

From the Beginning

The Sacrament of Holy Matrimony, for Couples Preparing to Marry

A fourteen session Catholic inductive Bible study

Leader Guide

Catholic Armory

Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female? Matthew 19:4

Using This Guide

This study is written for engaged couples in marriage preparation. It assumes a leader who is not a theologian, a room where some couples are further along than others, and a group that will ask hard questions. Everything here is designed so that the group discovers the material rather than receiving it.

What each session contains

- **Part 1, Leader Preparation Guide.** Read this before the session, not during it. It contains the session overview, the background you need, the Old Testament roots, three Voices of the Church, the Catechism connection, a leader-only Thread Watch, the session goals, and a time plan with the cuts already chosen for you.
- **Part 2, Discussion Guide.** What you actually work from in the room. Opening prayer, two open Win questions, numbered Build questions each with a shaded answer box, live discovery moments, build-then-press steelman chains, Dig Deeper boxes, two open Send questions, Live It This Week, a closing prayer, and the memory verse.
- **Part 3, Leader Reference Card.** Every passage used in the session, in order, plus the Catechism paragraphs and the assigned reading for next time.

The answer boxes

Every shaded answer box is labeled share after the discussion. That label is the method. Ask the question, let the room work, and only then read what is in the box. A leader who reads the answers first has turned an inductive study into a lecture with extra steps.

Three mechanics particular to this study

- **The sealed guess.** On Take-Home 1 each person writes, alone, an answer to the question: what are you actually promising on your wedding day? They seal it and bring it back in Session 8, where a four step ritual opens it against the Church's own words. Do not let couples discuss their answers in between. The comparison is the point.
- **Couple Conversation boxes.** Questions answered privately by the couple and never reported back to the room. Some things should not be discussed in front of eleven other people, and this is how the study handles them.
- **Before the Altar panels.** One panel on each Take-Home, carrying a concrete preparation task. Across fourteen weeks they accumulate into a real checklist: documents, dispensations, ritual choices, a natural family planning course, financial disclosure, guest list decisions, and confession before the day.

A note on who is in the room

This study prepares couples for Catholic marriage, and it assumes that some couples will include a party who is not Catholic and some a party who is not baptized. Say clearly at some point that Matrimony is a sacrament when both spouses are baptized, and that a marriage involving an unbaptized party, celebrated with the required dispensation, is a real and valid marriage rather than a lesser arrangement. Session 7 handles this in full, and nobody in those situations should have to wait seven weeks to hear that they belong here.

Take-Homes

Take-Homes are participant-facing and are distributed after each session, never before. They are deliberately spoiler-free: no answer box content, no reference to a discovery the group has not yet made, no Thread Watch, and no steelman material. Each is two pages.

The leader-only panels

Two kinds of panel are for your eyes only. Thread Watch tells you which of the study's three threads is being planted, developed, or resolved, and what not to say. If a Couple Is in an Irregular Situation gives you the pastoral triage for what is actually sitting in your room: a cohabiting couple, a prior marriage, an unbaptized fiancé, a disclosure you were not expecting. In every case the instruction is the same. Notice, refer, and do not investigate.

Safeguarding

Sessions 3, 6, and 13 carry safeguarding notes, and Session 13 carries the full one. Read it before the study begins rather than in week thirteen. Know before the first session whether you are a mandated reporter under your state's law or diocesan policy, and know how to reach your parish's safe environment coordinator.

Timing

Each session is written for ninety minutes, with a seventy-five minute plan that names which questions to cut. The cuts are already chosen so that you are not deciding under pressure at minute sixty-two.

One instruction that matters more than the rest

This study takes the hardest questions directly: divorce and remarriage, annulment, cohabitation, contraception, reproductive technology, same sex marriage, and abuse. Every one of them is built at full strength before it is answered. Do not soften the objections. A room of engaged adults can tell when an argument has been rigged, and the moment they suspect it, everything else you have taught becomes suspect too.

The Session Map

Five movements, fourteen sessions.

Movement I. The Design

- **Session 1. From the Beginning.** Genesis 1:26-28; Genesis 2:18-25
- **Session 2. What Went Wrong.** Genesis 3:1-24; Genesis 4:19; Deuteronomy 24:1-4
- **Session 3. The Covenant God Keeps.** Hosea 1:2-3; 2:14-20; 3:1-3; Ezekiel 16:8-14, 59-63; Isaiah 54:5-8; Malachi 2:14-16

Movement II. Christ Restores It

- **Session 4. It Was Not So.** Matthew 19:1-12; Mark 10:1-12; Luke 16:18; 1 Corinthians 7:10-11; Deuteronomy 24:1-4
- **Session 5. They Have No Wine.** John 2:1-11; John 19:25-27; Isaiah 25:6; Amos 9:13-14
- **Session 6. This Is a Great Mystery.** Ephesians 5:21-33; Colossians 3:18-4:1; 1 Peter 3:1-7; Genesis 2:24
- **Session 7. Not Just a Ceremony.** Ephesians 5:31-32; 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, 39; Hebrews 13:4; 1 Timothy 4:1-5

Movement III. The Consent

- **Session 8. I Do.** Song of Songs 8:6-7; Matthew 5:33-37; Genesis 1:28; Matthew 19:6; Ruth 1:16-17
- **Session 9. What God Has Joined.** 1 Corinthians 7:10-16; Matthew 19:6-9; Mark 10:9; Romans 7:2-3

Movement IV. The Body

- **Session 10. The Language of the Body.** 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8; Romans 12:1; Genesis 2:24-25
- **Session 11. Be Fruitful.** Genesis 1:28; Psalm 127:3-5; Psalm 128:3-4; 1 Samuel 1:1-20; Luke 1:24-25
- **Session 12. What Marriage Is and Is Not.** Genesis 1:27; Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4-6; Mark 10:6-9; Ephesians 5:31

Movement V. The Home and the Destination

- **Session 13. When the Cross Comes.** 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; 1 Samuel 1:1-18; Job 2:9-10; Luke 2:41-51; John 19:25-27
- **Session 14. The Domestic Church and the Marriage Supper.** Revelation 19:6-9; Revelation 21:1-4, 9-11; Matthew 22:23-32; Acts 2:42-47; Ephesians 5:31-32

The three threads

- **One Flesh.** Genesis 2:24, planted in Session 1 and found again by the group in Sessions 4, 6, 8, 10, and 12, resolved in Session 14.
- **The Bridegroom.** God as husband in the prophets, planted in Session 3, developed at Cana and in Ephesians, resolved at the marriage supper of the Lamb in Session 14.
- **They Have No Wine.** Planted at Cana in Session 5, deepened in Sessions 10 and 11, at its lowest in Session 13, and answered in Session 14.

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Session 1. From the Beginning

Movement I. The Design

Passages: Genesis 1:26-28; Genesis 2:18-25

Part 1. Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. That the group finds, from the text of Genesis alone, that marriage is not a human invention but a divine design with a recognizable shape: a communion of persons, male and female, blessed with fruitfulness, and made one flesh in a union that leaves and cleaves, which the Church later articulates as a covenant.

Catholic Touchstone. God himself is the author of marriage. It comes to us from the Creator, not from the Church and not from the state, and the Church guards it precisely because she did not invent it (CCC 1603).

What You Need to Know

You are opening a fourteen week study with a room full of people who have already said yes to each other. That is worth naming out loud tonight. They are not here to be talked out of anything. They are here because they are about to make the most consequential promise a human being can make, and somewhere in them they know it.

The temptation on night one is to front load doctrine. Resist it. Genesis is enough. If the group leaves tonight having actually seen the shape of marriage sitting there in the text, everything in the next thirteen weeks has somewhere to land.

TWO ACCOUNTS, ONE TEACHING

Genesis gives two accounts of creation, and they are different in style. Chapter 1 is ordered, liturgical, and cosmic: God speaks, and things are. Chapter 2 is intimate and earthy: God kneels in the dust, plants a garden, performs surgery. Modern scholarship generally sees two traditions woven together. The Church has no difficulty with that. She affirms that both are inspired and both teach truth for the sake of our salvation, and she leaves the literary questions genuinely open (Dei Verbum 11-12 on inspiration and literary interpretation; and CCC 390, which says that Genesis 3 uses figurative language).

That matters for tonight because a couple may ask whether we are meant to believe in a literal rib. The honest answer is that the Church does not require it, and that nothing in the Catholic doctrine of marriage rests on it. What the passage teaches is that the woman is of the same substance as the man, taken from his side, and that is the point the text itself makes in verse 23.

IMAGE, DIFFERENCE, AND BLESSING IN ONE BREATH

Read Genesis 1:27-28 slowly and notice how tightly three things are packed together: the image of God, the difference of male and female, and the blessing of fruitfulness. The text does not treat sexual difference as an afterthought to the image, and it does not treat fruitfulness as an accident of biology. It puts all three in a single movement.

Be careful how far you push this. The Church teaches that each human person, male or female, individually bears the image of God (CCC 355, 357, 369). It is a further theological development, associated especially with St. John Paul II and reflected at CCC 1702 and 2331, to see in the communion of man and woman a created

reflection of the divine communion. That development is legitimate and the Catechism uses it. It is not a license to say the image of God exists only in couples, which would leave the unmarried and the celibate outside it. Hold both.

A HELPER WHO IS NOT A SUBORDINATE

Genesis 2:18 says it is not good for the man to be alone and promises a helper fit for him. The Hebrew behind helper is ezer, and it is not a word for an underling. It is used repeatedly of God himself as Israel's help (Psalm 33:20; Psalm 121:1-2). The phrase translated fit for him is kenegdo, literally something like corresponding to him, or as his counterpart, or facing him. Put together it means a help that stands opposite him as an equal, not beneath him as an assistant.

This is a small point of vocabulary that does an enormous amount of work later, when the group reaches Ephesians 5 in Session 6 and someone in the room is worried about the word submission. Plant it now.

TAKEN FROM HIS SIDE

The word used for what God takes from the man in Genesis 2:21 is tsela, which elsewhere in the Old Testament usually means side, including the sides of the ark and the tabernacle. Rib is a reasonable translation, and side is closer to the word's ordinary range.

There is a much repeated line in medieval commentary that the woman was taken not from the man's head to rule over him, nor from his feet to be trampled, but from his side to be his companion. It is a genuine commonplace of the tradition, but it circulates under several names and we cannot pin it to one author with confidence. Use it if you like, and attribute it to the tradition rather than to a person.

LEAVE, CLEAVE, ONE FLESH

Genesis 2:24 is the sentence the whole Bible keeps coming back to. Notice its structure: a man leaves, a man cleaves, and the two become one flesh. Three verbs, in that order.

The first verb is more startling than it looks. In the world of the text, a bride ordinarily left her family and entered her husband's household. Genesis puts the leaving on the man. Whatever else it means, it means marriage creates a new household that outranks the two households that made it. A great many marriages struggle here in the first years, and your couples are about to have that conversation with their mothers.

The second verb is a word of clinging or being joined, and in the Old Testament it is used of loyalty to the covenant Lord (see Deuteronomy 10:20). The third is not sentiment. One flesh is a claim about a real union. The Church develops that into a communion of the whole person (CCC 1643), which is why she can say the union is not merely a feeling that ends when the feeling does.

NAKED AND NOT ASHAMED

Genesis 2:25 is one of the most poignant lines in Scripture: the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed. Before anything goes wrong, there is a state in which a person can be completely seen and completely unafraid. Every engaged couple wants this and most of them cannot yet say why it is hard. Leave it standing tonight. Session 2 will explain what happened to it.

MARRIAGE BEFORE THE CHURCH, BEFORE THE STATE

One last idea to have ready. Because marriage is written into creation, it is not the property of the Church or the government. The Church did not invent marriage and cannot redefine it. She recognizes it, raises it for the baptized to the dignity of a sacrament, and guards it. This is the argument that will do heavy lifting in Sessions 7 and 12, and tonight is where it is planted (CCC 1603).

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Tonight is the root, so the fulfillment runs forward rather than back. Have these in your head, because the group will start to feel the pattern before you name it.

- Christ answers a question about divorce by quoting these two verses and nothing else (Matthew 19:4-6). Session 4.
- St. Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 to argue that a Christian's body is not his own (1 Corinthians 6:16), and again to describe Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:31-32). Session 6.
- The prophets use marital and spousal imagery for God and Israel (Hosea 2; Ezekiel 16; Isaiah 54:5). They do not quote the one flesh line, but they are working the same material. Session 3.
- Scripture opens with a marriage in a garden and closes with a marriage supper in a city (Revelation 19:6-9; 21:2). Session 14.

That last observation is worth saving. If it lands tonight it will carry the whole study.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. AUGUSTINE ON WHAT MARRIAGE IS FOR

St. Augustine taught, in substance, that marriage carries three goods that belong to it by God's design rather than by our arrangement: children (proles), faithfulness between the spouses (fides), and the sacred and indissoluble character of the bond itself, which he called sacramentum. He grounded these in the way marriage is given in Genesis, before any human law existed to regulate it.

The Church still works with these three goods, though later formulations distinguish ends, goods, and essential properties in ways Augustine did not. In Session 8 you will find all three voiced in the wedding rite, some in the questions before the consent and some in the consent itself.

Summary of his teaching in On the Good of Marriage.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN PAUL II ON THE BODY AND THE PERSON

Across his catecheses on human love, St. John Paul II read Genesis 2 as revealing something about every person: that a human being is made for communion, discovers this by first discovering that he is alone, and that the body itself expresses the person rather than merely housing him.

In his reading, the man's cry at the sight of the woman is recognition. He is looking at someone who is like him and not him, and only then does he know what he is.

Summary of his catecheses on human love, collected as Man and Woman He Created Them.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL ON THE COVENANT

The Council taught that the intimate partnership of married life and love was established by the Creator and given its own laws, and that it arises in a human act by which the spouses give and receive one another, an act of irrevocable personal consent.

Two words there are load bearing for this study: covenant and consent. Marriage is not something the couple falls into. It is something they do, on purpose, by free and irrevocable consent, ordinarily expressed in vows.

Gaudium et Spes 48. Quoted in substance at CCC 1603 and 1639.

Catechism Connection

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 1602-1605 places marriage at the beginning of Scripture and reads Genesis 1 and 2 as the Church's first word on the subject. **CCC 1603** carries the sentence to remember tonight: God himself is the author of marriage.

CCC 355, 357, 369-372 hold together the equal dignity of man and woman and their real difference, and locate the image of God in each person.

CCC 2331 and **CCC 1702** are where the Catechism links the image of God to the call to communion. Use these carefully: they are the Catechism extending the doctrine of the image toward love and communion, not a claim that the image exists only in couples.

CCC 1652 treats fruitfulness as belonging to marriage by its nature rather than being added on.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

Thread 1, One Flesh, is planted tonight. Genesis 2:24 is the verse the rest of this study will keep finding in other people's mouths. Do not tell the group in advance where it reappears. Let them find it in the live discovery moment, and expect them to find it again on their own in Sessions 4 and 6.

Thread 2, The Bridegroom, is not planted yet. It arrives in Session 3 when the prophets start calling God a husband. Say nothing tonight.

Thread 3, They Have No Wine, arrives at Cana in Session 5. Say nothing tonight.

The sealed guess. Take-Home 1 carries a sealed box with the question, what are you actually promising on your wedding day? Explain the ritual tonight in one minute: each person writes an answer alone, not as a couple, folds the sheet, and brings it back sealed in Session 8. Do not let couples discuss their answers between now and then. The comparison is the point.

IF A COUPLE IS IN AN IRREGULAR SITUATION (LEADER ONLY)

Night one is when you find out what is actually in the room, and it is the worst possible night to react to it. Your only job tonight is that nobody feels ambushed.

A couple living together. Say nothing about it tonight, publicly or privately. It is common, the study reaches it directly in Session 10, and a first night correction will cost you the couple. If they raise it themselves, tell them honestly that the study takes it up in Session 10 and that you would rather talk then, with the text open.

A couple where one is not Catholic, or not baptized. This is ordinary and the Church has clear provisions for it. Session 7 covers what the difference actually means for their wedding. Make sure they know tonight that they are welcome here.

