your feelings.

Make sure to include your thoughts and feelings as you were sharing your wedding promises and vows with one another. What were you thinking and feeling as you looked into your spouse's eyes and freely promised to love him/her forever? Be as honest as possible.

Read your narration out loud to yourself. Take account of feelings that arise as you read about certain aspects of your wedding day.

After you and your spouse have completed this entry, share your stories with each other. Even though you were both there, don't be surprised if you both have different recollections and highlights. As you finish sharing with each other, take some time to pray with one another and thank God for bringing the two of you together.

POSTED BY PETER AT [12:01 AM](#) [16 COMMENTS](#)

THURSDAY, MARCH 11, 2010

[Your Wedding Day 1.2](#)

As you shared your wedding story in writing and with your spouse, what feelings arose within you? Please describe the feelings.

Have you ever reflected on your marriage vows after the wedding?

When you think about marriage, what is it for you?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in article 1601 says, "The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament."

What aspects of marriage in this statement resonate as being true for you? What parts might you disagree with?

Civil society refers to marriage as a contract between two people while the Church refers to marriage as a covenant. A covenant implies so much more than a contract. In a covenant you give your whole self away to another and in turn receive the whole other person. In marriage this is true with your spouse and with God. At the altar we promised to give our whole selves to our spouse (knowing we cannot do this on our own) and we gave our whole selves to God asking for his help to love our spouse as God loves us.

(If you have not had a chance to complete the first blog entry 1.1, please do so now.)

POSTED BY PETER AT [12:01 AM](#) [9 COMMENTS](#)

MONDAY, MARCH 15, 2010

[Wedding Promises and Vows 2.1](#)

On your wedding day you stood before a member of the clergy, your wedding parties, and your friends and family. Before all these people and God you publicly answered "yes" to the following questions as part of your marriage vows:

"Have you come here freely and without reservation to give yourselves to each other in marriage?"

"Will you love and honor 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?"

What was going on inside of you as you shared these vows? What feelings did you feel?

Were you nervous about saying yes to any of the vows and the implications it could have for your life?

How do you live out your marriage vows today in your marriage? (Examples: How do you give yourselves to each other, how are you open to life, how do you live out fidelity to one another, how do you lay down your life for your spouse, how does your marriage covenant include God in your ordinary daily living?)

Do your marriage vows have a deeper meaning to you now; after you have been married (mention how many years you have been married)?

POSTED BY PETER AT [12:01 AM](#) [14 COMMENTS](#)

THURSDAY, MARCH 18, 2010

[Wedding Promises and Vows 2.2](#)

(If you have not had a chance to complete Wedding Promises and Vows 2.1, please do so now.)

"This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called 'woman,' for out of 'her man' this one has been taken. That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body."

Genesis 2: 23-24

The wedding promises helped you know what a Catholic marriage is all about. You promised to love one another with a love that was completely free (not forced or coerced), faithful (you would be emotionally and physically faithful to one another), total (you would give yourself without holding anything back from the other person) and fruitful (your love would go beyond just the love between each other and would be open to new life).

After making the promises to one another and to God, you were ready to get married. Since it was your intention to marry the priest then lead you in these (or very similar) vows:

"I, N., take you, N., to be my wife (husband). I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life."

Take a moment to slowly re-read your vows... What do your vows mean to you today?

On your wedding day you were ministers of the sacrament of marriage to each other. The

priest or deacon was only the witness on behalf of the Church. It was you who gave consent to marry one another and it was you who said the words of consecration (your vows) to one another. By your consent, you created a new reality; your two individual lives became one flesh in the sacrament. The two of you with God created a covenant of love.

What does it mean for the two of you to become one?

How do you minister the sacrament of marriage to your spouse today in your marriage?

When you have a chance, take a moment to pray with your spouse and then during your prayer, share your wedding vows with one another again. Share with each other how you feel when you say these words to one another.

POSTED BY PETER AT [12:01 AM](#) [5 COMMENTS](#)

MONDAY, MARCH 22, 2010

[Your Marriage and God 3.1](#)

"Christ dwells with them (married couples), gives them the strength to take up their crosses and so follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another's burdens, to "be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ," and to love one another with supernatural, tender, and fruitful love."
(*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1642)

We have spent the first two weeks reflecting on your wedding day with the promises and vows you made to each other. Throughout these reflections, I have been asking you to let yourself feel and experience the emotions and feelings that were present then and now.

Let yourself feel those feelings again. Think of (read over again if you like) your promises and vows to one another. Take a moment to pray and use your promises and vows as part of the prayer. . . . Does an image of marriage arise in your mind as you ponder these? Perhaps it will be one of your wedding pictures or a picture of marriage in your mind. You may imagine a man carrying a woman over a threshold or a baby in her mother's arms. It could be an image seemingly unrelated to marriage, simply let the image come to your mind.

What is the image? If no image arises, stay with your feelings and write more details about these.

