solely for procreation,” still, “marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the begetting and education of children. Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute very substantially to the welfare of their parents.”

In addition, the raising of children helps parents to grow in the ways of love so prophetically described by St. Paul.

“Love is patient and kind. . . . is not jealous or boastful. . . . is not irritable or resentful. . . . endures all things” (1 Cor 13:4-7). Indeed, as both parents exercise their roles of caring love toward their children, each spouse grows in admiration and appreciation for the other, and their mutual love increases.

Lastly, “children strengthen the goodness of the bond of marriage, so that it does not give way under the strains that follow on the inevitable wane or disappearance of effortless romantic love.”

In short, you marry to be friends in the deepest sense — to help each other on the path to heaven and to have children whom you will educate in the ways of the Lord. In turn, your children will help you as parents grow closer together and to God. Married love is for family, and family life with its combination of joys and sorrows is the ordinary way of working out your salvation.

I: The Permanence of Marriage

With Christian couples divorcing at nearly the same rate as the general population, it can seem like lifelong marriage is becoming an anomaly. It is good to ask what exactly it means to stand before a minister or priest and solemnly promise fidelity and lifelong marriage “until death do us part.”

What did Jesus teach about the permanence of marriage?

Jesus addressed the permanence of marriage in four passages in the gospels and once in a letter to St. Paul. The most concise passage comes from the gospel of Luke.

Every one who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery (Lk 16:18).

Did the Jews at the time of Jesus allow divorce and remarriage?

Yes, but there was a debate. The more conservative school of thought believed that only a very serious reason could justify divorce; in practice that meant adultery or some other very serious moral misbehavior. The more liberal school held that a man could divorce his wife for all sorts of reasons, even trivial ones. According to some, the liberal practice was the prevailing one.

What did Jesus say about the Jewish divorce practices of his day?

Here is Matthew’s account.

Some Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any reason?” He answered, “Have you not read that the Creator who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder.”

They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a written notice of separation and to put her away?” He said to them, “For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity (in Greek, porneia, ‘indecency’), and marries another commits adultery; and he who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry” (Mt 19:3-10).

Matthew tells us that Jesus was being tested. The question was loaded: Could a man divorce his wife “for any cause” — as the liberal followers taught? If Jesus said yes, then he could be criticized for laxity; if he said no, he could be accused of rigormor; at the least he would be accused of taking sides.

His answer caught everyone by surprise; he told them that both sides were wrong; divorce was not possible for trivial reasons nor was it possible even for serious reasons.

Quoting what the Jews recognized was the Word of God — the book of Genesis — Jesus based his answer first upon the very nature of man and woman created in the image of God (Gen 1:27) and secondly upon the very nature of marriage — that the two become one flesh (Gen 2:24).

The response of the Jewish leaders was immediate: They quoted Moses. Why did Moses command giving your wife a written certificate of divorce in order to put her away, they asked. Jesus told them plainly: “For your hardness of hearts…” And then He reminded them about God’s plan and the true nature of marriage once again. “But from the beginning it was not so.”

What about that phrase “except for unchastity”?

Does that provide a reason for divorce with freedom to remarry in cases of infidelity, desertion, etc.?

No. If Jesus had meant that adultery and desertion were grounds for real divorce with the consequent freedom to re-marry, he would have been siding with the conservative thinkers. But he did not do that. He went back to Genesis, to the very order of creation. Look again at the last verse of Matthew’s account. The teaching of Jesus was such a shocking surprise that the immediate reaction of his disciples was that if a man was really that “stuck” with his first wife, it would be better not to get married at all! His disciples clearly understood that he was not siding with the conservatives.

References


"Until death do us part"
Second, making an exception for adultery and desertion would contradict the basic teaching of Jesus; it would have undermined his whole purpose in going back to the very order of creation. If adultery were grounds for divorce, all a man would have to do would be to have sex with someone held like for a new wife, and he would have broken free from the first marriage. Instead, Jesus spelled out very clearly that remarriage constitutes living in adultery. The gospel of Mark makes this very clear:

And in the house, his disciples again asked him about this. He taught them: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, he commits adultery against her; and if the wife divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery” (Mk 10:10-12).

The most likely meaning of “except for unchastity” is that it refers to marriages of close relatives which were con-demned by Jewish law as indecent. As indicated earlier, the Greek word translated as “unchastity” is porneia (pronounced por-nay-uh) from which we derive our word “pornography.” So the phrase reads, “except for porneia — unions judged indecent because they had every appearance of incest.”

Marriages judged to be incestuous, e.g., between a man and his stepmother (1 Cor 5:1) and between other close relatives, were acceptable in some societies long known to the Jews, but Jewish law condemned them as porneia. The early Christian Council of Jerusalem continued this condemnation (Acts 15:29). Therefore the clause “except for porneia” was no exception; it was a warning that no one, Jew or Greek, could enter into an incestuous union and expect the Church to recognize it. Such evil unions were not marriages; they both were and should be dissolved.

What’s the conclusion?

In marriage, two spouses become one flesh. Husband and wife create a relationship of oneness that is just as real and permanent as any other. A father may have disagreements with his son, even disown him, but he cannot cease to be his father. So also with husband and wife. Therefore Jesus taught that Christian marriage is for keeps. No exceptions. It is permanent. There is no out. If horrible circumstances occur, it may be necessary for one spouse to leave the other for the safety of herself (or himself) and the children. But the original bond created by their marriage vows before God still remains before God regardless of any civil laws, and neither party is free to remarry. Any attempt at such “remarriage” falls under the words of Jesus Himself — it is adultery.

Benefits of indissolubility

- To husband and wife, a “positive guarantee” of stability
- A bulwark against infidelities; sense of security
- Dignity of man & woman is maintained and mutual aid is assured
- Mutual support in the training and education of children
- More stable society


What is an annulment?
The proper term is “declaration of nullity,” and it is a judg-
ment by a Church process that an “apparent marriage” was no
marriage at all.

Then “annulments” aren’t just a Catholic form of divorce with freedom to remarry?

Definitely not. While there is the possibility that the applica-
tion of certain grounds of nullity, especially psychological ones, can be abused, the point remains: there are some unions that utterly fail to meet the requirements of true marriage from the very beginning, and they can and should be dissolved.

Why did God create the marriage relationship?
The Church clearly teaches that God created matrimony for the raising of a family and the perfection of the spouses.

“By their very nature, the institution of marriage itself and conjugal love are ordained for the procreation and education of children, and find in them their ultimate crown.”

Spouses are called “to render mutual help and service to each other through an intimate union of their persons and of their actions.”

This intimate union of their persons goes far beyond their sexual unions. Indeed, married love has to be worked at, for it requires unselfishness. “Such love, merging the human with divine, leads the spouses to a free and mutual gift of them selves, a gift proving itself by gentle affection and by deed...”

So, how important are children to Christian marriage?
The Church teaches that while “marriage is not instituted...