Someone with a previous marriage. If a participant mentions a prior marriage, do not evaluate it, do not speculate about nullity, and do not reassure them that it will be fine. Ask whether they have spoken with the parish about it, and if they have not, connect them with the pastor this week. Session 9 covers the subject, but their case belongs with the priest and the tribunal, not with the group.

A pregnancy. Treat it as good news, because it is. Do not treat it as an explanation for anything.

In all four cases the referral is the same: the pastor or deacon preparing them. You are leading a study, not conducting an investigation.

Session Goals

1. The group reads Genesis 1:26-28 and 2:18-25 aloud and notices, without being told, that the text presents marriage as designed rather than invented.
2. Every participant can state the three verbs of Genesis 2:24 in order and say what each one costs.
3. The group discovers for themselves at least two later places in Scripture where Genesis 2:24 is quoted.
4. Each couple leaves with the sealed My Guess sheet, written separately and undiscussed.
5. Nobody leaves feeling that the fourteen weeks ahead are an examination they are going to fail.

Time Note and Pre-Chosen Cuts

Ninety-minute plan. Welcome and opening prayer, 8 minutes. Win questions, 15. Reading Genesis aloud, 7. Build questions 1 through 5, 25. Live discovery moment, 10. Build questions 6 through 8 with the steelman, 15. Send and Live It, 7. Closing prayer and Take-Home distribution with the sealed guess explanation, 3.

Seventy-five minute plan. Cut Build question 4 and the Dig Deeper box. Shorten the Win section to one question. Keep the live discovery moment intact: it is the engine of tonight and of the study's method.

If the room is slow to talk, and on night one it often is, do the reading before the Win questions rather than after. A shared text loosens a room faster than a shared question.

Part 2. Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

OPENING PRAYER

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lord God, you made us for each other and you made us for you. Before we were engaged, before we were born, you had already written what marriage is. Tonight, teach us to read it. Take away our fear of what we might find. Give us the courage to want what you actually want for us, and not merely what we have already decided we want. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win. Getting Started

Open questions. No wrong answers, no answer box. Let every couple speak once before anyone speaks twice.

- A.** Tell us how the two of you got engaged. Two minutes, and the other one is not allowed to correct the story.
- B.** Think of one marriage you have watched up close, at any distance, that made you want this. What did you see?

Build. Into the Text

Read Genesis 1:26-28 aloud, then Genesis 2:18-25. Two different readers, and ask the room to listen for anything that surprises them.

- 1.** In Genesis 1:27-28, what three things does the text put right next to each other? Do not interpret yet, just list what is on the page.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

The image of God, the difference of male and female, and the blessing of fruitfulness. All three arrive in two verses, without any transition between them.

If the group only finds two, ask them to read verse 28 again. The blessing is easy to skim past because it sounds like a formality, and it is not.

- 2.** Genesis 2:18 is the first time in the Bible that God calls something not good. What is it, and why is that startling this early?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

It is not good that the man should be alone. Everything so far has been called good, and this is the first no. The problem is not sin, because sin has not happened yet. The problem is solitude.

Worth naming: the man is in a garden, with God, doing meaningful work, and it is still not good that he is alone. Whatever loneliness is, the text says it is not solved by having enough to do or even by having God nearby.

3. The translation says a helper fit for him. What do you assume that word helper means, and does the rest of the Bible use it that way?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Most people hear helper and think assistant, someone who takes the lesser share of a job. The Hebrew word is ezer, and the Old Testament uses it most often of God himself as Israel's help. See Psalm 33:20 and Psalm 121:1-2, and read one of them aloud here.

The second word, kenegdo, means something like corresponding to him, or facing him, or as his counterpart. Together they describe a help that stands opposite him as an equal.

Do not let this become a debate about roles tonight. Just put the vocabulary in the room. It will matter in Session 6.

4. In verse 23 the man finally speaks, and it is the first recorded human speech in the Bible. What does he actually say, and what is he doing when he says it?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He says she is bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh. The first human words in Scripture are a recognition of another person, and they are close to poetry.

He is naming likeness. Everything he has named until now has been unlike him. This one is like him and not him at the same time, and that is what makes the cry possible.

LIVE DISCOVERY MOMENT

Genesis 2:24 gets quoted later in Scripture more than almost any other verse in the Torah. Do not tell them where.

Give each couple a Bible with cross references, or a concordance, or let them use the search on a phone, and give them six minutes to find as many places as they can where somebody quotes or clearly uses this verse.

What they will find: Matthew 19:5 and Mark 10:7-8, where Jesus quotes it in an argument about divorce. 1 Corinthians 6:16, where St. Paul uses it about a man and a prostitute, which will shock somebody. Ephesians 5:31, where St. Paul quotes it and then says he is talking about Christ and the Church.

Then ask one question and let it sit: why would a verse about a man leaving his parents be the verse the New Testament keeps reaching for? Take answers. Do not resolve it. That question is the study.

5. Look at the three verbs in verse 24 in order. What does each one cost?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Leaves. A new household is created that outranks the two that made it. In the culture of the text this is doubly striking, because ordinarily the bride left her family and joined her husband's. Genesis puts the leaving on the man.

Cleaves. The word is one of clinging or being joined fast, and elsewhere it describes loyalty to the Lord himself (Deuteronomy 10:20). It is a word for staying, not for arriving.

Become one flesh. Not a feeling and not a metaphor. The text claims a real one flesh union, and the Church builds her fuller account of marital communion on it.

The cost question usually gets the best answers of the night from the couples whose parents are already

struggling with the wedding planning. Let them talk.

COUPLE CONVERSATION (JUST THE TWO OF YOU, NOT THE ROOM)

Two questions, just between the two of you, and no reporting back to the room.

Which of the three verbs is going to be hardest for us, and which one of us is going to find it hardest?

Name one specific way that leaving has not happened yet in our relationship. Do not defend it, just name it.

6. Verse 25 says they were naked and not ashamed. What is the text describing, and why does it need to be said?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

A condition in which a person can be completely seen and completely unafraid. Nakedness here is not only physical, though it is not less than physical.

It needs to be said because it is about to stop being true. Genesis 3 is next week, and the first thing shame does is reach for clothing.

Some rooms go quiet here. Let them. Do not rescue the silence.

BUILD THEN PRESS: MARRIAGE IS A HUMAN INVENTION THAT VARIES BY CULTURE

Build it at full strength.

Put this one at full strength, and do not let the room laugh it off, because it is the argument the culture is actually making and one of your couples has a sibling who makes it at Thanksgiving.

Marriage looks different in every society. The ancient Near East around Israel had its own creation stories and its own marriage customs, and Genesis reads like one more of them. The very same Bible has patriarchs with multiple wives, concubines, and a law code that permits a man to write a certificate of divorce. If marriage were a fixed divine design, the Bible itself seems not to have gotten the memo. Genesis 2 looks like what scholars call an etiology, a story told to explain why an existing practice exists. On that reading, calling it a design is reading theology backward into a folk tale.

Then press.

Concede honestly what is true. The customs did vary. Polygamy is in the text and is not condemned on the spot. The Church does not require reading Genesis 2 as journalistic history and reads its language as figurative (CCC 390).

Then press from the text itself. Verse 24 begins with therefore. The narrator is not describing a custom, he is drawing a conclusion from what God just did. The claim of the text is precisely that the practice follows from the design, not the other way around.

Second press, and hold it for Session 4: when Jesus is handed the divorce certificate law and asked to comment, he does not treat the later custom as the standard. He goes back to these two verses and says that from the beginning it was not so. If any first century Jew was in a position to say marriage is whatever the culture makes of it, it was him, and he refused.

Do not overclaim in return. The natural institution argument does not require a literal rib, and it does not require the patriarchs to have behaved well. It requires only that marriage has a shape which is given rather

than chosen, and that is what the text asserts.

DIG DEEPER: TAKEN FROM HIS SIDE

The word for what God takes from the man in verse 21 is *tsela*, which in most of its other appearances means side, including the sides of the ark and of the tabernacle. Rib is fair, and side is closer to the word's usual range.

The tradition has long noticed that she is taken from his side rather than from his head or his feet. The line circulates widely in medieval commentary without a single secure author, so attribute it to the tradition rather than to a person.

7. Nothing in these chapters mentions a church, a priest, a license, or a courthouse. What follows from that?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

That marriage is older than every institution that now regulates it. It belongs to creation, which is why the Church says God himself is the author of marriage (CCC 1603).

Two things follow that will matter later. First, the Church cannot redefine what she did not invent, which is why she is immovable on some points that look merely stubborn from outside. Second, a marriage between two unbaptized people is a real marriage, not a pretend one, because it stands on creation rather than on baptism. Session 7 picks this up.

Send. Carrying It Out

Open questions again. No answer boxes.

- Y. You are going to be married for a long time. What is one thing in tonight's text that you want to still believe in year twenty, when you cannot remember why you agreed to any of this?
- Z. Who is the one person you need to tell that you are doing this study? Not to recruit them. To tell them.

Live It This Week

- **Read it out loud together, once, this week.** Genesis 1 and 2, the two of you, in one sitting. Do not discuss it while you read. Discuss it after.
- **Fill in the sealed sheet alone.** Take-Home 1 has a box for the question, what are you actually promising on your wedding day? Write your own answer, separately, without comparing. Fold it and bring it back sealed. You will open it in Session 8.
- **One act of leaving.** Identify one decision you have been running past a parent that should now be running past your fiancé first, and change the order this week. Tell your parent kindly what you are doing.
- **Pray Night Prayer together once.** Compline from any breviary app, or simply the Our Father, an examination of the day, and the Hail Mary. Five minutes. This is the habit that survives.

Closing Prayer

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, you looked at the man alone and called it not good, and then you did something about it. Do something about us. Make us the kind of people who can be seen without hiding. Give us the courage to leave what must be left and to cling to what you have given. Keep us in your friendship through these fourteen weeks, and bring us to the altar with our eyes open.

Our Lady, Queen of Families, pray for us. St. Joseph, pray for us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Genesis 2:24

Part 3. Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in the order it appears.

- Genesis 1:26-28. The image of God, male and female, and the blessing of fruitfulness.
- Genesis 2:18-25. Not good to be alone, the helper fit for him, the deep sleep, the first human speech, leave and cleave and one flesh, naked and not ashamed.
- Psalm 33:20 and Psalm 121:1-2. God as Israel's help, for the *ezer* discussion.
- Deuteronomy 10:20. Cleaving used of loyalty to the Lord.
- Matthew 19:4-6 and Mark 10:7-8. Found by the group in the discovery moment. Do not expound tonight.
- 1 Corinthians 6:16. Found by the group in the discovery moment.
- Ephesians 5:31-32. Found by the group in the discovery moment.
- Genesis 3. Assigned reading before Session 2.

Catechism Paragraphs Used

CCC 355, 357, 369-372, 390, 1601, 1602-1605, 1643, 1652, 1702, 2331.

Before Next Session

Ask everyone to read Genesis 3 before Session 2, slowly, twice if they can.

Session 2. What Went Wrong

Movement I. The Design

Passages: Genesis 3:1-24; Genesis 4:19; Deuteronomy 24:1-4

Part 1. Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. That the group finds in Genesis 3 the specific damage that the fall did to the communion of Genesis 2, and can name it in the vocabulary the text supplies: hiding, blaming, disordered desire, and domination.

Catholic Touchstone. Original sin did not destroy the design of marriage. It wounded the people who enter it. Every marriage now is two wounded people attempting a communion that neither of them can manage on their own, which is exactly why the sacrament exists (CCC 1606-1608).

What You Need to Know

Last week the room was in a garden. Tonight it is not. This session earns its place because your couples are about to promise permanence to another human being, and most of them have a working theory that the marriages they have watched fail did so because of specific mistakes that they personally will avoid. Genesis 3 says the problem is deeper than that and older than them.

Handle this session with a light hand. The point is not to make anyone afraid. The point is that a couple who knows what they are up against will reach for grace, and a couple who does not will reach for blame.

THE SERPENT WORKS ON THE WORD OF GOD FIRST

Notice the order of operations. The serpent does not begin by proposing sin. He begins by asking a question about what God said, and he misquotes it in a way that makes God sound stingy. The woman corrects him and, in correcting him, adds a prohibition God never gave. By the time anyone eats anything, the picture of God in their heads has already changed.

This is worth naming for engaged couples because it is the exact mechanism by which spouses come to resent each other. Very few marriages die from a single act. They die from a slowly revised account of who the other person is.

FOUR KINDS OF DAMAGE, IN THE ORDER THE TEXT GIVES THEM

Work through the aftermath in sequence, because the text is orderly about it.

- **They see that they are naked, and they hide.** The word for the covering is the same energy as the covering that will now characterize every relationship. What was possible in 2:25, being completely seen without fear, is over.
- **They hide from God.** The first religious act after sin is concealment. God asks where are you, which is the first question God speaks in the Bible and one worth sitting with. The serpent asked the first question of all, four verses into the chapter.
- **They blame.** The man blames the woman and, in the same sentence, blames God for giving her to him. The woman blames the serpent. Nobody in the story says the words I did this.

- **The relation itself is disordered.** Genesis 3:16 says that her desire shall be for her husband and he shall rule over her. The rest of Scripture then shows exactly that happening.

GENESIS 3:16 IS A PROPHECY, NOT A PROGRAM

This verse is regularly misread as God's plan for marriage. It is not. It sits in the middle of a passage describing consequences, alongside thorns in the field and pain in childbearing, and no one has ever argued that thorns are God's will for agriculture.

Interpretation of the Hebrew here is genuinely disputed, and you should say so rather than pretending otherwise. The word translated desire is rare, and readings range from a longing for the husband to a grasping for mastery over him, with the same vocabulary appearing in Genesis 4:7 about sin crouching at the door. What is not disputed is the second half. Domination of the woman by the man is named here as a wound, and Christ will reverse it rather than ratify it.

WATCH WHAT HAPPENS TO MARRIAGE IMMEDIATELY AFTERWARD

The narrative does not argue this point, it demonstrates it. Within one chapter, Lamech has two wives (Genesis 4:19) and is boasting about killing a man. The patriarchs will take concubines. The law will eventually regulate divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1-4), and note carefully what that passage does and does not do: it presumes the practice, restricts one particular remarriage, and never institutes divorce as a good.

This is the material Jesus will address head on in Session 4, and the phrase he will use is hardness of heart. Genesis 3 is where hearts got hard.

WHAT WAS NOT LOST

Be sure the group leaves with this. The Church teaches that original sin wounded human nature but did not corrupt it entirely (CCC 405). Marriage remains a good of creation, still blessed, still fruitful, still one flesh. What is lost is our capacity to live it unaided.

And the first promise of a remedy is inside the punishment itself. Genesis 3:15 speaks of the woman's offspring and the serpent's, with enmity between them. The tradition has long read this verse in relation to Christ and, with him, to Mary, and the Church continues to read it that way (CCC 410-411). Note honestly that the Latin reading which made the woman herself crush the serpent's head reflects a translation the Church no longer defends on textual grounds, while the Christological reading stands on its own.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Tonight the Old Testament is the root and the wound, and every fulfillment lies ahead.

- Genesis 3:15 opens toward Christ, the offspring who breaks the serpent, and the tradition reads Mary alongside him as the new Eve (CCC 410-411).
- Genesis 3:16 is answered at Ephesians 5:21-25, where the man's rule is redefined as self surrender. Session 6.
- Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is answered at Matthew 19:8, where Jesus says the concession was for hardness of heart and from the beginning it was not so. Session 4.
- The hiding of Genesis 3:8 is answered wherever God comes looking, most fully in the Incarnation.
- St. Irenaeus and the tradition after him set Eve and Mary side by side: what was bound by one woman's disobedience was loosed by another's obedience.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. IRENAEUS ON THE TWO WOMEN

St. Irenaeus taught that the knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by the obedience of Mary, setting the two women deliberately side by side so that the undoing matches the doing.

He did not mean that Mary replaces Christ. He meant that God repairs the story with the same materials he used to make it: a garden, a tree, a woman, a word given and either refused or received.