What does your image (or your feelings about your vows and promises) suggest about God's purpose for your wedding?

What does your image (or feelings) suggest about your view of marriage?

(Some people like to write a dialogue between themselves and their image. How does your image answer the above questions?)

POSTED BY PETER AT [12:01 AM](#) [10 COMMENTS](#)

THURSDAY, MARCH 25, 2010

[Your Marriage and God 3.2](#)

Take a moment to quietly say a prayer for your marriage, your spouse and your family....

As you think about your feelings from your wedding day and/or the image that emerged about your marriage, what story, passage, or theme from the Bible, Church history, theology, lives of the saints, etc. come to mind?

Simply write down all the ideas that come to your mind. Brainstorm a list. Don't ponder at length on any of these yet, just write them down.

For example, as you pondered your wedding day it may remind you of Jesus at the Wedding Feast of Cana saving the couple from embarrassment (John 2: 1-11). It may remind you of Jesus saying that in marriage the two become one flesh (Mark 10: 6-9). It could remind you of Jesus and the Church's teaching that marriage is to be permanent (Matthew 19: 3-6 or the Catholic Catechism of the Church 1601). It may remind you of the life of a saint (such as St. Joseph or St. Gianna Molla).

Please write about whatever story, passage, or theme from the Bible, Church history, theology, lives of the saints, etc. that comes to your mind. Share one or as many as you wish in your comments and with your spouse. If none come to mind, share this as well.

Pick one item from the list you brainstormed from Christian tradition. If it is a Scripture passage, read the passage. If a saint, search for the saint on the Internet and read about them. Whatever you selected, answer these questions:

What does this piece of Christian tradition say about God's purposes for marriage?

What does this piece of Christian tradition suggest about your part in realizing God's purposes for your marriage? Do not over think over your answers; simply write from your heart.

POSTED BY PETER AT [12:01 AM](#) [7 COMMENTS](#)

MONDAY, MARCH 29, 2010

[Making Sense of It All 4.1](#)

As you shared your thoughts, feelings, images and reflections on Christian tradition was there a theme or aspect that jumped out at you as being particularly important for you?

Is there a question that emerged that you wish to pursue more?

Do your reflections confirm your beliefs about marriage?

Did they challenge your beliefs in any way?

Do your reflections make you think of a particular new way of acting and/or thinking about your own marriage?

What **concrete change or action will you take** from these four weeks of reflection (name at least one). In your comments, feel free to share any other insights, thoughts, feelings that you had.

Just as your vows transformed you from two to one, so too did the sacrament transform your individual daily lives to a united "domestic church." Your home life has become a means of grace and holiness for both of you (and any children you may have). Your home becomes a miniature church (domestic church) where all your activities (even the mundane ones of changing the oil in the car, changing a diaper, getting your spouse coffee in the morning, etc.) are opportunities for grace.

How is your home a domestic church?

Please share your reflections with your spouse as well so that you can grow in your marriage with one another.

POSTED BY PETER AT [12:02 AM](#) [8 COMMENTS](#)

THURSDAY, APRIL 1, 2010

[Evaluation 4.2](#)

Thank you for participating in this theological reflection on your marriage. Your marriage is a sacrament in the Church. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says, *"Sacraments are 'powers that come forth' from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving. They are actions of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body, the Church"* (1116).

Your sacramental marriage gives you grace (power) to live your married life. Because

you sealed your love in a covenant with God, the Holy Spirit (God) is at work in your life and marriage every day. Make use of this power/grace by calling on God each day in prayer as individuals, couples and as families. Allow Christ to help transform your love for your spouse into a supernatural love.

"The couple needs to remember they have entered a relationship between persons. They come to one another with two loves, the one commanded by Jesus and the one caused by their attraction to each other. They are challenged to unite their personal love with Christ's love. Their human love will survive more effectively the cultural challenges they face, as well as the psychological and economic ones, when it is merged with the powerful love of Christ, who wants them to succeed and whose divine grace is ever at their service." (United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, 286)

Thank you for participating in this marriage reflection blog! I hope it serves as a blessing to you and your marriage.

Please complete the following evaluation to help me make this an even better experience for couples in the future...

<http://www.zoomerang.com/Survey/WEB22AA9RJ3MLA>

Even if you were unable to post comments or read the blog, please complete the evaluation.

Thank you again for your participation!!!

POSTED BY PETER AT [12:01 AM](#) [0 COMMENTS](#)

Appendix D

Marriage Reflection Blog Evaluation Results

1. Name			
Confidential			
2. Please state the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements (your answers may have changed from the first time you answered these questions): I feel I know the teachings of the Catholic faith very well.			
Completely agree		3	27%
Mostly agree		7	64%
Not sure		1	9%
Mostly disagree		0	0%
Disagree		0	0%
Total		11	100%
3. I feel I know the Catholic Church's teachings on marriage very well.			
Completely agree		6	55%
Mostly agree		5	45%
Not sure		0	0%
Mostly disagree		0	0%
Disagree		0	0%
Total		11	100%
4. Marriage is a calling from God.			
Completely agree		9	90%
Mostly agree		1	10%
Not sure		0	0%
Mostly disagree		0	0%
Disagree		0	0%
Total		10	100%
5. Marriage is a commitment meant to last a lifetime.			
Completely agree		11	100%
Mostly agree		0	0%
Not sure		0	0%
Mostly disagree		0	0%
Disagree		0	0%
Total		11	100%

6. In marriage, each spouse is meant to give their whole selves to their spouse.			
Completely agree		11	100%
Mostly agree		0	0%
Not sure		0	0%
Mostly disagree		0	0%
Disagree		0	0%
Total		11	100%
7. I experience God in my marriage.			
Completely agree		8	73%
Mostly agree		3	27%
Not sure		0	0%
Mostly disagree		0	0%
Disagree		0	0%
Total		11	100%
8. Married love is not perfect, but it is holy.			
Completely agree		10	91%
Mostly agree		1	9%
Not sure		0	0%
Mostly disagree		0	0%
Disagree		0	0%
Total		11	100%
9. Marriage can bring a husband and wife closer to God.			
Completely agree		8	73%
Mostly agree		3	27%
Not sure		0	0%
Mostly disagree		0	0%
Disagree		0	0%
Total		11	100%
10. Define these terms in your own words (your responses may have changed from the first time you defined these terms):			
Sacrament -			
1	A gift from God that enables us to become closer to Him.		
2	A power that comes from God, available to all baptized Christians, instituted by Christ for His Church.		
3	A sacrament is a gift From God that enriches our spiritual relationship in our religion.		
4	A sacrament is a visible sign of grace.		
5	Outward sign of God's grace.		
6	no change		

7 Outward sign of an internal action of God's grace on the soul

8 I think my responses would be the same.

11. Marriage -

- 1 A sacrament joining a man and a woman in a bond intended to reflect the love of the Holy Trinity.
- 2 The unity of a man and a woman who commit to love each other, support and care for each other and their family for as long as they live.
- 3 The complete union of man and wife- body, soul, mind, which forms a permanent, exclusive, and fruitful bond.
- 4 The Holy bond between a man and a woman.
- 5 An inseparable bond between husband and wife.
- 6 Holy union between a man and a woman, open to life, and blessed by God.
- 7 no change

12. Covenant -

- 1 a promise
- 2 A sacred promise to be honored and cherished.
- 3 vows or promises instituted by God, blessed by God, raised to the divine and not just human
- 4 A solemn promise between God and man.
- 5 A lasting and abiding promise.
- 6 Holy promise, divine and binding.
- 7 no change

13. Domestic Church -

- 1 the living out/working out of family life in such a way that Christ is honored and revered in each person and in the family as a whole--reflecting God's love to the world
- 2 When you live the daily life of a Catholic and apply the teachings to your daily activities and interactions at home.

- 3 A mini reflection of the Church where we live out our call to holiness and service to God through serving our family day in and day out.
- 4 Our sharing as a couple and as a family in our spiritual beliefs.
- 5 A model of Catholic marriage.
- 6 The family, representing the greater church, but in miniature. It strengthens and prepares the children to live their faith, and share/spread it as they get older.
- 7 no change

14. Please answer these questions in your own words: Who is the minister of the sacrament of marriage?			
God		3	27%
Husband and Wife		9	82%
Priest		0	0%
15. Do you feel that God is present in your married life?			
Yes		10	100%
No		0	0%
Total		10	100%

- 1 Again, I'm not sure that my answers would have changed, though I don't remember the exact wording I used
- 2 I feel that he watches over us and guides to stay committed to our vows.
- 3 Guiding, strengthening, providing protection and nourishment for both the joys and sufferings of family life. He has blessed our marriage with much fruit, especially the gift of children
- 4 God brought us together; God guides our life together; God gives us strength as parents and as a couple.
- 5 By the fact that we continue to be blessed with wonderful children, a happy marriage, and a good life.
- 6 Yes, especially in our children.
- 7 Many ways, including seeking and receiving of forgiveness from one another; learning about self-gift and sacrifice; receiving unconditional love from another person

16. Do you live out the sacrament of marriage in your daily life?			
Yes		9	100%
No		0	0%
Total		9	100%

- 1 By giving of ourselves in sacrifice to each other.
- 2 In our daily interactions with each other
- 3 We strive to be one of heart, mind and body. We have made each other our number one priority, even above our children and we are committed to living our vows each day.
- 4 I love my wife and I express this to her every day. We share so much together, and we support each other daily. We listen to each other's words and we accept each other's feelings.
- 5 By caring and loving each other and our children.
- 6 In daily life, we must make sacrifices. Those are acts of love that we offer to God, and He uses those works. We also give witness to our children through our words and deeds.
- 7 For example, praying together, playing together, openness to children, working out conflicts, supporting one another's needs

17. Is marriage a means to grow closer to God?			
Yes		10	100%
No		0	0%
Total		10	100%

- 1 It helps us learn to love deeper by knowing so much about someone and still loving them. It also teaches me about God's love because I wonder how someone could know SO much about me and still love me as much as she does.
- 2 Marriage allows us to Thank God for creating our spouse and blessing our marriage.
- 3 Through serving each other and being open to life, we feel we are serving God and striving to be open to His plans for our family
- 4 If God is present in your lives when you are married, your love for God grows as your love for each other grows. By accepting each other's love,

God's love grows in us as well.