Against Heresies, Book III, chapter 22. The Eve and Mary comparison recurs in Book V.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. THOMAS AQUINAS ON WHAT THE WOUND ACTUALLY IS

St. Thomas taught that original sin leaves human nature wounded rather than destroyed, and he named four wounds in particular: ignorance in the mind, malice in the will, weakness in the face of what is hard, and disordered desire.

Read that list against Genesis 3 and against your own last argument. Both spouses will bring all four into the marriage. Neither of them put them there.

Summary of his teaching on the wounds of nature, Summa Theologiae I-II, question 85.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM ON THE BLAMING

Preaching on Genesis, St. John Chrysostom pressed hard on the moment when the man answers God by pointing at his wife, and at God for giving her to him. In substance he criticized the man sharply for shifting the blame onto his wife and onto God rather than confessing plainly.

He is a useful voice here because he is unsparing with the man. In a room of engaged couples that lands differently than a general observation about human nature.

Summary of his teaching in the Homilies on Genesis.

Catechism Connection

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 1606-1608 is the paragraph set built for tonight. It states plainly that every person experiences evil around and within marriage, traces it to sin, and insists that the disorder is not the fault of the institution.

CCC 397-401 describes the first sin and its consequences, including the rupture between man and woman.

CCC 405 is the one to have ready for anyone who thinks tonight is bleak: human nature is wounded, not totally corrupted.

CCC 410-411 treats Genesis 3:15 as the first announcement of a redeemer and gives the Church's reading of the passage, including the place of Mary as the new Eve.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

One Flesh. Tonight the thread runs backward: the one flesh union of 2:24 is still stated as a fact, but the two people inside it have started hiding from each other. Do not announce this. If someone in the room notices that the design was not revoked, only wounded, that is the point landing on its own.

The Bridegroom arrives next week. Say nothing.

The sealed sheets. Ask tonight whether everyone has written theirs. Do not ask what anyone wrote. If a couple has discussed their answers with each other, tell them cheerfully to write a fresh one separately and

seal it. The comparison in Session 8 only works if the answers are independent.

IF A COUPLE IS IN AN IRREGULAR SITUATION (LEADER ONLY)

Genesis 3 is the session where somebody's face changes, because it is about hiding and most people in the room are hiding something.

If a participant discloses something serious during or after this session, and this session is when it tends to happen, your job is to receive it without flinching and to route it. Thank them. Do not probe for detail. Do not offer an assessment of whether it affects their marriage. Ask whether the person preparing them for marriage knows, and if not, offer to help them make that conversation happen this week.

If the disclosure involves a previous marriage, an abortion, or an addiction, say clearly that none of these puts them outside the reach of what this study is about, and connect them with the priest and with confession. Do not counsel them yourself beyond that.

If one fiancé discloses something the other does not appear to know, do not become the keeper of that secret and do not disclose it yourself. Tell them plainly and kindly that this belongs in front of the person they are about to marry, that you will not carry it for them, and that the priest can help them do it. Full and honest disclosure before consent is not merely good advice. Session 8 will show them why. Serious deception about a quality of a person can, in particular circumstances, bear on validity, but not every undisclosed fact does, and that judgment belongs to the priest and the tribunal rather than to you.

If anything raises a safety concern, see the safeguarding note in Session 13 and act on it immediately rather than waiting for that session.

Session Goals

1. The group reads Genesis 3 and identifies, from the text alone, four distinct kinds of damage rather than one general idea of sin.
2. Every participant can explain why Genesis 3:16 describes a consequence rather than a command.
3. The group can articulate what was wounded and what was not, using CCC 405 as the guardrail.
4. Each couple names one inherited pattern they are bringing into the marriage from the family that raised them.
5. Nobody leaves thinking that the failure of other people's marriages was caused by a lack of effort they themselves will supply.

Time Note and Pre-Chosen Cuts

Ninety-minute plan. Opening prayer, 5 minutes. Win questions, 12. Reading Genesis 3 aloud in parts, 10. Build questions 1 through 4, 22. Live discovery moment, 10. Build questions 5 through 8 and the steelman, 22. Send and Live It, 6. Closing prayer, 3.

Seventy-five minute plan. Cut the Dig Deeper box and Build question 7. Read only Genesis 3:1-19 aloud and summarize the expulsion.

If the room gets heavy, and it may, take the Couple Conversation early rather than late. Giving them somewhere private to put the weight keeps the group discussion honest instead of performative.

Part 2. Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

OPENING PRAYER

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lord, you came walking in the garden in the cool of the day and you called for the two people who were hiding from you. Come looking for us tonight. We have practiced hiding for a long time and we are good at it. Give us enough courage to be found, and enough trust to believe that being found by you is mercy. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win. Getting Started

Open questions. No wrong answers, no answer box. Let every couple speak once before anyone speaks twice.

- A.** What is one thing you have already learned about being loved by someone who has seen you at your worst?
- B.** Think of the household you grew up in. Name one habit from it you want in your marriage, and one you are determined to leave behind.

Build. Into the Text

Read Genesis 3:1-24 aloud in parts if you can: a narrator, the serpent, the woman, the man, and God. It changes how the room hears it.

- 1.** Before anyone eats anything, what has already happened in verses 1 through 5? Track exactly what the serpent does with God's words.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He asks a question about what God said and misquotes it in a direction that makes God sound withholding. Then he flatly contradicts the consequence, and then he supplies a motive: God is holding out on you.

Notice that the woman also adds to the command, saying they may not touch the tree. Whether that addition came from her or from how the man passed it on, the picture of God in play is already a little harsher than the real one.

The eating is late in the sequence. The revision of who God is comes first.

- 2.** Genesis 2 ended with two people naked and unashamed. What is the first thing that happens to them in 3:7, and what does it tell you about what sin does to intimacy?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

They know they are naked and they cover themselves, from each other, before God ever arrives. The first casualty is not their relationship with God. It is their ability to be seen by each other.

Shame is not the same as guilt. Guilt says I did something bad. Shame says I am something that must not be seen. Marriage is the place where that gets tested every day.

3. God asks the first question he speaks in the Bible: where are you. God knows the answer. So what is the question for?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

It is an invitation to come out. God does not begin with the accusation, he begins by asking the man to place himself.

This is the shape of confession and it is worth saying so tonight. The sacrament does not exist to inform God of things. It exists so that we come out of the trees and say where we are.

4. Read verses 12 and 13 again and count who accepts responsibility.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Nobody. The man blames the woman and, in the same breath, blames God for giving her to him. The woman blames the serpent. The serpent does not get asked.

The man's sentence is worth reading twice. The woman whom you gave to be with me. The gift itself is now the grievance. Every couple in that room will one day be tempted to treat their spouse as the reason their life is harder than it should be.

COUPLE CONVERSATION (JUST THE TWO OF YOU, NOT THE ROOM)

Just the two of you. Nothing goes back to the room.

When we fight, what is my move? Do I attack, go silent, get funny, get logical, or leave the room? Say your own move out loud, not your fiancé's.

Which of us learned that move from which parent?

LIVE DISCOVERY MOMENT

Do not explain Genesis 3:16 yet. Instead, send them looking for what actually happens to marriage in the pages right after Genesis 3.

Give them eight minutes with Genesis 4:19, Genesis 16:1-6, Genesis 29:21-30, Genesis 30:1-13, and Deuteronomy 24:1-4, and ask a single question: does the design of Genesis 2 survive intact in the story that follows?

What they will find: Lamech takes two wives later in the next chapter. Abram takes Hagar. Jacob is tricked into a double marriage and takes two wives, and concubines follow in the chapter after that. The law eventually presumes the practice of divorce and regulates it.

Then ask: if the Bible records all of this without much visible protest, what should we conclude? Take answers and let it stay unresolved. Somebody will say the Bible seems to permit it. That is the honest reading of the surface, and it is exactly the question Jesus will be handed in Session 4.

5. Now look hard at Genesis 3:16. Is this a command, a permission, or a diagnosis? What in the passage decides it?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

A diagnosis. It sits in a list of consequences beside pain in childbearing and thorns in the ground. Nobody reads the thorns as God's plan for farming, and there is no reason to read the domination differently.

Be honest that the first half of the verse is genuinely disputed. The word translated desire is rare, and the same vocabulary shows up in Genesis 4:7 about sin crouching at the door. Readings range from a longing for the husband to a grasping for control over him. The Church has not settled it, so do not settle it either.

What is not in dispute: the man ruling over the woman is described here as part of the damage, not part of the design. When you reach Ephesians 5 you will find the New Testament dismantling it rather than endorsing it.

BUILD THEN PRESS: THE GOD OF GENESIS 3 IS PETTY, AND THE PUNISHMENT DOES NOT FIT

Build it at full strength.

Build it properly. This is the objection your couples' friends will make at the reception, and a bad answer now makes the whole study look defensive.

On its face the story is about a fruit. An all knowing God plants a tree he knows they will eat from, permits a talking serpent in the garden he made, then curses childbirth, agriculture, and human relations for all time over a single act of disobedience committed by people who, not yet knowing good and evil, arguably lacked the equipment to appreciate what they were doing. If a human father behaved this way we would not call him just. The traditional reading also seems to make a woman carry particular blame, and that reading has done real damage to real marriages.

Then press.

Concede the parts that are true. The reading which pins the fall chiefly on the woman is a distortion, and Scripture itself puts the responsibility on the man (see Romans 5:12-19, where the comparison is between Adam and Christ). And the Church does not require reading Genesis 3 as a literal transcript. She teaches that the language is figurative while the event it affirms is real (CCC 390).

Then press on the nature of the sin. The text does not present it as fruit theft. It presents a decision to determine good and evil for oneself, on the strength of a claim that God cannot be trusted. That is not a small thing and it is not a legal technicality, because it changes what the person is, not merely what the person owes.

Press on the consequences themselves. Read them again and ask whether God is imposing arbitrary penalties or describing what a rupture with the source of life actually looks like. Thorns, pain, domination, death: these read less like a fine and more like a diagnosis.

Finally, press on what God does immediately afterward. He comes looking. He asks where they are. He clothes them, which is a strangely tender detail in a passage about judgment, and he speaks of an offspring who will break the serpent. A petty God does not do any of that.

Do not overclaim in return. This passage remains genuinely hard, and the Church does not pretend otherwise. Leave the difficulty standing where it stands.

6. Look at 3:15 and 3:21. What does God do in the middle of the sentence of judgment?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He says the woman's offspring will bruise the serpent's head, which is the RSV2CE wording, and he makes clothing for the two people who have just betrayed him. The language of crushing comes from the tradition's reading of that promise.

The Church reads verse 15 as the first announcement of the Gospel, and reads Mary alongside Christ as the

new Eve (CCC 410-411). Be honest about one detail: an old Latin rendering had the woman herself crushing the serpent's head, and the Church no longer defends that reading on textual grounds. The Christological reading does not depend on it.

The clothing is not decoration. God calls, questions, and pronounces judgment, and then he clothes the two people who cannot bear to be seen.

DIG DEEPER: WOUNDED, NOT DESTROYED

It matters enormously which of these two the Church teaches, and she teaches the first: human nature is wounded in its natural powers, subject to ignorance, suffering, death, and an inclination to sin, but not totally corrupted (CCC 405).

Some Christian traditions have taught a more thorough corruption. The practical difference shows up in marriage. If your fiancé's nature is wounded, then their good impulses are real and can be strengthened. Some traditions hold instead that sin has so affected every faculty that unaided persons cannot do anything savingly good or move toward God at all, while still affirming real natural and civil goods. State that position accurately rather than as a caricature. The Catholic account, that the wound is real but the nature is not destroyed, is what makes a marriage survivable on ordinary days.

7. Given all of that, what would a marriage need in order to work now, that it would not have needed in Genesis 2?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Grace, and a way to keep receiving it. Also forgiveness, which is not needed where nothing has gone wrong.

This is why the grace of the sacrament matters so much. Christ raised marriage between the baptized to the dignity of a sacrament (CCC 1601, 1617), and one central fruit of that sacrament is grace that heals and sustains two wounded people (CCC 1608, and Session 7). The design did not change. Our capacity did.

If a couple in the room says out loud that they are going to need help, the session has done its work.

Send. Carrying It Out

Open questions again. No answer boxes.

- Y. Where is the place in your own life that you are currently hiding, not from your fiancé, but from God?
- Z. What is one habit that would make it easier for the two of you to say I was wrong to each other quickly rather than slowly?

Live It This Week

- **Go to confession this week, both of you, separately.** Not because tonight was about how bad you are. Because Genesis 3 is a story about hiding, and the sacrament is the practice of coming out of the trees. If it has been years, tell the priest that at the start and let him help you.
- **Name your move.** Tell your fiancé, in plain words, what you do when you are hurt. Attack, silence, humor, logic, exit. Naming it in peacetime makes it recognizable in wartime.

- **Break one inherited pattern once.** Choose one habit from your family of origin that you do not want, and consciously do the opposite a single time this week. Tell your fiancé you are doing it.
- **Read Hosea 1 through 3 before next session.** It gets uncomfortable. Keep reading anyway.

Closing Prayer

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, we have been hiding since the garden, and we are still doing it. Come looking for us. Cover what we cannot cover ourselves. Heal the four wounds we carry into this marriage, the blindness and the weakness and the malice and the wanting of wrong things, and do it slowly if it must be slow, but do it. Keep us from ever using each other as an explanation for our own sin.

Mary, new Eve, pray for us. St. Joseph, pray for us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, Where are you?

Genesis 3:9

Part 3. Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in the order it appears.

- Genesis 3:1-24. The whole session text, read aloud in parts.
- Genesis 2:25. Read alongside 3:7 for the contrast.
- Genesis 4:7. The same vocabulary of desire, for the 3:16 discussion.
- Genesis 4:19; 16:1-6; 29:21-30; 30:1-13. Found by the group in the discovery moment.
- Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Found by the group in the discovery moment. Do not expound. Session 4 handles it.
- Romans 5:12-19. Responsibility placed on Adam, used in the steelman press.
- Hosea 1 through 3. Assigned reading before Session 3. Matthew 19 is the text of Session 4 and is assigned then.

Catechism Paragraphs Used

CCC 390, 397-401, 405, 410-411, 1606-1608.

Before Next Session

Ask the group to read Hosea 1 through 3 before Session 3, and to keep reading even when it gets uncomfortable.

Session 3. The Covenant God Keeps

Movement I. The Design

Passages: Hosea 1:2-3; 2:14-20; 3:1-3; Ezekiel 16:8-14, 59-63; Isaiah 54:5-8; Malachi 2:14-16

Part 1. Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. That the group discovers, by working through the prophets themselves, that God chose marriage as the image for his own covenant, and that the word covenant means something different from and stronger than the word contract.

Catholic Touchstone. The love of God for Israel and of Christ for the Church is described in Scripture as a marriage, and marriage is therefore not merely illustrated by that love but shaped by it. The bond is not maintained by the faithfulness of both parties. It is maintained by the faithfulness of God (CCC 1611-1612, 1617).

SAFEGUARDING NOTE (LEADER ONLY, READ BEFORE THE SESSION)

Ezekiel 16 and Hosea 2 contain language of a husband stripping and shaming an unfaithful wife. Read the session note above before you teach this, and say explicitly to the group that no text of Scripture permits a husband to punish, shame, coerce, or use force against his wife.

If any participant appears to be hearing these texts as permission, or if anything in the discussion raises a concern about coercion or violence in a relationship in the room, do not debate it in the group. Speak to the person alone afterward, tell the priest or deacon preparing the couple, and if there is any indication of immediate danger, contact emergency services. In the United States the National Domestic Violence Hotline is available at 1-800-799-7233 or by texting START to 88788.

Do not attempt to investigate, mediate, or verify. Your role is to notice, to refer, and to stay available.

What You Need to Know

Tonight is where the study turns from anthropology to theology, and it is the session that makes Ephesians 5 possible in Session 6. If your couples arrive at Ephesians without having lived in Hosea for ninety minutes, the great mystery will sound like a metaphor. It is not a metaphor. It is the thing marriage was built to say.

GOD COMMANDS A PROPHET TO MARRY A WOMAN WHO WILL BETRAY HIM

Hosea opens with an instruction that should stop the room: take a wife of harlotry. The prophet's marriage is not an illustration he thought up. It is a sign he is made to live, publicly, for years, in front of a nation that will understand exactly what it means.