- 5 Yes, as it is one of the vocations.
- 6 It's a way to give witness -- there's greater purpose to my life with my children. It's a cliché, but they're gifts from God, and I strive harder to be good -- working for them and because of them!
- 7 In and through our broken humanity, God's grace shines through! This amazes me. I am astounded as I reflect upon the grace of this sacrament.

18. Do you see your married life as a small version of the church?			
Yes		10	100%
No		0	0%
Total		10	100%

- 1 We strive to know God in our little church, we share his word through the example of our love, and we see the fruit of his love in our children.
- 2 We are our own community sharing our faith together. Our community of two reaches out and touches our family, our friends, and sometimes even strangers. Our love light shines like a beacon, and its glow touches others. Our little church encourages others to be open to love for your spouse and to let others know that you love each other.
- 3 My husband and I make sacrifices for each other out of love. That seems like Christ and His relationship to the church.
- 4 Yes, especially as I slowly learn about Christ the Bridegroom and we, the Church, being His bride. Our priest DANCED down the aisle after Easter mass! He invited people to dance with him--the Church is his bride! This imagery helps me with understanding more fully married life being a small version of the church. Our love is growing and reaches out to embrace new life through God's creative action.

19. General Blog Information: I found this pilot marriage reflection blog relevant to my life today.			
Strongly Agree		5	45%
Agree		5	45%
No opinion		0	0%
Disagree		1	9%

Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	11	100%
20. The blog was easy to follow and participate.		
Strongly Agree	1	10%
Agree	7	70%
No opinion	1	10%
Disagree	1	10%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	10	100%
21. The blog format facilitated and enhanced my learning.		
Strongly Agree	2	18%
Agree	5	45%
No opinion	2	18%
Disagree	2	18%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	11	100%
22. The blog format encouraged me to express my thoughts and reflections.		
Strongly Agree	4	36%
Agree	3	27%
No opinion	2	18%
Disagree	2	18%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	11	100%
23. I discussed my blog reflections and comments with my spouse.		
Strongly Agree	3	30%
Agree	7	70%
No opinion	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%

Total	10	100%
24. The topics discussed in the individual blog posts relate to my life and how I live my marriage each day.		
Strongly Agree	3	27%
Agree	6	55%
No opinion	1	9%
Disagree	1	9%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	11	100%
25. Your Experience of the Blog: I feel I came to a better understanding of the Church's teachings on marriage through the blog.		
Strongly Agree	3	27%
Agree	4	36%
No opinion	1	9%
Disagree	3	27%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	11	100%
26. I feel the blog designer had a good understanding of the Church's teachings on marriage.		
Strongly Agree	10	91%
Agree	1	9%
No opinion	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	11	100%
27. The blog helped me realize that I would like to know more about the sacrament of marriage.		
Strongly Agree	3	27%
Agree	3	27%
No opinion	5	45%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	11	100%
28. I feel the marriage blog helped deepen my relationship with my spouse.		
Strongly Agree	3	27%
Agree	6	55%

No opinion	1	9%
Disagree	1	9%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	11	100%
29. The blog helped me see deeper that marriage is a means toward holiness.		
Strongly Agree	4	36%
Agree	4	36%
No opinion	2	18%
Disagree	1	9%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	11	100%
30. Marriage Reflection Blog Project I understood that the purpose of the blog was to reflect on my marriage and especially my wedding day vows and promises.		
Strongly Agree	3	27%
Agree	7	64%
No opinion	0	0%
Disagree	1	9%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	11	100%
31. I understood the definition of 'marriage' from the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1601). "The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament."		
Strongly Agree	6	55%
Agree	5	45%
No opinion	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	11	100%
32. Based on my experience in this pilot program, I would recommend it to a peer.		
Strongly Agree	3	27%
Agree	4	36%
No opinion	2	18%
Disagree	2	18%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	11	100%

33. The marriage reflection blog would positively enhance Catholic couple's experience of marriage.			
Strongly Agree		4	36%
Agree		3	27%
No opinion		4	36%
Disagree		0	0%
Strongly Disagree		0	0%
Total		11	100%
34. A future marriage reflection blog should have a similar format to that of this pilot program.			
Strongly Agree		2	18%
Agree		4	36%
No opinion		2	18%
Disagree		3	27%
Strongly Disagree		0	0%
Total		11	100%
35. Having a face to face meeting with the other couples would have enriched this marriage reflection blog experience.			
Strongly Agree		3	27%
Agree		3	27%
No opinion		3	27%
Disagree		2	18%
Strongly Disagree		0	0%
Total		11	100%
36. If there was an opportunity to meet the other couples in the blog, I would have been willing to travel more than 20 miles to meet up with the couples.			
Strongly Agree		1	9%
Agree		5	45%
No opinion		0	0%
Disagree		5	45%
Strongly Disagree		0	0%
Total		11	100%
37. Having four weeks for reflection was the right amount of time for the blog.			
Strongly Agree		3	27%
Agree		5	45%
No opinion		2	18%
Disagree		1	9%
Strongly Disagree		0	0%

Total	11	100%
38. I believe the blog should have been shorter.		
Strongly Agree	0	0%
Agree	1	9%
No opinion	1	9%
Disagree	9	82%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	11	100%
39. I believe the blog should have been longer.		
Strongly Agree	0	0%
Agree	3	27%
No opinion	3	27%
Disagree	4	36%
Strongly Disagree	1	9%
Total	11	100%
40. I would have preferred to have had fewer reflections over a longer period of time (i.e. one reflection a week for eight weeks).		
Strongly Agree	3	27%
Agree	6	55%
No opinion	1	9%
Disagree	1	9%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	11	100%
41. I would have preferred to have had more reflections over a shorter period of time (i.e. a reflection every other day for two weeks).		
Strongly Agree	0	0%
Agree	0	0%
No opinion	2	18%
Disagree	4	36%
Strongly Disagree	5	45%
Total	11	100%
42. This marriage enrichment blog would be beneficial to other married Catholics.		
Strongly Agree	5	56%
Agree	2	22%
No opinion	2	22%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	9	100%

43. The 'ideal' number of blog posts (or reflections) for a marriage reflection blog would be:			
One		1	9%
Two		0	0%
Three		0	0%
Four		2	18%
Five		0	0%
Six		3	27%
Seven		0	0%
Eight		3	27%
Nine		0	0%
Ten (or more)		1	9%
No opinion		1	9%
Total		11	100%
44. Of the eight blog posts, how many did you read (it is OK if you did not read them all)?			
None (zero)		0	0%
One		0	0%
Two		1	9%
Three		0	0%
Four		1	9%
Five		1	9%
Six		1	9%
Seven		1	9%
Eight		6	55%
Total		11	100%
45. Of the eight blog posts, how many did you comment on?			
None (zero)		0	0%
One		1	9%
Two		1	9%
Three		3	27%
Four		0	0%
Five		1	9%
Six		0	0%
Seven		3	27%
Eight		2	18%
Total		11	100%
46. What were the main reasons you did not read and/or comment on the blog?			

- 1 Seemed repetitive

- 2 We quickly fell behind. Felt a bit overwhelmed. We were gone for 10 days overseas
- 3 hard to find time to read blog and then coordinate time with husband twice a week to both discuss and post
- 4 There were a lot of questions within each post. They required a lot of thought, and it was a little hard for me to decide which question to tackle first, or which ones to focus on more than others. It took a lot of time and thought.
- 5 Travel for work
- 6 Sometimes the topic introduction did not pull me in or spark an idea. They were also very lengthy.
- 7 Time/family constraints and not being at the computer at the same time as my spouse!
- 8 Time limitation (once a week would have been much easier to manage/schedule). Primarily though it was 3 reasons that I did not participate more: 1. The nature of the reflections seemed somewhat forced, like the one about the image of marriage, where it seemed like the blog had a particular answer in mind and format for my thoughts/image. 2. I lost interest when I felt that the blog was not practical enough for my marriage. I didn't find that the abstract reflections really helped my wife and I to explore the challenges and joys of our marriage. Instead, our dialogue tended to be philosophical and, well, abstract. I was hoping for a more tangible discussion. 3. It seemed like a number of the other couples "had it together," put on their church faces, and gave the Sunday School teacher the answers they wanted to hear. I volunteer with our church youth group and it reminded me of the times when we've been having a discussion on a challenging topic and one or more of the teens give me the exact, textbook answers for whatever questions I have, but never admit their true questions/concerns/challenges that I know they must have if they're human. I guess I'm saying that it felt kind of fake.