Then chapter 3 goes further. Hosea is told to go again and love a woman who is an adulteress, and he buys her back. The Hebrew of 3:1 makes the parallel explicit: love her as the LORD loves the people of Israel. The prophet's humiliation is the point.

COVENANT IS NOT CONTRACT

This distinction will carry the rest of the study, so get it clean tonight. Present it as a pedagogical contrast drawn from the marital covenant rather than as an exhaustive definition of every contract and every biblical

covenant, since covenants do carry stipulations and sanctions, and Scripture does speak of Israel breaking them.

- A contract exchanges goods or services. A covenant exchanges persons. The formula that runs through the Old Testament, I will be your God and you shall be my people, is a self donation, not a transaction.
- A contract is enforced by penalty. A covenant is sworn by an oath, which calls God himself to witness. That is why Malachi 2:14 speaks of the LORD as witness between a man and the wife of his youth.
- A contract ends when a party breaches it. A covenant, in the biblical pattern, is not dissolved by breach. It is violated, mourned, and often restored, and the innocent party bears the cost of the restoration.

That last point is the whole of Hosea in one line, and it is the reason the Church can say that a ratified and consummated marriage between two baptized persons is not dissolved by adultery, by abandonment, or by anything short of death. The couple in front of you is about to swear the kind of oath that does not have an exit clause because the God who witnesses it does not have one either.

EZEKIEL 16, AND HOW TO HANDLE IT

Ezekiel 16 is one of the most disturbing chapters in the Bible. God finds an abandoned newborn, raises her, adorns her as a bride, and she becomes a prostitute. The judgment that follows is described in language of public stripping and shaming.

Do not soften it and do not skip it, and do not read it without preparation. Two things to have ready. First, this is covenant lawsuit rhetoric, a recognized genre in which the offended party publicly recites the history of the relationship and the terms broken. Its force comes from the shocking reversal, not from a description of how husbands should treat wives. Second, notice where the chapter ends. Verses 59 through 63 promise that God will remember his covenant and establish an everlasting one, and that Israel will be silent because of her shame when God forgives her. The text holds both together, shame and atonement, and does not resolve the tension for us.

A caution you must say out loud in the session: no passage of Scripture licenses a husband to punish, shame, coerce, or lay hands on his wife. If any participant is hearing this text as permission, that is a pastoral emergency and not a difference of interpretation. See the safeguarding note.

THE TENDERNESS UNDERNEATH

Hosea 2:14 is the hinge of the entire book and it is easy to miss. After all the accusation, God says he will allure her, bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. The Hebrew is literally to speak upon her heart. And then 2:16: she will call him my husband and no longer my master, playing *ishi* against *baali*. Many readers hear an answer to the domination of Genesis 3:16 in that, and it is worth offering as a reading rather than as a claim the verse makes.

Then the betrothal in 2:19-20, which is your memory verse tonight, and which are customarily recited in the tefillin prayer in many Jewish communities, subject to local practice and the calendar. God does not merely forgive. He proposes again.

MALACHI AND THE DIFFICULT VERSE

Malachi 2:14-16 does two things at once. It calls the wife a man's companion and the wife of his covenant, and it says something extremely severe about divorce. Be honest that the Hebrew of verse 16 is textually difficult and translations differ significantly. What is not in doubt is the surrounding argument, which treats the breaking of a marriage as an act of faithlessness against a covenant witnessed by God himself.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah all describe the covenant as a marriage, and all of them describe Israel's idolatry as adultery. The image is not occasional. It is the standard prophetic vocabulary.
- Isaiah 54:5 says the Maker is the husband, and 54:7-8 describes an abandonment for a brief moment answered by everlasting love. Isaiah 62:5 has God rejoicing over his people as a bridegroom over a bride.
- The Song of Songs is read by the Jewish and Christian traditions alike as speaking of God and his people, without denying that it is also, in its plain sense, love poetry about a man and a woman. Both readings are legitimate and the Church has never required choosing one.
- In the New Testament, John the Baptist calls himself the friend of the bridegroom (John 3:29), Jesus calls himself the bridegroom (Mark 2:19-20), and St. Paul says he betrothed the Corinthians to one husband (2 Corinthians 11:2).
- The last book of the Bible ends with a wedding (Revelation 19:7-9; 21:2, 9). Session 14.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX ON WHY THE SONG IS IN THE BIBLE

Across dozens of sermons on the Song of Songs, St. Bernard taught that the soul's union with God is genuinely spousal, and he read the Song's language of desire, allegorically and at length, as the vocabulary Scripture itself gives us for what God wants with us.

He preached these sermons to monks, which is worth telling your couples. The nuptial language of Scripture belongs to every Christian, married or not, because marriage is the sign and not the substance.

Summary of his teaching in the Sermons on the Song of Songs.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: POPE BENEDICT XVI ON THE LOVE GOD HAS FOR US

In his first encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI argued that the prophets, and Hosea and Ezekiel above all, describe God's love for Israel in frankly passionate terms, and that this love is at once a searching desire and a wholly gratuitous gift.

His conclusion is the one your couples need: God's way of loving becomes the measure of human love, and not the reverse. We do not learn what God is like by studying good marriages. We learn what marriage is by studying God.

Deus Caritas Est, sections 9 to 11. Note for the leader: a papal encyclical, not the voice of a canonized saint.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. TERESA OF AVILA ON THE MARRIAGE THE SOUL IS OFFERED

St. Teresa of Avila described the deepest union available to a soul in this life using the language of spiritual marriage, and she was careful to say that it is God who initiates, God who sustains, and God who gives what no amount of effort can produce.

Read that against Hosea. The betrothal formula in Hosea 2:19-20 has one subject throughout, and it is not Israel. I will betroth you, three times, and the woman does nothing at all.

Summary of her teaching in the seventh dwelling places of The Interior Castle.

Catechism Connection

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 1611-1612 is tonight's core: the Church reads the prophets' nuptial imagery as preparing for the covenant of Christ and the Church, and sees in it the deepening of Israel's understanding of marriage itself.

CCC 1617 states that the sacrament of matrimony signifies the union of Christ and the Church, and that this is why the Church has always read the nuptial covenant this way.

CCC 1639 describes the consent by which spouses give and receive one another as sealed by God himself, so that the bond arises from a human act but no longer depends on it.

CCC 219 speaks of God's love for Israel as stronger than a bridegroom's for his beloved, and of a love that survives infidelity.

A caution on scope: these paragraphs ground the nuptial reading of the covenant. They are not a rulebook for allegorizing every detail of Hosea or Ezekiel, and applications beyond them should be presented as our extension, not as the Catechism's teaching.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

The Bridegroom is planted tonight, and it is the biggest plant of the study. After the live discovery moment the group will have found God calling himself a husband in four prophets and Christ calling himself a bridegroom in the Gospels. Do not tell them where this ends. The payoff is Session 14, and the intermediate payoffs are Sessions 5 and 6.

One Flesh does not appear tonight by name, but the covenant formula, I will be your God and you shall be my people, is the same logic in different words. If someone in the room notices, let them say it.

They Have No Wine arrives next week. Say nothing.

Leader note on restraint. Do not preview Ephesians 5. Half the value of Session 6 is the shock of finding that St. Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 and then says he is talking about Christ and the Church. If you spoil that tonight, you spend it early and cheap.

IF A COUPLE IS IN AN IRREGULAR SITUATION (LEADER ONLY)

A couple where one has been unfaithful during the engagement. Hosea makes this session the likeliest night for that to surface. If it does, do not treat it as a reason the marriage cannot happen and do not treat it as nothing. Send them to the priest preparing them, and to confession. Full honesty before consent matters for reasons Session 8 will make plain.

A couple who cannot hear the marriage imagery because of a parent's affair. Watch for the person who goes quiet during Hosea. Follow up privately and gently afterward. For them the prophets are not abstract, and the good news of the book is aimed straight at them.

A participant who is not baptized. Tonight is one of the sessions where they may feel most outside. Make sure they are drawn into the discovery moment by name. Session 7 will explain what their situation means for the wedding; tonight they simply need to be included.

Session Goals

1. The group works through Hosea and Ezekiel themselves and can state why God chose marriage as the image of the covenant.
2. Every participant can distinguish covenant from contract in at least three specific ways.
3. The group discovers on its own that the nuptial image runs from the prophets straight through the Gospels.
4. The disturbing material in Ezekiel 16 is handled honestly, with the abuse question named and answered rather than avoided.
5. At least one couple says out loud that a covenant sounds heavier than what they were expecting to promise.

Time Note and Pre-Chosen Cuts

Ninety-minute plan. Opening prayer, 5 minutes. Win questions, 10. Reading Hosea 1:2-3 and 2:14-20 aloud, 8. Build questions 1 through 4, 22. Live discovery moment, 12. Ezekiel 16 with the steelman, 22. Send and Live It, 8. Closing prayer, 3.

Seventy-five minute plan. Cut Build question 3 and the Dig Deeper box. Read only Ezekiel 16:8-14 and 59-63 rather than working through the chapter.

Never cut the steelman tonight. If time is short, cut a question instead. Leaving the Ezekiel objection unanswered in a room of engaged couples is worse than not raising it.

Part 2. Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

OPENING PRAYER

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Faithful God, you have never once broken your word to anyone. We have broken ours many times, to you and to each other. Tonight we are going to read about a love that keeps going after it has been betrayed, and we are afraid of that love, because we know we will need it. Speak to our hearts as you promised to speak to hers. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win. Getting Started

Open questions. No wrong answers, no answer box. Let every couple speak once before anyone speaks twice.

- A.** Tell us about a promise someone kept to you when it would have been reasonable for them to walk away.
- B.** What is the difference between someone who has to stay and someone who chooses to stay? Can you tell from the outside?

Build. Into the Text

Read Hosea 1:2-3 aloud, then Hosea 2:14-20, then Hosea 3:1-3. Let the first one sit a moment before you move on.

- 1.** God's opening instruction to Hosea is to take a wife of harlotry. What is God doing, and why would he use a prophet's actual marriage to do it?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He is making the prophet into a sign. Hosea will not merely announce the message, he will live it publicly for years while everyone watches.

And notice what that implies about the covenant: God is saying that his relationship with Israel is the kind of relationship in which betrayal is possible and devastating. You cannot commit adultery against a business partner.

Someone may ask whether this was fair to Hosea. It was not comfortable, and the text does not pretend it was. That discomfort is doing theological work.

- 2.** Chapter 3 sends him back a second time, and he pays to get her. What has changed, and what has not?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

What has changed is that she is now demonstrably guilty and the cost is now literal. He pays for her. The text does not tell us who held the claim, so do not fill that in.

What has not changed is the instruction, which in 3:1 is explicit: love her as the LORD loves the people of

Israel. The redemption is not a reward for her repentance. It comes first.

The word your couples should hear here is redeem, which means to buy back. It will show up again in Session 6 when a husband is told to hand himself over for his wife.

3. Look at Hosea 2:14-16. After all the accusation, what does God actually do, and what does the woman start calling him?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He allures her, brings her into the wilderness, and speaks tenderly to her. The Hebrew is literally to speak upon her heart.

And she calls him my husband rather than my master. The Hebrew turns on ishi against baali, with a deliberate jab at Baal worship. Many readers also hear an answer to the domination named in Genesis 3:16, though that verse uses a different Hebrew verb, so present the connection as a reading rather than as a lexical reversal.

Ask the room what it means that the wilderness is where this happens. In Israel's memory the wilderness is the honeymoon, the place where the covenant was made in the first place.

4. Read 2:19-20 slowly. Who does what in these two verses?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

God does everything. I will betroth you, three times, and every quality named comes from his side: righteousness, justice, steadfast love, mercy, faithfulness. She contributes nothing except being betrothed.

The verb is betroth, not remarry. He is not resuming an old arrangement, he is proposing again, as if for the first time, to a woman who has already broken it.

LIVE DISCOVERY MOMENT

This is the largest discovery moment of the first movement. Split into pairs and give them ten minutes.

The question: find every place you can where God, or Christ, is called a husband or a bridegroom, or where the people are called a bride. Old Testament and New. Write down the references.

What they will find, roughly in this order: Isaiah 54:5 and 62:5. Jeremiah 2:2 and 3:14. Ezekiel 16:8. Hosea 2:16-20. Then, if they push into the New Testament, Mark 2:19-20, John 3:29, 2 Corinthians 11:2, Ephesians 5:25-32, and Revelation 19:7 and 21:2.

Then ask two questions and stop. First: is this an occasional image or the standard one? Second: if God chose this image on purpose, what does that tell you about what he thinks marriage is for?

Take answers and let them stand unresolved. Do not connect it to Ephesians 5 tonight. That is Session 6 and the surprise is worth protecting.

NOW THE HARD CHAPTER

Read Ezekiel 16:8-14, then summarize verses 15 through 58 briefly in your own words, then read 16:59-63. Tell the group before you begin that this chapter contains disturbing imagery and that you will take it head on.

5. In verses 8 through 14, what is the sequence of what God does for the foundling?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He passes by, sees her, spreads his skirt over her, swears an oath, enters a covenant with her, and she becomes his. Then he washes her, anoints her, clothes her, and adorns her with jewelry, and her beauty becomes famous.

Everything she has, she was given. That is the argument of the chapter and it is the reason the betrayal is so severe.

BUILD THEN PRESS: THE PROPHETIC MARRIAGE IMAGERY IS ABUSIVE AND SHOULD NOT BE USED

Build it at full strength.

Build this at full strength. It is raised seriously by serious people, including believing Christians, and a room of engaged couples deserves to hear it made properly rather than as a straw target.

In Ezekiel 16 and Hosea 2, God is portrayed as a husband who responds to his wife's infidelity by stripping her publicly, exposing her, and handing her over to her lovers. If a human husband did this we would call it violence, and rightly. Presenting God this way in a book that also tells wives to submit has, in fact, been used to justify controlling behavior in real marriages, and survivors of domestic abuse have said so plainly. The objection is not that the passage is unpleasant. It is that the passage seems to model, in God himself, exactly the pattern of jealous punishment that we now recognize as dangerous.

Then press.

Concede first, and concede fully. The imagery has been misused. There are wives who were told to endure violence because Christ endured, and that was a betrayal of the text and of them. The Church today is clear that no one is obliged to remain in danger, and that separation is legitimate where safety requires it (Session 13 takes this up directly).

Then press on genre. These chapters belong to a recognizable form, the covenant lawsuit, in which the offended party recites the history and the terms broken in deliberately shocking language. The rhetoric is aimed at producing recognition in a nation that had stopped seeing what it was doing. The rhetorical target is Israel's idolatry, and Israel is the audience, not a wife receiving instructions.

Press second on where the passages end. Hosea 2 ends in a betrothal. Ezekiel 16 ends with God establishing an everlasting covenant and forgiving. If the point were punishment, the chapters would end at the punishment. They do not. The trajectory is restoration, at the offended party's expense.

Press third on the New Testament reversal. When the nuptial image is picked up by St. Paul, the husband's role is defined by handing himself over to death for her (Ephesians 5:25). Whatever the prophets are doing, the completed picture puts the cross where the punishment would be. Session 6.

Do not overclaim. These chapters remain genuinely hard, the Church has not issued a settled interpretation of every verse, and it is honest to say that some of this language would not be chosen today. Leaving the difficulty visible costs you nothing and buys you the room's trust.

6. Malachi 2:14 calls the wife a man's companion and the wife of his covenant, and says the LORD was witness. What changes about a promise when a third party witnesses it?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

It stops being a private arrangement that the two of them can quietly renegotiate. A witnessed oath has standing outside the two people who made it.

This is exactly why the Church requires that a wedding happen in a particular form, in front of witnesses,

rather than privately. Session 7.

Be honest about verse 16: the Hebrew is difficult and translations differ substantially. The argument of the passage as a whole is not in doubt, and it treats breaking a marriage as faithlessness against a covenant that God himself witnessed.

DIG DEEPER: COVENANT AND CONTRACT, IN THREE LINES

A contract exchanges goods. A covenant exchanges persons.

A contract is enforced by penalty. A covenant is sworn by oath, with God as witness.