47. On average, how much time did you spend reflecting on the blog post and writing your reflections?			
0-5 minutes		0	0%
5-10 minutes		3	27%
10-15 minutes		2	18%
15-20 minutes		3	27%

20 minutes or more	3	27%
Total	11	100%
48. Did you make comments on other participant's comments?		
Yes	2	18%
No	9	82%
Total	11	100%
49. What do you believe would be the ideal format for marriage reflection?		
Same format as pilot blog	3	27%
Similar format, with some variation	1	9%
Different format entirely	0	0%
No opinion	0	0%
If you chose 'similar format' or 'different format entirely' as your answer, please provide some specific information that would help bring about a new or improved format:	7	64%
Total	11	100%

- 1 I would be interested in a more practical and more flexible reflection model, that encouraged us as supportive and humble couples to share our challenges and ways which we address them.
- 2 I wonder if there is a format that more encourages dialogue with the other couples.
- 3 One post per week (for 3 - 4 weeks) with an aspect of marriage to read about. Then discuss 1 or 2 questions. We found it difficult to keep up with two posts a week and felt a little overwhelmed with the amount of discussion we were asked to have and the amount of questions there were to choose from. We think we would have kept up with (and benefited more from) less posts with more focused topics and questions. Just our experience as busy people with two small children!!
- 4 I am not sure. I liked the format, and reading what others had to say, but I didn't like the work of contributing to it. I would rather share my reflections with people in person, rather than through a blog. It seems so permanent and official putting it out there on the blog.
- 5 I think the only way for a blog to be effective would be to

have very provocative topics that people would be strongly opinionated about. Or, have a short anecdote and ask folks to comment on the story. A blog as a tool for reflection and learning is not effective because it is not very interactive and it is a bit strange to post personal thoughts to people you don't know, and can't interpret their comments in context of who they are. A better online method would be web-conferencing or possibly Skype? And I think the ideal is still in person.

- 6 I bet this format draws more women than men. I would need more information before making a recommendation.

50. If a marriage blog was designed to help strengthen your marriage what additional topics would you like to see (check all that apply and add your own)?			
Praying as a Couple		8	73%
Serving others as a married couple		5	45%
Developing a closer relationship with Christ		3	27%
Financial skills		2	18%
Communication Skills		9	82%
Reading Scripture as a couple		4	36%
Other, please specify		4	36%

- 1 all sound fine
- 2 Fighting fair
- 3 Tips for families with small children
- 4 How to deal with difficult times, issues, challenges...

51. I clicked on at least one of the website referrals on the side bar of the blog?			
Yes		4	40%
No		6	60%
Total		10	100%

- 1 Clicked on daily quote.
- 2 Marriage Matters
- 3 I had seen several of the linked websites before. I remember clicking on the marriage encounter link to double-check dates... we have been wanting to attend one of those.

52. What resources (in addition to the web links) would be helpful on the blog?

- 1 books
- 2 I did not use the web links although I did enjoy the tip of the day. (especially the one about nagging)
- 3 Assistance setting up a blog account
- 4 Maybe other Catholic blogs (sorry if that was available & I missed it)

53. How do you most prefer to learn more about Church teaching on marriage (select all that apply)?

Online resources	7	64%
Printed materials from the parish	3	27%
DVD	0	0%
Homilies	5	45%
Small groups at the parish	2	18%
Retreats	5	45%
Mentor couples	6	55%
Other, please specify	4	36%

- 1 MP3 downloads or weekly podcasts would be an interesting and convenient way to listen to teachings.
- 2 books
- 3 Marriage enrichments
- 4 Books

**54. Marriage Reflection Blog Effectiveness (This is the last page of the evaluation)
From my experience in the marriage reflection blog, I am more open to pursuing other means of marriage enrichment.**

Strongly Agree	2	18%
Agree	6	55%
No opinion	3	27%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	11	100%

55. After participating in the marriage reflection blog, I believe I have a better understanding of my Catholic faith.

Strongly Agree	2	18%
Agree	4	36%
No opinion	4	36%
Disagree	1	9%

Strongly Disagree		0	0%
Total		11	100%
56. After participating in the marriage reflection blog, I believe I have a better understanding of the meaning of the sacrament of marriage.			
Strongly Agree		3	27%
Agree		3	27%
No opinion		4	36%
Disagree		1	9%
Strongly Disagree		0	0%
Total		11	100%
57. The marriage reflection blog provided me with an accessible means to enrich my marriage.			
Strongly Agree		2	20%
Agree		7	70%
No opinion		0	0%
Disagree		1	10%
Strongly Disagree		0	0%
Total		10	100%
58. The marriage reflection blog helped me to appreciate my spouses understanding of the sacrament of marriage better.			
Strongly Agree		5	45%
Agree		1	9%
No opinion		4	36%
Disagree		1	9%
Strongly Disagree		0	0%
Total		11	100%
59. The marriage reflection blog helped me better understand my marriage as a domestic church.			
Strongly Agree		3	27%
Agree		4	36%
No opinion		3	27%
Disagree		1	9%
Strongly Disagree		0	0%
Total		11	100%
60. The marriage reflection blog helped me better realize that God is present in my daily married life.			
Strongly Agree		3	27%
Agree		4	36%
No opinion		3	27%
Disagree		1	9%

Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	11	100%
61. Through the marriage reflection blog, I came to see my marriage more as a covenant, which includes God, as opposed to simply a civil contract.		
Strongly Agree	3	27%
Agree	5	45%
No opinion	2	18%
Disagree	1	9%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	11	100%
62. In the initial e-mail, you were given a copy of the "Purpose of the Project in Ministry" and "Contribution to Ministry". Do you have any comments about how the blog fulfilled these goals? Purpose of the Project in Ministry "The purpose of this project is to design, pilot and evaluate an online interactive blog that will offer married couples opportunities to (1) theologically reflect on the sacramental vows they committed themselves to on their wedding day; (2) understand that their path to holiness is intimately related to their sacramental vows and is now expressed in their daily interactions together in their domestic church; and (3) share this experience verbally with their spouse and in writing with other couples in the online community. Additionally, the project will provide a gateway to other resources on marriage and the Church."		

- 1 I thought this was very thoughtfully and sensitively developed and orchestrated. Ways to place the Internet at the service of marriage enrichment efforts in the Church is a critical undertaking.
- 2 It is good for us to be reminded that God is present in our marriage and that marriage is a sacrament.
- 3 I think it fulfilled its purpose very well.
- 4 I think the blog was an effectively way for couples to exchange and share their views.
- 5 This was a very specific purpose, and I think this project met it quite well. It was well-designed.
- 6 I think the intent is great. It seemed like there were 4-5 posts focusing on the vows/wedding day which I wasn't expecting. I think more time between reflections would be better. Sometimes it took me a couple days to even

think of something to write. It is hard to come up with a deep reflection just after reading it, and sometimes I never got back to it. We did talk a bit about each other's posts a little, which was interesting, but nothing really significant came out of it.

63. Do you believe that this marriage reflection blog will be able to contribute to ministry as proposed? Contribution to Ministry "The project will create a new model of mystagogical reflection and marriage enrichment utilizing online tools that provide ongoing "community" for couples to grow and share in their understanding of marriage as a means of holiness. This online resource will be readily available for marriage ministers to utilize or to assist them in creating a similar program to use in their places of ministry. It will provide a tool for ministers and couples to grow in their understanding of the sacrament of marriage using a new medium."

- 1 We are currently involved in a Marriage Matters marriage enrichment program at our parish. This is in person, once monthly. We have only had one meeting, but there was a HUGE attendance. I am wondering about the application of the Theology of the Body teachings of JP II in terms of being IN PERSON and learning about marriage physically beside your spouse and next to other couples AT your PARISH. I am wondering if an online tool such as this may be best applied within a parish community (or, in tandem to an in person program?) The goal, then, may also be related to strengthening a sense of ongoing community in the setting of marriage enrichment...
- 2 yes
- 3 yes
- 4 This is new technology and it is very comfortable for younger couples. I think that this is a great way to reach out to young couples on their level and allow them to benefit from the message that you are sharing.
- 5 I think it will be able to contribute to ministry. I think a lot of people would be very interested to try something like this. My hubby and I do better when we are meeting with other people face to face

though, away from the chores and routine at home. It was very hard to make time to reflect about the postings together and write our reflections. When we attend meetings or events with other people, it gives us a space and time for reflection where we can't be distracted by everyday responsibilities. I would say though, that the little time we were able to spend on this was fruitful for our marriage. Reading what other people wrote was very inspiring as well. And I know we should try to spend more time doing this kind of thing at home. It was a good exercise to try to do this, even though I don't think we did a very good job.

- 6 Yes.
- 7 Yes, I think it was a fortunate use of technology to reach out to couples regardless of location and a common meeting time.
- 8 I think you should have everyone submit a brief bio of themselves before starting (years married, # kids, where live, strength/weakness of their marriage). I think this would help make this a more personal experience. Also having people meet before and after would be great. I'm not sure this style of blogging is very effective... Possibly having marriage seminars available to download or watch on YouTube would be more effective for marriage ministers. For example, speakers or marriage/family therapists speaking on any of the topics you mentioned above like prayer, finances etc. THEN, perhaps you could have people discuss the seminar or participate in a Q&A remotely or submit questions by email during the seminar like radio stations do for some of their programming. I guess I just didn't get a lot out of the others' posts, since I didn't know anything about them and couldn't even see them. Also there were some privacy concerns with having our names up there, though this was solved with the "anonymous" button. Because of those issues, people were even less knowable. Another cool thing you could do to provoke discussion would be to have people watch a clip from a movie, and then post their reaction to it, or even just discuss famous marriages. Just something to sort

of elicit an immediate response--which may not be very reflective, granted.

64. Final Comments and Recommendations
Please add your opinions and comments
on the topics below: A marriage reflection
blog is a viable means to help married
couples grow deeper in their understanding
of the sacrament of marriage.