A contract ends when someone breaks it. A covenant, when broken, is mourned and restored, and the cost of the restoration falls on the one who kept it.

Ask the couples which of the two they think they are signing up for, and then ask them which one they have been planning for.

COUPLE CONVERSATION (JUST THE TWO OF YOU, NOT THE ROOM)

Just the two of you.

If I discovered next year that you had betrayed me, what would I want to be true about myself in how I responded? Not what would I do. What would I want to be true.

Have we been planning a contract or a covenant? Be specific. Where has our planning assumed an exit?

7. Why would God choose marriage, of all things, as the image for his covenant, when he could have chosen kingship, or friendship, or fatherhood?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He does use all of those elsewhere. Offer this as a pastoral observation rather than a proof: marriage is uniquely apt for the image because it gathers a free choice of one particular person, an exclusive claim, a public promise, a bodily union, and the possibility of new life.

And it is the only one in which betrayal is possible in the specific form the prophets keep describing. You cannot commit adultery against a king.

Turn it around at the end: if God chose marriage as the sign, then a marriage is not a private arrangement between two people who happen to be religious. It is saying something in public about God, whether or not the couple intends it.

Send. Carrying It Out

Open questions again. No answer boxes.

- Y.** If your marriage is going to say something about God to everyone who watches it, what do you want it to say?
- Z.** Whose marriage in your life has said something true about God without ever talking about it?

Live It This Week

- **Read Hosea 2:19-20 out loud to each other once this week.** Not as a sentiment. As a description of the kind of promise you are about to make and the kind of promise God has already made to you.
- **Find the exit.** Each of you name one assumption you have quietly been carrying about what would justify leaving. Say it out loud to each other. You do not have to resolve it tonight.
- **Pray one decade together for a marriage you know that is in trouble.** Do not tell them you are doing it.
- **Read Matthew 19:1-12 again before next session,** slowly, and note every question anyone asks in the passage.

Closing Prayer

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, you betrothed yourself to a people who were not faithful, and you have never taken it back. We are about to make a promise like that one, and we are not able to keep it on our own. Teach us what a covenant is by keeping yours with us. When one of us has been wronged, let us remember that you bought back what you could have abandoned.

Our Lady, faithful Virgin, pray for us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy.

Hosea 2:19

Part 3. Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in the order it appears.

- Hosea 1:2-3. The command to marry.
- Hosea 2:14-20. The wilderness, the tenderness, my husband and not my master, and the threefold betrothal.
- Hosea 3:1-3. Go again, love her, and buy her back.
- Ezekiel 16:8-14. The covenant, the washing, the adorning.
- Ezekiel 16:59-63. The everlasting covenant and the forgiveness.
- Isaiah 54:5-8. Your Maker is your husband.
- Malachi 2:14-16. The LORD as witness, the wife of your covenant, and the difficult verse on divorce.
- Isaiah 62:5; Jeremiah 2:2; Jeremiah 3:14. Found by the group in the discovery moment.
- Mark 2:19-20; John 3:29; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:7; 21:2. Found by the group in the discovery moment. Do not expound.
- Matthew 19:1-12. Assigned reading before Session 4.

Catechism Paragraphs Used

CCC 219, 1611-1612, 1617, 1639.

Before Next Session

Read Matthew 19:1-12 before Session 4, slowly, noting every question anyone asks in the passage.

Session 4. It Was Not So

Movement II. Christ Restores It

Passages: Matthew 19:1-12; Mark 10:1-12; Luke 16:18; 1 Corinthians 7:10-11; Deuteronomy 24:1-4

Part 1. Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. That the group works out for itself, by comparing the Gospel accounts side by side, that Jesus answered a live legal controversy by going behind the law to creation, and that his answer was heard by his own disciples as absolute.

Catholic Touchstone. A ratified and consummated marriage between two baptized persons cannot be dissolved by any human power or for any reason other than death. The Church has no authority to dissolve it because the Church did not make it (CCC 1614, 1640; Code of Canon Law, canon 1141).

What You Need to Know

This is the session where the study stops being beautiful and starts being expensive. Everything before tonight your couples could hear as poetry. Tonight they hear a claim with teeth in it, and the honest ones will feel it.

Your job is not to soften the teaching and not to weaponize it. It is to let them see that Jesus said it, that his own disciples heard it as extreme, and that he did not take it back when they complained.

THE QUESTION IS A TRAP, AND IT IS A SPECIFIC TRAP

Matthew 19:3 has the Pharisees ask whether it is lawful to divorce for any cause. That phrase is not filler. It drops the question into a live rabbinic dispute about Deuteronomy 24:1, which permits a man to write a certificate of divorce if he finds in his wife some indecency.

The rabbinic tradition preserved in the Mishnah records two schools reading that phrase very differently, one narrowly, concerning sexual immorality, and the other broadly, so that almost any displeasure would serve. Treat the rabbinic material as background rather than as proof, since the sources were compiled later than the Gospel scene, but the dispute itself is well attested and it explains the shape of the question. They are asking Jesus to take a side in an argument about how loose the grounds are.

He does something neither school expected. He declines to interpret Deuteronomy at all.

BEHIND MOSES TO THE BEGINNING

Jesus answers by asking whether they have not read, and then he quotes two verses: Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24. Those are the two verses your group read in Session 1, and the group should be allowed to notice this on their own.

Then he adds a sentence that is not in Genesis: what therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder. This is the hinge of the entire Catholic doctrine of marriage. The joining is God's act, not merely the couple's, and therefore its undoing is not within human competence.

When they push back with Moses, he draws a distinction that should be underlined: Moses allowed, for your hardness of heart. He does not say Moses was wrong. He says the permission was a concession to a condition, and that the condition was not original. From the beginning it was not so.

THE EXCEPTION CLAUSE, HANDLED HONESTLY

Matthew has a phrase that Mark and Luke do not: except for unchastity (Matthew 19:9; compare 5:32). The Greek word is *porneia*. This is one of the most argued phrases in the New Testament and you should not pretend it is simple.

Lay out the readings honestly.

- Read as adultery. Then Matthew permits divorce and remarriage after adultery, which is roughly the position of most Protestant traditions and, by a different route involving pastoral tolerance, of the Orthodox churches.
- Read as an unlawful union in the first place. On this reading, *porneia* covers unions forbidden by Jewish law, including those within prohibited degrees of kinship. 1 Corinthians 5:1 is the clearest support, since it concerns a man with his father's wife; the appeal to Acts 15:20 and 29 is a debated reading, since those verses prohibit *porneia* without defining it. On this reading Jesus is saying that an incestuous or otherwise invalid union may and must be dissolved, because it was never a marriage. This corresponds closely to what the Church now handles through declarations of nullity.
- Read as permitting separation but not remarriage. On this reading the exception concerns putting away, that is, ceasing to live together, and the prohibition on remarriage stands untouched.

The Church has not defined which exegesis is correct, and you should say so plainly. What she has defined is the doctrine: the bond of a ratified and consummated sacramental marriage is not dissolved by adultery or by anything else except death. Note the distinction carefully, because it is exactly the kind of place where the Church permits latitude in exegesis while holding the doctrine firm.

THE TWO THINGS THAT SETTLE IT

First, Mark and Luke have no exception at all (Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18). Mark even extends it symmetrically to a woman divorcing her husband, which was highly atypical and legally constrained in a Jewish setting. Many scholars take the symmetry as a sign of a Gentile or Roman readership, though the inference is debated.

Second, St. Paul, writing earlier than any of the Gospels, gives the ruling as a command not from himself but from the Lord: the wife should not separate, and if she does, she should remain single or else be reconciled (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). That sentence is decisive for the Catholic reading, because it contemplates the separation and still forbids the remarriage.

LISTEN TO THE DISCIPLES

The best evidence for how absolute Jesus sounded is the reaction of the men who liked him. In Matthew 19:10 they say that if this is the case, it is better not to marry. Nobody says that in response to a moderate ruling. And Jesus does not reassure them. He talks instead about those who are able to receive the saying, and about eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom.

That last part is not a change of subject. Jesus has just made marriage permanent, and immediately puts alongside it the vocation of those who forgo it entirely for the kingdom. The two vocations interpret each other: each is a whole self given away without a return ticket.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is the passage under dispute. Read what it actually does: it presumes divorce as an existing practice, restricts the man from taking back a wife he divorced after she has married another, and never commands or commends divorce.
- Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 are the verses Jesus quotes. Your group met both in Session 1.
- Malachi 2:14-16 stands behind the prophetic protest against faithlessness in marriage. Session 3.

- Ezra 9 and 10 record a mass dismissal of foreign wives, which is a genuine difficulty and worth naming honestly if someone raises it. It should not be read as a divine authorization of divorce, and the Church has not defined a single interpretation of the episode.
- 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 gives the apostolic ruling, and 7:12-16 gives the case of a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever, which becomes the basis of what the Church later calls the Pauline privilege. Session 9.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: THE COUNCIL OF TRENT ON WHAT ADULTERY DOES NOT DO

The Council of Trent taught that the Church does not err when she teaches that the marriage bond is not dissolved by the adultery of one of the spouses, and that neither party may contract another marriage while the other lives.

Note what the canon carefully does not do. It does not deny that separation may sometimes be right. It denies that the bond itself has been broken.

Council of Trent, Session XXIV, canons on the sacrament of matrimony, especially canon 7.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. THOMAS MORE AND THE COST OF A MARRIAGE CASE

St. Thomas More was executed in 1535 for refusing to swear an oath, and the whole crisis that produced that oath began with a king who wanted his marriage declared null and could not get it.

Be precise with your couples about what he died for. He did not die making a speech about indissolubility. He died refusing to say, under oath, something he did not believe to be true about a marriage. That is a smaller and harder kind of courage, and it is closer to the kind they will need.

Historical summary. More refused the oath required under the Act of Succession in 1534 and was convicted of treason and executed in 1535 in connection with the royal supremacy. The two statutes are distinct and should not be merged.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: AN EARLY CHRISTIAN VOICE ON REMARRIAGE

The Shepherd of Hermas, an early Christian writing widely read in the second century, addresses a husband whose wife has committed adultery. In substance it says that he should not continue to live with her while she persists, and that he must not marry another, so that the door to her repentance and return stays open.

That reasoning is worth pausing over. The prohibition on remarriage is presented not as cruelty toward the innocent party but as the thing that keeps reconciliation possible.

Summary of The Shepherd of Hermas, Mandate 4. Note for the leader: an early Christian text, not Scripture and not the voice of a canonized saint.

Catechism Connection

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 1614-1615 treats exactly tonight's passage: Jesus takes up marriage as it was in the beginning, and the disciples' reaction shows how heavy the teaching sounded. The Catechism does not minimize that.

CCC 1640 states that the bond of a valid sacramental marriage is perpetual and exclusive, and that the Church herself cannot dissolve it.

CCC 2382-2386 covers divorce, including the recognition that civil divorce may sometimes be the only

possible way to secure legal rights, care of children, or protection, and that a person can be the innocent victim of a divorce. Have this ready; someone in your room is the child of one.

Code of Canon Law, canon 1141 states the doctrine in its legal form: a ratified and consummated marriage can be dissolved by no human power and by no cause other than death.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

One Flesh pays off tonight, and the group should get there first. When Jesus quotes Genesis 2:24, wait. Somebody will recognize it from Session 1 and from the discovery moment that week. Let them say it before you do. If nobody does, ask where they have heard those words before, and wait longer.

The Bridegroom is quiet tonight, with one exception: if anyone connects the permanence of the covenant to Hosea, affirm it and move on. Do not preview Session 6.

They Have No Wine arrives next week at Cana. Tonight ends heavy on purpose, and next week begins with a wedding party running out of wine. That is deliberate sequencing, so resist the urge to soften tonight in order to make the room feel better. Session 5 will do that work with the text rather than with reassurance.

Watch the room. This is the session where a participant with divorced parents, or with a previous marriage, is most likely to go silent. Note who it is and follow up privately this week, before Session 9.

IF A COUPLE IS IN AN IRREGULAR SITUATION (LEADER ONLY)

A participant who has been divorced. Tonight will be hard for them no matter how well you teach it. Two rules. Do not say anything from the front that implies the divorced are second class, because the Church does not teach that (CCC 2386 explicitly contemplates the innocent victim of a divorce). And follow up privately within a day.

A participant with a prior marriage and no declaration of nullity. If this has not already reached the pastor, it must reach him this week, because a wedding date may be unseetable until the case is resolved. Do not guess at the outcome, do not estimate a timeline, and do not tell them it will probably be fine. Walk them to the priest.

Children of divorce, which will be a large share of your room. Many of them are here precisely because they have decided not to repeat it. Tonight can land as either hope or accusation depending on your tone. Say plainly at some point in the evening that nothing tonight is a judgment on their parents, whose situations you do not know.

A couple where one is cohabiting or civilly married already. Hold it. Session 9 handles convalidation and Session 10 handles living arrangements. Tonight is not the night.

Session Goals

1. The group identifies the Pharisees' question as a request to take sides in an existing dispute about the grounds for divorce.
2. The group notices without being told that Jesus answers by quoting the two verses they read in Session 1.
3. Every participant can state the difference between Moses allowing something and God commanding it.
4. The group compares Matthew, Mark, Luke, and 1 Corinthians side by side and can say which contain an exception and which do not.

5. The three main readings of the exception clause are laid out honestly, and the group can distinguish an open exegetical question from a settled doctrine.
6. Nobody leaves believing that the Church claims a power over the bond that she explicitly denies having.

Time Note and Pre-Chosen Cuts

Ninety-minute plan. Opening prayer, 5 minutes. Win questions, 10. Reading Matthew 19:1-12 aloud, 6. Build questions 1 through 4, 22. Live discovery moment with the four column comparison, 15. The exception clause and the steelman, 22. Send and Live It, 7. Closing prayer, 3.

Seventy-five minute plan. Cut Build question 3 and the Dig Deeper box. Do the four column comparison from the front rather than in pairs, but still make them read the verses aloud.

Do not cut the disciples' reaction in verse 10. It is thirty seconds and it does more work than any argument you could make.

Part 2. Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

OPENING PRAYER

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lord Jesus, when they came to you with a legal question you gave them a harder answer than they wanted. Give us the honesty to hear what you actually said rather than what we would prefer. Some of us are carrying wounds from marriages that ended, and some of us are afraid of the promise we are about to make. Meet all of us here. Speak to us as one who knows what it costs to keep a covenant. Amen.

Win. Getting Started

Open questions. No wrong answers, no answer box. Let every couple speak once before anyone speaks twice.

- A.** Have you ever asked someone a question hoping they would give you permission rather than an answer? What happened?
- B.** What is the longest you have ever kept a promise that got harder than you expected?

Build. Into the Text

Read Matthew 19:1-12 aloud. Ask a second reader to read Mark 10:1-12 immediately afterward, without commentary in between.

- 1.** Look closely at the question in Matthew 19:3. What are the exact words, and what does the phrasing tell you about what they already believe?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause. They are not asking whether divorce is permitted. They assume it is, on the basis of Deuteronomy 24:1, and they are asking how wide the grounds are.

In the rabbinic tradition preserved later in the Mishnah, this was a running dispute between two schools, one reading the phrase some indecency in Deuteronomy narrowly and the other broadly. Treat that as helpful background rather than as proof, since the sources were compiled after the Gospel scene. The dispute itself explains the shape of the trap: any answer places him in a camp.

- 2.** He does not answer the question he was asked. What does he do instead, and what two passages does he quote?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He goes behind Moses to creation and quotes Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24.

Wait here. Someone in the room read both of those in Session 1 and found the second one again in the discovery moment that night. Let them recognize it out loud. If nobody does, ask where they have heard those words before and let the silence do its work.

The move is the whole argument: the grounds for divorce are the wrong question if marriage is a design rather

than an arrangement.

3. Verse 6 contains a sentence that is not in Genesis. Find it. What does it add?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.

Two additions. First, the joining is God's act. The couple consents, but the bond that results is not merely the sum of their two intentions. Second, the undoing is placed outside human authority, which is a claim about competence, not about willpower.

This is why the Church says she cannot dissolve a valid sacramental marriage. Not that she declines to. That she has no power to (CCC 1640; canon 1141). It is worth stressing that this limits the Church rather than empowering her.

4. They answer him with Moses. How does he characterize the Mosaic permission, and what is the significance of the word he uses?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

Allowed, not commanded. A concession to a condition. And the condition is diagnosed, not excused: hardness of heart, which is exactly what Genesis 3 produced in Session 2.

Ask what it means that God legislated around a hardness he did not approve. It means the law was doing damage control, and that Christ is now addressing the damage itself.

LIVE DISCOVERY MOMENT

This is the central discovery of the session. Put four references on a board or a sheet, in this order, and have four different people read them aloud while everyone else writes.

Matthew 19:9. Mark 10:11-12. Luke 16:18. 1 Corinthians 7:10-11.

The question to the room: which of these contains an exception, and what exactly does each one forbid? Give them eight minutes with the texts.

What they will find: Matthew has a clause about unchastity. Mark and Luke have none. Mark states it symmetrically, applying to a wife who divorces her husband, which was highly atypical in a Jewish legal setting, and which many scholars take as a sign of a Gentile readership. And St. Paul, writing before any of the Gospels, presents the ruling as coming from the Lord rather than himself, and says that a wife who separates should remain single or be reconciled.

Then ask the question that matters: Paul contemplates the separation actually happening, and still rules out the remarriage. Paul never discusses Matthew's clause, so this cannot settle its meaning by itself. What does it tell you about how the earliest apostolic witness handled separation and remarriage?

Let them answer before you teach anything about porneia.

THE EXCEPTION CLAUSE

5. Matthew alone has the phrase except for unchastity. What are the possible things that phrase could mean?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Lay out all three honestly, and do not present the Catholic reading as obvious.

One. It means adultery, and Matthew therefore permits divorce and remarriage in that case. This is broadly the Protestant reading, and the Orthodox churches reach a comparable pastoral outcome by a different route.

Two. It refers to a union that was unlawful from the start. On this reading porneia covers unions forbidden under Jewish law, including marriage within prohibited degrees of kinship. 1 Corinthians 5:1 is the clearest support; the appeal to Acts 15:20 and 29 is debated, since those verses prohibit porneia without defining it. On this reading Jesus is not creating an exit from marriage but excluding relationships that were never marriages. This is close to what the Church now treats through declarations of nullity.

Three. It licenses separation, that is, ceasing to live together, while leaving the prohibition on remarriage untouched. This fits 1 Corinthians 7:11 precisely.

Say clearly: the Church has not defined which of these readings of the Greek is correct. She has defined the doctrine that the bond of a ratified and consummated sacramental marriage is not dissolved except by death. Distinguishing an open exegetical question from a settled doctrine is exactly the discipline this study is trying to teach.

BUILD THEN PRESS: JESUS MADE AN EXCEPTION, AND THE CHURCH HAS OVERRIDDEN HIM

Build it at full strength.

Build it fully. Your couples have friends who make this argument, and it is not a stupid one.

Matthew twice records an exception, at 5:32 and again at 19:9. The plainest reading of porneia in a marital context is sexual infidelity. Matthew was written to a Jewish Christian audience who would have understood the Deuteronomy debate, and he shows Jesus taking the stricter of the two schools rather than abolishing the category of lawful divorce altogether. On this reading, a wronged spouse is free. Meanwhile the Catholic Church, which claims to be preserving a hard teaching, in practice grants tens of thousands of declarations of nullity a year, which look to an outsider like divorce with a Latin name. So the objection sharpens: the Church appears to have deleted an exception Jesus made, and then quietly manufactured a wider one of her own.

Then press.

Concede the first half honestly. The clause is there, the adultery reading is a serious reading held by serious Christians, and anyone who tells your group that the Greek obviously means an invalid union is overstating. It does not obviously mean anything; that is why the argument has lasted.

Press first with Mark, Luke, and Paul. Three witnesses, including the earliest one, state the prohibition without any exception, and Paul explicitly contemplates a separation and still forbids the remarriage. Whatever Matthew's clause is doing, the earliest apostolic ruling did not treat it as an exit.

Press second with the disciples' reaction. If Jesus had merely endorsed the stricter of two existing schools, the disciples would have had no reason to say it is better not to marry. That reaction strongly suggests they heard the teaching as radically demanding.

Press third on the annulment charge, and be direct rather than defensive. A declaration of nullity is not a dissolution. It is a judgment that consent, capacity, or form was defective from the beginning, so that what looked like a marriage was not one. That distinction is real, and it is also true that a tribunal can be wrong, that numbers have varied enormously by country and decade, and that scandal on this point is a fair criticism of practice rather than of doctrine. Session 9 takes it up in full.

Do not overclaim. Do not tell the room that the Orthodox position is simply infidelity to Christ, and do not tell them that Protestants have not thought about this. Say that Christ has bound the Church here in a way that costs her, and that she claims no authority to release what she did not bind.

6. Read verse 10 again. What do the disciples say, and why is their reaction good evidence?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry.

Nobody says that in response to a moderate ruling. Their reaction is the best available evidence for how absolute the teaching sounded to people who had every incentive to hear it mildly.

And notice: Jesus does not walk it back, soften it, or clarify that they have misunderstood him. He talks about who is able to receive it.

DIG DEEPER: EUNUCHS FOR THE KINGDOM

Verse 12 is not a change of subject. Having just made marriage permanent, Jesus immediately places beside it the vocation of those who renounce marriage entirely for the kingdom of heaven.

The two vocations explain each other. Both are a whole self given away without a return ticket, and both are only livable as gifts. This is why priests and consecrated religious are not spectators at your wedding; they are the other half of the same sign (CCC 1618-1620).

COUPLE CONVERSATION (JUST THE TWO OF YOU, NOT THE ROOM)

Just the two of you. This is the most important Couple Conversation in the first half of the study.

When we each said yes, what did we privately assume the word forever meant? Answer honestly, including any quiet assumption that it would end if things got bad enough.

What is the hardest scenario you can name in which you would still be married? Say the scenario out loud. Do not promise anything yet.

7. If the bond really cannot be dissolved, what does that make the wedding day?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Not the beginning of a trial period and not a celebration of a decision already made privately. It is the moment something comes into existence that, once the marriage is ratified and consummated, neither of them can uncreate.

This is the answer to the question people ask about why the Church is so careful about weddings, and so slow about them. She is not administering a ceremony. She is witnessing the creation of a bond that, once ratified and consummated between the baptized, she cannot undo.

Hold this. Session 8 will read the actual words they are going to say.

Send. Carrying It Out

Open questions again. No answer boxes.

- Y.** What is one thing you have to stop believing about marriage if what Jesus said tonight is true?
- Z.** Who in your life needs to hear that the Church does not consider the divorced to be second class Christians?

Live It This Week

- **Say the hard scenario out loud.** Finish the Couple Conversation if you did not finish it in the room. Name the hardest situation in which you would still be married, and say it to each other.
- **Write to someone divorced whom you love.** A parent, an aunt, a friend. Not about theology. Just tell them you are glad they are in your life. Tonight's teaching is about the bond, not about ranking people.
- **Read Matthew 19:6 slowly every day this week.** One verse. It is your memory verse, and it may well be read at your wedding.
- **Read John 2:1-11 before next session.** Notice who runs out of what.

Closing Prayer

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you did not make it easier when they asked you to. You told the truth and let them decide what to do with it. Give us hearts that are not hard. Where our families carry the wounds of marriages that ended, bring your healing and keep us from judging what we did not live through. And when the day comes that we would rather have an exit, remind us what you said, and give us the grace to want it.

St. Thomas More, pray for us. St. Joseph, pray for us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.

Matthew 19:6

Part 3. Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in the order it appears.

- Matthew 19:1-12. The session text.
- Mark 10:1-12. Read immediately after Matthew, without commentary between.
- Genesis 1:27 and 2:24. Quoted by Jesus. The group met both in Session 1.
- Deuteronomy 24:1-4. The passage under dispute.
- Luke 16:18. Used in the four column comparison.
- 1 Corinthians 7:10-11. Used in the four column comparison, and decisive for the Catholic reading.
- Acts 15:20, 29 and 1 Corinthians 5:1. The other uses of *porneia*, for the exception clause discussion.
- Matthew 5:32. The parallel exception clause.
- John 2:1-11. Assigned reading before Session 5.

Catechism Paragraphs Used

CCC 1614-1615, 1618-1620, 1640, 2382-2386. Code of Canon Law, canon 1141.

Before Next Session

Read John 2:1-11 before Session 5, and notice who runs out of what.

Session 5. They Have No Wine

Movement II. Christ Restores It

Passages: John 2:1-11; John 19:25-27; Isaiah 25:6; Amos 9:13-14

Part 1. Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. That the group traces the word hour through John's Gospel and discovers for itself that the first sign, given at a wedding, is pointed at the cross, and that the woman who speaks at the wedding is standing there again when the hour arrives.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church has always read Christ's presence at the wedding at Cana as the confirmation of the goodness of marriage and as the announcement that from that point marriage would be an efficacious sign of his presence (CCC 1613).

What You Need to Know

Last week was heavy on purpose. Tonight opens at a party, and the party fails. That sequence is not an accident of the syllabus; it is the shape of the Christian life. The teaching comes first and it is impossible, and then Christ shows up in the middle of a household disaster with a hundred and fifty gallons of wine.

WHAT RUNNING OUT OF WINE ACTUALLY MEANT

A first century Galilean wedding was not an evening. It was a multi day feast, and the groom's family carried the obligation to provide. In an honor culture, running out of wine was not an inconvenience, it was a public humiliation with lasting social cost. When the text says they have no wine, it means the celebration is about to become a story the village tells at their expense.

Make sure your couples feel that before you say anything spiritual about it. This is a wedding where the plans failed in front of everyone.

THE WOMAN WHO NOTICES

Mary is the first person John records naming the need. What she says to her son is not a request in form. It is a statement of fact: they have no wine. She names the need and leaves the response to him.

That is worth teaching directly to engaged couples, because it is a model of intercession and also, frankly, a model of how to raise a problem with a spouse.

THE HARD SENTENCE IN VERSE 4

Jesus answers, O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come. Do not skip past this and do not explain it away.

Two honest notes. First, the phrase translated what have you to do with me renders a Semitic idiom that indicates distance or a difference of concern between two parties. Its exact force here is disputed among interpreters, and it does not carry the contempt that the English can suggest. Second, the address woman is unusual for a son speaking to his mother, and John uses it again at the cross in 19:26. Many readers, including in the Catholic tradition, take the repetition as deliberate, linking Mary to the woman of Genesis 3:15. That reading is legitimate and not defined; present it as a reading rather than as the meaning.

What is not disputed is what happens next. He answers that his hour has not yet come, and then he acts, and she has already told the servants to do whatever he says. Her confidence is not shaken by his answer.

DO WHATEVER HE TELLS YOU

These are the last words of Mary recorded anywhere in Scripture. She never speaks again in the New Testament. That is a striking fact to put in front of a room, and it is verifiable in thirty seconds by anyone who wants to check.

That sentence summarizes the Christ-centered direction of authentic Marian devotion. She notices a need, she brings it to her son, and she points away from herself.

SIX STONE JARS

The detail is precise: six stone water jars used for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. That is somewhere between a hundred and twenty and a hundred and eighty gallons of wine, which is a comic and extravagant amount for a village wedding whose party is nearly over.

Two things are being said. Many Christians read the purification jars and the new wine as a sign of fulfillment, the water of the old rites giving way to the wine of the new. And the abundance is absurd, because that is what the prophets said the messianic age would look like: mountains dripping with sweet wine, a feast of rich food and well aged wine for all peoples (Amos 9:13-14; Isaiah 25:6).

A cautious note on the number six. Some commentators make much of six as one short of seven, a symbol of incompleteness. It is a reasonable reading and John does use numbers deliberately, but it is an interpretation rather than something the text asserts. Offer it as a possibility, not as a decoding.

THE HOUR, AND WHERE IT GOES

In John, the hour is a technical term for the Paschal hour, centered on the cross and including his glorification and return to the Father. Watch it move: not yet come at 2:4, not yet come at 7:30 and 8:20, and then at 12:23 the hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified, and at 13:1 and 17:1 it has arrived.

So the first sign, worked at a wedding, is dated by reference to the crucifixion. And when the hour does come, John puts the same woman at the foot of the cross and has Jesus address her with the same word. The wedding and the cross are tied together at both ends.

That is the theological center of tonight, and your group can find it themselves with a concordance and twelve minutes. Let them.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- Isaiah 25:6. A feast of rich food and well aged wine, on the mountain, for all peoples. The messianic banquet.
- Amos 9:13-14. The mountains shall drip sweet wine. Abundance as a sign of restoration.
- Genesis 3:15. The woman and her offspring. Relevant to the address at Cana and at the cross, offered as a reading rather than as a certainty.
- The prophetic marriage covenant of Session 3 stands directly behind a Gospel that opens its signs at a wedding.
- Revelation 19:6-9. The marriage supper of the Lamb. The passage does not mention wine; the connection to Cana is typological. Session 14.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. AUGUSTINE ON WHY CHRIST CAME TO A WEDDING

Preaching through John's Gospel, St. Augustine argued in substance that Christ went to the wedding to confirm that marriage is his own creation and not something merely tolerated, and that anyone who claims marriage is evil should notice where the Lord chose to work his first sign.

That argument had a live target in Augustine's day, when several movements taught that the body and marriage were beneath the truly spiritual. It has a live target now for the opposite reason: a culture that treats marriage as a lifestyle option rather than as something Christ deliberately entered.

Summary of his teaching in the Tractates on the Gospel of John.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN PAUL II ON THE MOTHER AT CANA

In his encyclical on the Blessed Virgin, St. John Paul II read the Cana scene as showing Mary's particular way of being present: she notices a human need, she places it before her son, and she then directs everyone else toward him rather than toward herself.

He also noted the link between the address at Cana and the address at the cross, and read the two scenes together as the frame of her role in the life of the Church.

Note for your couples: this is what Catholic devotion to Mary actually is. Do whatever he tells you.

Summary of his teaching on the Cana scene in Redemptoris Mater.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. LOUIS DE MONTFORT ON GOING THROUGH THE MOTHER

St. Louis de Montfort taught, in substance, that everything Mary does terminates in Christ, and that devotion to her which does not end in him has misunderstood her entirely.

Test it against the text. At Cana she speaks twice: once to her son about a need, and once to the servants about obedience to him. Then she does not speak again in the scene.

Summary of his teaching in True Devotion to Mary.

Catechism Connection

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 1613 is the paragraph for tonight, and it is precise about what the Church claims: the Church sees in the Cana scene the confirmation of the goodness of marriage and the announcement that from then on marriage will be an efficacious sign of Christ's presence.

Note carefully what that does not say. It does not say the sacrament was instituted at Cana by a formula, and you should not say so either. The Church's case for the sacramentality of marriage rests principally on Ephesians 5 and on her constant tradition, which Sessions 6 and 7 will take up.

CCC 1335 connects the abundance of wine at Cana to the Eucharist, as a sign of the wedding feast in the Father's kingdom.

CCC 2618 treats Mary's intercession at Cana as the model of her intercession in the Church.

CCC 2618 is the Cana paragraph, and **CCC 964** treats Mary's union with her Son at the cross. The link between the two scenes is a reading of the text rather than a claim either paragraph makes, and the discovery your group makes tonight should be presented that way.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

They Have No Wine is planted tonight, and it is the pastoral thread of the study. Say the phrase out loud more than once and let it become a shorthand in the room. It will return in Session 10 when self control runs out, in Session 11 when plans run out, in Session 13 when everything runs out, and in Session 14 when the good wine is finally served.

The Bridegroom develops quietly. If someone connects the wedding at Cana to God as bridegroom from Session 3, affirm it and stop. The full payoff is Session 14.

One Flesh is silent tonight.

Do not preview Ephesians 5. Next week is the pivot of the whole study and it needs to land as a surprise. If a participant races ahead to Ephesians during the discussion, thank them, write it on the board, and tell them you are keeping it for next week.