- 1 My sense is that it can't stand alone; in other words, it needs to have an anchor, perhaps a parish anchor, to allow it to grow and germinate in the future....
- 2 It was nice to be reminded of our vows and relive them.
- 3 I agree, and I would expand this into a series of other marital topics.
- 4 I felt like I knew a lot about the sacrament of marriage and the church teachings since we had a really good pre-cana program and regular discussions about marriage through other church programs and homilies. But I do think it could help other people who haven't had as much "catholic marriage education". I think it could be a different way to learn about Catholic teachings on marriage, and it definitely provides good food for thought and reminders for anybody who is married or thinking about getting married.
- 5 It was very effective.
- 6 Not sure. I knew the theology before, so not sure if this added much.

65. The marriage reflection blog helped me
grow deeper in my faith and opened up new
means to grow deeper in my marriage.

- 1 Yes. It provided built-in opportunities to reflect on our sacrament.
- 2 It encourages us to say (or type) things that we don't normally say in our daily lives. And everyone can agree that feeling loved is a basic necessity in our existence.
- 3 Many of the topics have already been discussed by us through our involvement with Worldwide Marriage Encounter, however, it is good to have these topics refreshed, and by doing it through a different medium was very helpful.
- 4 It did help me grow a little deeper in my faith. It forced me to spend more time in reflection and prayer, and I feel like it has been good for

me and my relationship with my husband. I feel like I have been able to be a little bit better as a wife as a result of the reflection and prayer and reading the nice things that everybody else wrote.

5 I think the questions posed were thought provoking and relevant.

6 Not much

66. What did you like most about the marriage enrichment blog experience?

1 to share with other couples

2 I like the interaction and reading other people's postings.

3 I could do it at my own pace and at times that were convenient to me.

4 Talking with my hubby about it and reflecting on the postings. I did enjoy writing my reflection even though it was very hard.

5 The flexibility to answer and participate when time was available.

6 I liked reading about other people's experiences -- it helped me feel connected to other Catholic couples. Sometimes, it provided a social outlet (as well as spiritually informative) at a convenient time.

7 I liked reading what my spouse wrote, and having him read what I wrote.

8 Being part of a Catholic pilot program to strengthen marriages, including our own!

9 Something different

67. What did you like least about the marriage enrichment blog experience?

1 Sometimes I struggled with a reply because I thought that it was similar to the previous posting.

2 Getting the posting part set up.

3 The time table. It was hard for me to keep up with the postings. And also the fact that it was all through the computer. It was out of my normal comfort zone to be posting personal reflections where anyone might see them. And I don't know what will become of them, but it is definitely out of my comfort zone to think that months or years down the line, someone could read what I wrote and I wouldn't know. I appreciate that you changed the blog to allow for

anonymous postings for that reason.

- 4 I thought the blog design elements (the style of the web pages) were a little distracting. A simpler background would be preferable.
- 5 Some weeks it was hard to respond to two blogs.
- 6 Wondering whether anyone else read my posts since I usually posted after the next one was already up.
- 7 the venue didn't draw my husband's interest although the subject matter did tremendously

68. Please offer any comments and recommendations related to the marriage reflection blog not covered in this survey.

- 1 I think that further interpretation of each of the basic wedding vows would be nice. For example - in sickness and health - richer or poorer. Some guidance on how to keep your marriage strong during illness, or financial trouble etc.

- 2 I thank you for doing this, and encourage you to continue with your efforts. Any tools that are shared to help enrich marriages is a wonderful thing!

- 3 I liked that the blog was very positive and uplifting. I think in a face to face format though, it would be easier to reflect on struggles as well. I tried to be open and honest in my answers, but I felt like the blog encouraged us to only say very positive good things. Which is good, but I think that if someone read what I wrote they would think I had the most perfect marriage, when in reality, yeah, it is pretty wonderful most of the time but we do have struggles and difficulties, some times more than others. I wouldn't want to bring down others or be brought down by others, but I think my hubby and I would like to find a way to talk about our difficulties in a constructive, positive way.

- 4 It was a non-threatening, less formal way to engage in an educational and spiritual experience. I think my husband would have balked at a retreat or a face-to-face reflection time (plus, it would have been extremely difficult to find a babysitter!) but this was a positive experience. The topics encompassed our wedding day, our

marriage, and even our children, and the individual opportunity for reflection was all invaluable. It afforded us the space to reflect separately and then discuss together what we had each posted.

- 5 I'm glad I participated. It is a good idea to look for online interactive marriage enrichment, since it is so easy and accessible. I wonder if it would be more effective to just have the couple write to each other? (for reflection) And have a 30 min YouTube video for the theologic teaching part. Anyway, thanks for all your work. I think this has a lot of potential and please let me know if you have any future projects we could participate in.
-

- 6 Thank you for your commitment to this!!!
-

- 7 I felt like Daniel Lorusso must have in The Karate Kid after spending several days painting fences and waxing cars (reading abstract reflections), only I never had that a-ha moment when Mr. Myagi shows me that I've learned something that can help me defend myself (improve my marriage).
-

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