IF A COUPLE IS IN AN IRREGULAR SITUATION (LEADER ONLY)

Couples whose wedding planning is going badly. Tonight is the night they will hear their own situation in the text, and that is a gift rather than a distraction. Let the conversation about failed plans be real. It disarms the room.

Marian devotion in a mixed room. If one fiancé is not Catholic, tonight can feel like the session where the Catholic strangeness shows. Handle it by staying in the text. The particular Marian claims in tonight's session are visible in eleven verses: she notices, she asks, she points to him, she goes quiet. Invite the non-Catholic participant to say what they see in the passage, and take their answer seriously.

A couple under financial strain over the wedding. Somebody in the room is quietly panicking about the cost of the reception. Cana is a good night to say plainly that the sacrament is the wedding and the party is the party, and that God has never once been impressed by a venue.

Session Goals

1. The group can describe what running out of wine meant socially, so that the miracle registers as a rescue rather than as a convenience.
2. The group handles verse 4 honestly, including the disputed idiom, without either flinching from it or over explaining it.
3. The group traces the word hour through John and discovers on its own that it refers to the cross.
4. The group finds the second use of the address woman at John 19:26 and draws the connection themselves.
5. Every participant can state what CCC 1613 actually claims about Cana, and what it does not claim.
6. The phrase they have no wine enters the room's vocabulary as the name for the moment a marriage runs out of its own resources.

Time Note and Pre-Chosen Cuts

Ninety-minute plan. Opening prayer, 5 minutes. Win questions, 12. Reading John 2:1-11 aloud, 4. Build questions 1 through 5, 25. Live discovery moment on the hour, 15. Build questions 6 through 8 and the steelman, 20. Send and Live It, 6. Closing prayer, 3.

Seventy-five minute plan. Cut the Dig Deeper box and Build question 3. Keep the hour discovery; it is the session.

If the room is flat, ask early for stories of weddings where something went badly wrong. Every room has three and they are usually funny, and the laughter buys you the seriousness later.

Part 2. Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

OPENING PRAYER

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lord Jesus, you went to a wedding, and while you were there the whole thing started to fall apart. You did not lecture the family about better planning. You gave them more than they had lost. Come to our weddings, and to our marriages, and to the places where we have already run out. Teach us to notice what is missing the way your mother noticed, and to do whatever you tell us. Amen.

Win. Getting Started

Open questions. No wrong answers, no answer box. Let every couple speak once before anyone speaks twice.

- A.** Tell us about a wedding, yours or anyone's, where something went badly wrong. What happened, and what does everyone remember now?
- B.** When something is going wrong in a group, are you the person who notices first or the person who finds out last? Be honest, and let your fiancé vote.

Build. Into the Text

Read John 2:1-11 aloud. It is short. Read it twice, by two different readers, before you ask anything.

- 1.** Verse 3 says the wine gave out. What would that actually have meant for the family hosting?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Public humiliation, not inconvenience. A wedding feast ran for days and the host family carried the obligation to provide. Running out was the kind of failure a village remembered.

Fill in what your couples know from their own planning: this is the moment the caterer calls and says the food will not be enough, in front of everyone, permanently.

The miracle is a rescue of somebody's dignity. That is not a small thing for God to trouble himself with, and it tells you something about him.

- 2.** What exactly does Mary say to Jesus, and what does she not say?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

She says they have no wine. That is all. It is a statement, not a request, and it contains no instructions about what he should do.

She also does not tell the hosts, the steward, or the disciples. She takes the problem directly to him.

Ask the room what it would change if spouses raised problems with each other this way. Name the thing that is missing, without a demand attached and without an audience.

3. Verse 4 is difficult. Read it again. What is your honest first reaction to how he answers his mother?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Let the room say that it sounds harsh, because it does in English. Do not rush to defend it.

Then give them the two honest notes. The phrase translated what have you to do with me renders a Semitic idiom marking a difference of concern between two parties, and its precise force here is genuinely disputed among interpreters. It does not carry the contempt the English suggests.

And the address woman is unusual from a son to his mother. John uses it again at the cross, in 19:26. Many readers take the repetition as deliberate and hear an echo of the woman of Genesis 3:15. That is a legitimate reading, and it is a reading rather than a definition. Say which is which.

Then point at what is not disputed: he answers that his hour has not yet come, and then he acts anyway, and she never doubted that he would.

4. What does she say to the servants, and why is it worth knowing that these are her last recorded words in the Bible?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Do whatever he tells you. And yes, she never speaks again anywhere in the New Testament. Anyone in the room can verify that this week.

Her last recorded words point away from herself. That is the direction of authentic Catholic devotion to Mary in one sentence, and it is a useful thing to be able to say to a Protestant friend.

For a marriage, it is also a workable rule. Two people who both do whatever he tells them will not need to negotiate nearly as much as they think.

5. Count the jars, and count the gallons. Why would John record the volume?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Six stone jars, twenty or thirty gallons each, used for the Jewish rites of purification. That is roughly a hundred and twenty to a hundred and eighty gallons.

It is a startling amount for a party that is nearly over, and the abundance is the message. The prophets described the age to come in exactly these terms: a feast of well aged wine for all peoples, and mountains dripping with sweet wine (Isaiah 25:6; Amos 9:13-14).

The jars were for purification. The water of the old rites becomes the wine of the new. John does not explain the symbolism, he just tells you what the jars were for and lets you work it out.

If someone offers that six is one short of seven and therefore signifies incompleteness, that is a reasonable reading and not something the text asserts. Mark it as an interpretation.

LIVE DISCOVERY MOMENT

This is the discovery that makes the session. Do not tell them what they are looking for beyond the instruction.

The instruction: in verse 4 Jesus says his hour has not yet come. Find every other place in John where the hour is spoken of that way, and write down what has happened by the time it arrives.

Give them twelve minutes, in pairs, with a concordance or a search. Point them to the Gospel of John only.

What they will find: John 7:30 and 8:20, where no one arrests him because his hour had not yet come. Then 12:23, the hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified, spoken as he begins to talk about a grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying. Then 13:1 and 17:1, where the hour has arrived and he is going to the Father.

Then ask: so what is the hour? They will say the cross. Let them say it.

Then send them to one more passage: John 19:25-27. Ask what they notice about who is standing there and what he calls her.

Then ask the closing question and stop. John begins the signs at a wedding, dates that wedding by reference to the hour, and puts the same woman at the hour when it comes. Why would he build it that way? Take answers. Do not resolve it. Session 14 resolves it.

BUILD THEN PRESS: CANA HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH MARRIAGE

Build it at full strength.

Build it seriously, because a sharp Protestant friend will make exactly this argument and it has real force.

Read John 2 without Catholic assumptions and notice what is absent. The bride is never named or even mentioned. The groom appears once, to be teased by the steward. Nothing is said about the couple, their vows, their union, or God's design for marriage. The sign is about Jesus: he manifests his glory and his disciples believe. The stone jars point to Jewish purification giving way to something new. In other words, this is a Christological sign about the arrival of the messianic age, and the wedding is scenery. To build a doctrine of sacramental marriage on it is to read a conclusion into a story that is plainly about something else. And it is telling that Catholics cite Cana at all, since if the sacrament were really instituted here, one would expect a word of institution, as at the Last Supper.

Then press.

Concede the main point at once, and concede it fully. The primary sense of John 2 is Christological. There is no word of institution. The Catechism does not claim there is one, and the paragraph is careful: the Church sees in this scene the confirmation of the goodness of marriage and the announcement that marriage will henceforth be an efficacious sign of Christ's presence (CCC 1613). Announcement and confirmation are not institution, and a Catholic who overstates that has weakened his own case.

Then press on where the Catholic argument actually stands. It stands on Ephesians 5:31-32, where St. Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 and calls it a great mystery concerning Christ and the Church, and on the constant practice of the Church. Sessions 6 and 7 make that case. Cana is corroboration, not foundation.

Press second on John's method. This is a Gospel in which nothing is scenery. John chooses the setting of every sign with care, and the first sign of the incarnate Word is worked at a wedding, in a Gospel that will later have the Baptist call himself the friend of the bridegroom (John 3:29) and whose Passion narrative has the beloved disciple take the mother home. If a novelist did this we would call it deliberate.

Press third with the discovery the group just made. The wedding is dated by reference to the hour, and at the hour the same woman is addressed with the same word. That structure is not an accident and it is not a Catholic invention; it is in the text and anyone can check it.

Do not overclaim in return. Do not say Cana proves the sacrament. Say that the Church reads Cana in the light of the whole Scripture and of her own practice, which is exactly what she says she does.

COUPLE CONVERSATION (JUST THE TWO OF YOU, NOT THE ROOM)

Just the two of you.

Where have we already run out? Name one place where our own resources, patience, money, self control, or family goodwill have already given out during this engagement.

What did we do when it happened? Did either of us think to say it out loud to God the way Mary said it, plainly and without instructions?

6. The steward tells the bridegroom he has kept the good wine until now. What does that sentence do at the end of the story?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

It reverses the ordinary expectation, which the steward states out loud: everyone serves the good wine first, when people can still taste it.

The pattern of God is the opposite. The best is later. That is worth saying in a room where several couples privately fear that they are currently at the peak of their romance and everything after the wedding is decline.

Keep the phrase. The good wine kept until now is going to come back in Session 14.

DIG DEEPER: THE BRIDEGROOM WHO IS NOT THERE

Notice the small oddity in verse 9. The steward praises the bridegroom for wine the bridegroom did not provide. The real provider is standing in the room and is not thanked.

Many readers see this irony as deliberate. Two chapters later the Baptist will call himself the friend of the bridegroom who rejoices at the bridegroom's voice (John 3:29), and by then the reader knows who the bridegroom actually is.

7. Verse 11 says this was the first of his signs and that his disciples believed in him. Given everything else that Jesus could have done first, what does it say that this was the one?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

That he began among people, at a family celebration, solving an embarrassing domestic problem generously and almost anonymously.

And that he was willing to enter a wedding as a guest. The Church's claim is not that Cana created the sacrament, but that God did not consider marriage beneath him, and the first sign is where he showed it (CCC 1613).

Ask them what it would mean to invite him to their wedding in a sense stronger than the seating chart.

Send. Carrying It Out

Open questions again. No answer boxes.

- Y.** In your marriage, what will be the sign to you that you have run out of wine, and what will you do when you see it?
- Z.** Who is the person in your life who notices what is missing before anyone else does? Have you ever thanked them?

Live It This Week

- **Name one thing you have run out of, out loud, in prayer, together.** Do not add instructions for God about how to fix it. Say the sentence and stop, the way Mary did.
- **Do whatever he tells you, once, specifically.** Choose one thing you already know Christ is asking of you and that you have been putting off, and do it this week. Tell your fiancé which one you chose.
- **Thank the person who notices.** Call or write the person in your life who sees what is missing before anyone else. Tell them you noticed them noticing.
- **Read Ephesians 5:21-33 before next session,** the whole passage, and read it twice. Next week is the pivot of this study.

Closing Prayer

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you turned water kept for washing into wine kept for joy, and you did it because a family was about to be shamed. Do that for us. Take what is ordinary and dutiful in us and make it glad. When we run out, and we will, let your mother's words be ours: they have no wine, and then, do whatever he tells you.

Our Lady of Cana, pray for us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

His mother said to the servants, Do whatever he tells you.

John 2:5

Part 3. Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in the order it appears.

- John 2:1-11. The session text, read twice.
- John 7:30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1; 17:1. Found by the group tracing the hour.
- John 19:25-27. The woman at the cross, found by the group.
- John 3:29. The friend of the bridegroom, used in the Dig Deeper box.
- Isaiah 25:6. The feast of well aged wine.
- Amos 9:13-14. The mountains dripping sweet wine.
- Genesis 3:15. Offered as a reading behind the address woman, not as a certainty.
- Ephesians 5:21-33. Assigned reading before Session 6.

Catechism Paragraphs Used

CCC 726, 964, 1335, 1613, 2618.

Before Next Session

Read Ephesians 5:21-33 before Session 6. Read the whole passage, twice.

Session 6. This Is a Great Mystery

Movement II. Christ Restores It

Passages: Ephesians 5:21-33; Colossians 3:18-4:1; 1 Peter 3:1-7; Genesis 2:24

Part 1. Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. That the group compares the New Testament household passages against each other, discovers what St. Paul does differently, and finds for itself that Ephesians 5 answers the domination of Genesis 3:16 rather than endorsing it.

Catholic Touchstone. Christian marriage between the baptized signifies and shares in the covenant of Christ and the Church. That is why the Church calls it a sacrament, and why the model for a husband's authority is a man being crucified (CCC 1616-1617, 1642).

SAFEGUARDING NOTE (LEADER ONLY, READ BEFORE THE SESSION)

This is the passage most often misused to justify control, and you must say so from the front rather than leaving it to be inferred.

Say clearly during the session: no Catholic teaching can require a wife to submit to sin, to abuse, to coercion, or to danger. A husband who cites this passage to demand compliance has inverted its plain meaning, which puts the demand on him.

If anything in tonight's discussion raises a concern about coercion or violence, do not address it in the group. Speak to the person alone afterward, notify the priest or deacon preparing the couple, and if there is any indication of immediate danger contact emergency services. In the United States the National Domestic Violence Hotline is available at 1-800-799-7233 or by texting START to 88788. Do not investigate, mediate, or attempt to assess the relationship yourself.

Know your own obligations before the session begins. If you are a mandated reporter under the law of your state or under diocesan policy, or if the parish has a safe environment coordinator, know that in advance rather than looking it up afterward.

What You Need to Know

This is the pivot of the study. Everything before tonight has been preparing the room to read one passage without flinching, and everything after tonight depends on the room having read it honestly.

Expect tension. Somebody arrives tonight already braced. Somebody else arrives ready to use this passage as a weapon. Both of them need to leave with the text having done something to them.

VERSE 21 IS NOT AN INTRODUCTION, IT IS THE SENTENCE

The single most important thing you can teach tonight is grammatical, and it is verifiable by anyone with a decent Bible.

Ephesians 5:21 says be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. In the Greek, the participle governing that sentence carries forward into what follows, and in the best manuscript evidence verse 22 has no verb of its own at all. Wives, to your husbands, as to the Lord. The verb has to be borrowed from verse 21.

Many English translations, including the RSV, supply *be subject* in verse 22 for readability, and a footnote in most study Bibles will tell you the verb is not there in the earliest witnesses.

The consequence is straightforward. Whatever St. Paul is asking of wives is a particular case of something he has just asked of everybody.

THE HOUSEHOLD CODES AND WHAT PAUL DOES TO THEM

Lists of duties within a household were a standard literary form in the ancient world, and they commonly ran one direction: they told the person in charge how to manage wives, children, and slaves. Ancient practice was more varied than a flat contrast allows, so present what follows as a notable difference rather than as something unprecedented. Comparable material appears in Colossians 3 and 1 Peter 2 and 3.

Two things are strange about the Christian versions. First, the subordinate parties are addressed directly, as moral agents with their own consciences, rather than being discussed in the third person, which is notable against many contemporary codes. Second, in Ephesians the person with power gets the longest and heaviest instruction by a wide margin. Wives receive roughly three verses. Husbands receive nine, and the content of those nine is death.

Let the group count the verses themselves. It is the fastest way to dismantle the assumption that this passage is a management manual.

HEAD, AND WHAT IT DOES AND DOES NOT SETTLE

Verse 23 calls the husband the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church. Be honest about the state of the question. The Greek word *kephalē* is argued over: some scholars stress authority, others stress source or origin, and the evidence is genuinely mixed. Do not tell your room that the debate is settled in either direction.

What settles the meaning in this passage is not the lexicon but the comparison Paul chooses. Christ's headship over the Church is defined three verses later as handing himself over to death for her. If that is the model, then any account of headship here must be governed by Christ's self-emptying love. It cannot license coercion or domination, and in this passage it looks like the obligation to go first into the sacrifice.

The Catholic tradition has held that there is a real order in the family and that the husband bears a genuine responsibility, while insisting that this order is one of love and service and never of domination (see Pope Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, which teaches it explicitly; CCC 1645 states the equal personal dignity of the spouses). Note that the Catholic rite of marriage does not ask a bride to promise obedience.

GENESIS 3:16 ANSWERED

Have this ready, because the group met it in Session 2. There, domination of the woman by the man was named as part of the damage. Here, the man is told that his role is to hand himself over for her, to nourish and cherish her, and to love her as his own body. Neither passage names the other, so the connection is a reading rather than a stated cross reference. On that reading the wound is not ratified but answered, at the level of the man's own will.

WASHING, WORD, AND THE GREAT MYSTERY

Verses 26 and 27 describe Christ cleansing the Church by the washing of water with the word, which the tradition reads as baptism. Notice that the husband is being told to do something for his wife's holiness, which is a remarkable thing to make a man responsible for.

Then verse 31 quotes Genesis 2:24, the verse the group has now met in Sessions 1, 4, and tonight. And verse 32 says this is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church.

The Greek word is *mysterion*. In Latin it was rendered *sacramentum*. That translation is one strand in the history of how the Church came to speak of marriage as a sacrament, and a Protestant objector will say the doctrine rests on a translation error. Do not fight that battle tonight. Session 7 is built for it. Tonight, stay with what St. Paul actually says: he quotes a verse about a man and a woman becoming one flesh and says he is talking about Christ and the Church.

WHAT THAT REVERSAL MEANS

Read the logic in the direction Paul writes it. He does not say Christ and the Church are like a marriage. He takes the Genesis verse about marriage and refers it to Christ and the Church, which the Church reads as revealing what marriage was pointing at all along (CCC 1616-1617). Marriage is the sign; the union of Christ and his Church is the reality that the sign was made to point at.

That is why a wedding is not a private event with religious decoration, and it is why what your couples do in their marriage will preach whether or not they intend it.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- Genesis 2:24 is quoted directly at Ephesians 5:31. The group has now met it three times.
- Genesis 3:16 is answered here, as the domination named there is replaced by a command to self surrender.
- The prophetic marriage covenant of Session 3 is the direct background: God as husband to an unfaithful people, loving her back into fidelity.
- Ezekiel 16:9-14, where God washes and clothes and adorns his bride, may echo behind Ephesians 5:26-27. The group read it three weeks ago; see whether anyone connects it.
- Revelation 19:7-8, where the bride has made herself ready and is clothed with fine linen, completes the image. Session 14.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM ON WHAT A HUSBAND IS FOR

In his homily on this passage, St. John Chrysostom told husbands that the love they owe their wives is measured by Christ's love for the Church, which means it is measured by the cross. He taught in substance that a husband should be willing to be cut into a thousand pieces for her, and that a man who rules his wife by fear has failed at the only thing he was asked to do.

He also insisted that the reverence asked of a wife in verse 33 is not the fear of a slave, and that a husband who produces that kind of fear has misread the passage entirely.

Summary of his teaching in Homily 20 on Ephesians.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN PAUL II ON MUTUAL SUBJECTION

St. John Paul II taught that verse 21 governs the whole passage, and that the subjection asked of a wife is one side of a mutual subjection asked of both spouses out of reverence for Christ. He saw no contradiction between the general exhortation and the particular one, because the particular one is a case of the general.

He also argued that this passage introduces something genuinely new into the ancient world.

Summary of his teaching in Mulieris Dignitatem, section 24.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: POPE PIUS XI ON ORDER AND LOVE IN A HOUSEHOLD

Writing on Christian marriage, Pope Pius XI taught that the order within a family does not deny the wife her liberty or her dignity as a person, does not oblige her to obey every request of a husband regardless of its reasonableness, and does not treat her as a minor.

He is a useful voice precisely because he is writing from a tradition-minded position and still draws the line clearly.

Summary of his teaching in the encyclical Casti Connubii. Note for the leader: a papal encyclical, not the voice of a canonized saint.

Catechism Connection

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 1616-1617 is the heart of tonight: St. Paul says that spouses are to love one another as Christ loved the Church, and that Christian marriage is an efficacious sign of that covenant.

CCC 1642 states that the grace of the sacrament perfects the human love of the spouses, strengthens their unity, and sanctifies them on the way to eternal life, and it is where the Church's language of mutual self giving belongs.

CCC 2204-2206 treats the family as the domestic church and describes the relations within it in terms of respect and service. Session 14 returns here.

CCC 369-372 is worth having ready if the equality question comes up sharply, since it states the equal personal dignity of man and woman directly.

A note on scope: none of these paragraphs settles the lexical dispute about the word head, and you should not present them as though they do.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

One Flesh pays off tonight and the group should get there without help. When you reach verse 31 and St. Paul quotes Genesis 2:24, stop reading and wait. This is the third appearance and someone will say it. Then read verse 32 and let it land.

The Bridegroom converges tonight. Session 3 gave them God as husband. Session 5 gave them a wedding dated by the cross. Tonight St. Paul says outright that marriage was always about Christ and the Church. Do not complete the arc; the marriage supper is Session 14.

They Have No Wine is silent tonight. It returns in Session 10.

Sealed guess check. Two sessions from now the sheets get opened. Remind the room tonight that the sheets exist, that they should not be discussed, and that nobody is going to be graded.

IF A COUPLE IS IN AN IRREGULAR SITUATION (LEADER ONLY)

A fiance who arrives having already decided this passage is the problem. Do not argue. Ask them to count the verses assigned to each party and to read verse 21 aloud. The text does more for you here than any defense of it.

A fiance who arrives eager to use it. This is the more dangerous case. Watch for a man who is pleased by verse 22 and bored by verse 25. Address it in the room by staying relentlessly on the husband's nine verses, and follow up privately afterward if the pattern is marked.

A woman who goes very quiet. Follow up privately within a day. Ask an open question and let silence do the work. If anything concerning emerges, see the safeguarding note.

A couple from a tradition that teaches strict male headship. Be respectful and precise. The Catholic tradition does hold a genuine order and responsibility in the family, and it also rules out domination and does not ask a bride to promise obedience. Both halves are true and you should say both.

Session Goals

1. Every participant can state that verse 21 governs the passage and can explain why verse 22 depends on it.
2. The group counts the verses given to wives and to husbands and draws the obvious conclusion themselves.
3. The group compares Ephesians, Colossians, and 1 Peter and identifies what the Christian household codes do differently from the surrounding culture.
4. The lexical dispute about the word head is presented honestly, and the group can say why the comparison to Christ settles the meaning here regardless of how the dispute is resolved.
5. Every participant can connect Ephesians 5:25 back to Genesis 3:16 and say what is being reversed.
6. Nobody leaves this room believing that this passage licenses control, and nobody leaves believing the Church has quietly dropped it.

Time Note and Pre-Chosen Cuts

Ninety-minute plan. Opening prayer, 5 minutes. Win questions, 10. Reading Ephesians 5:21-33 aloud, 5. Build questions 1 through 4, 22. Live discovery moment on the household codes, 15. Build questions 5 through 8 and the steelman, 24. Send and Live It, 6. Closing prayer, 3.

Seventy-five minute plan. Cut Build question 6 and the Dig Deeper box. Do the household code comparison with Colossians only, dropping 1 Peter.

Do not cut the steelman under any circumstances tonight. If you run out of time, cut the Send section and hold the steelman. An unanswered objection on this passage does more damage than an unfinished session.

Part 2. Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

OPENING PRAYER

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lord Jesus, tonight we read a passage that has been loved and misused in almost equal measure. Give us clear eyes. Do not let us hear what we came expecting to hear. Show the men in this room what you are actually asking of them, and show the women what you have promised them. Make our marriages into a sign that tells the truth about you. Amen.

Win. Getting Started

Open questions. No wrong answers, no answer box. Let every couple speak once before anyone speaks twice.

- A.** Before tonight, what did you think Ephesians 5 said? Be honest, including if you have only heard about it secondhand.
- B.** Describe a time somebody in authority over you used it well. What did they actually do?

Build. Into the Text

Read Ephesians 5:21-33 aloud, slowly, all of it. Then ask the room to sit for ten seconds before anyone speaks.

- 1.** Look at verse 21 and verse 22 in your Bible. What does verse 21 say, and what do you notice about the grammar of verse 22?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Verse 21 says be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

In the earliest Greek manuscripts, verse 22 has no verb of its own. It reads, in effect, wives, to your husbands, as to the Lord, and the verb has to be carried over from verse 21. Most English versions, including the RSV, supply the verb for readability, and most study Bibles note it. Have someone check their footnotes in the room.

The consequence: whatever is being asked of wives is a specific case of something already asked of everyone. You cannot quote verse 22 without verse 21 and still be quoting St. Paul.

- 2.** Count the verses. How many are addressed to wives, and how many to husbands? What is the content of each?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Roughly three to wives, and nine to husbands. Let them count it rather than telling them.

The wives' instruction is about respect and subjection. The husbands' instruction is: love as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, make her holy, nourish and cherish her, love her as your own body, and leave your father and mother for her.

Ask the room which assignment they would rather have. The passage that gets quoted to control women spends three quarters of its length telling a man to die.

LIVE DISCOVERY MOMENT

Do not explain the household codes. Send them looking.

The instruction: read Ephesians 5:21-6:9, then Colossians 3:18-4:1, then 1 Peter 2:18-3:7. Answer two questions in pairs, twelve minutes.

One. Who is spoken to directly in each list, and who is only spoken about?

Two. In Ephesians, which party gets the most words, and what are they told to do?

What they will find: in all three, the parties with less power, wives, children, and slaves, are addressed directly, as people with consciences of their own, which is notable against many contemporary codes. And in Ephesians the husband receives by far the longest instruction, and its content is self surrender rather than command.

Then ask, and let it be uncomfortable: the same passage that speaks to wives also speaks to slaves. What do we do with that? Take answers. Do not resolve it. The steelman is coming and this is exactly the objection it will make.

3. Verse 23 calls the husband the head of the wife as Christ is head of the Church. What does the passage itself say Christ's headship looks like?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Verse 25 answers it: he gave himself up for her. Verse 26, he makes her holy. Verse 29, he nourishes and cherishes her.

Be honest that the Greek word behind head is genuinely argued over, with some scholars stressing authority and others source or origin, and the evidence is mixed. Do not claim the dispute is settled.

Then point out that the dispute does not decide this passage. St. Paul supplies the definition himself by naming the model, and the model is a man being crucified. Whatever headship is, it is defined here by the one being imitated, who did not use his authority as a right to be obeyed but handed himself over.

Practical form for your couples: in this passage, the husband's authority is the authority to go first into the sacrifice.

4. Go back to Genesis 3:16 from Session 2. What did it say would happen between a husband and a wife? Now read Ephesians 5:25 next to it.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Genesis 3:16 said he shall rule over you, and named it as part of the damage, alongside thorns and pain.

Ephesians 5:25 tells him to hand himself over for her. Many Catholic readers hear that as an answer to the ruling rather than a modification of it, addressed to the will of the man himself. Say that it is a reading, because neither passage cites the other.

Say plainly: the New Testament does not ratify the consequence of the fall. It undoes it, starting with the person who benefited from it.

BUILD THEN PRESS: EPHESIANS 5 IS PATRIARCHY WITH A HALO

Build it at full strength.

Build it at full strength and do not soften a word of it. Someone in your room has already thought all of this and has not said it.

Whatever the internal logic, the passage tells wives to be subject and does not tell husbands to be subject to their wives in the same words. It sits inside a list that also tells slaves to obey their masters with fear and trembling, and no Christian today thinks that instruction stands as written. If we have rightly concluded that the slave material reflects a social arrangement the Gospel eventually dissolved, consistency demands the same conclusion about the marriage material. Insisting that the husband is head, while explaining at length that head does not mean what it sounds like, looks like keeping the word and quietly deleting the content in order to avoid admitting that the Church got something wrong. And a real cost has been paid for keeping it: women have been counseled to endure violence on the authority of this chapter.

Then press.

Concede everything true, and there is a lot. The passage has been used to justify abuse. Women have been told to stay in danger. That was a betrayal of the text and of them, and the Church today is clear that no one is obliged to remain in danger. Concede also that the slave material is not a model for social arrangements, and that Christians took far too long to say so.

Then press on the disanalogy, and press carefully because this is where the argument is won or lost. Marriage is rooted in creation and is affirmed by Christ himself as something from the beginning. Slavery is nowhere presented as such. When Paul grounds the marriage instruction, he does not ground it in Roman household order at all; he grounds it in Christ and the Church and in Genesis 2. The two halves of the code have different foundations, and one of them survives the removal of its cultural setting.

Press second on the direction of the demand. If the aim were to preserve male privilege, the passage is written strangely: it gives the man three times the instruction and defines his position by the cross. A social arrangement being defended does not usually require the beneficiary to die.

Press third on what the Church actually asks. The Catholic rite of marriage does not ask a bride to promise obedience. The Church affirms the equal personal dignity of husband and wife (CCC 369, 1645) and condemns domination. If the accusation is that the Church has quietly deleted the content, the honest answer is that she has taught the dignity, charity, and mutual self gift that are actually here, through formulations that have varied over time and have needed correction. Do not claim an uncomplicated uniform history.

Do not overclaim. Do not pretend the exegetical questions are settled, and do not pretend that Christian husbands have generally lived this. The passage is a standard the Church has failed to meet, which is a different thing from a passage the Church should discard.

5. Verses 26 and 27 say Christ cleanses the Church by the washing of water with the word, to present her holy. What is being described, and what does it make the husband responsible for?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

The tradition reads the washing as baptism. Christ acts to make his bride holy.

Applied to the husband, the passage puts him at the service of his wife's holiness, which is an astonishing thing to hand a man. He is not responsible for producing it, which is Christ's work, and he is certainly not responsible for her behavior. He is asked to protect and support her path to God.

Ask the men in the room what that would look like on a Tuesday. Practical answers only. Getting her to Mass, protecting her prayer, taking the children so she can go to confession, refusing to be the reason she is angry.

6. Read verses 31 and 32 again. What does St. Paul quote, and what does he then say he was talking about?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He quotes Genesis 2:24, which the group has now met in Sessions 1, 4, and tonight. Then he says this is a great mystery, and he means it in reference to Christ and the Church.

Read the direction of that sentence carefully. He does not say Christ and the Church are like a marriage. He quotes the Genesis verse about marriage and refers it to Christ and the Church, which the Church reads as revealing what marriage was pointing at all along.

So marriage is the sign and the union of Christ and his Church is the reality. Their wedding will be saying something about God to everyone present, whether or not they intend it.

DIG DEEPER: MYSTERY AND SACRAMENT

The Greek word in verse 32 is *mysterion*. The Latin translation rendered it *sacramentum*, and that is part of the history of how the Church came to name marriage among the seven sacraments.

A Protestant objector will say the whole doctrine rests on a translation. It does not, and Session 7 answers that argument properly. Tonight, simply note the two words and hold the question.

COUPLE CONVERSATION (JUST THE TWO OF YOU, NOT THE ROOM)

Just the two of you.

Name one decision each of you has quietly assumed you would control after the wedding. Money, where you live, how often you see family, how you spend Sundays. Say it out loud without defending it.

To the one who will be the husband: name one specific thing you are willing to give up for her, this year, that costs you something real. Not a category. A thing.

7. Verse 33 summarizes: let each one love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. Why summarize with love and respect rather than repeating subjection?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Because that is what the passage has actually been about. The summary is the author telling you what he thought he was saying.

St. John Chrysostom, preaching on this passage, insisted that the reverence asked here is not the fear of a slave, and that a husband who produces that kind of fear has failed at his one assignment.

Practical question to close on: which of the two, love or respect, do you find easier to give, and which does your fiancé most need from you?

Send. Carrying It Out

Open questions again. No answer boxes.

- Y. If your marriage is a sign of Christ and the Church, what is the first thing about your daily life that will have to change?

Z. What is one lie about this passage that you are now able to correct if a friend brings it up?

Live It This Week

- **Husbands to be: do one costly thing this week.** Choose the specific sacrifice you named in the Couple Conversation and do it before the next session. Do not announce it afterward.
- **Read verses 21 to 33 aloud together once, slowly.** One of you reads the wives' verses and the other reads the husbands' verses, out loud, to each other.
- **Correct one misunderstanding.** The next time this passage comes up in conversation, and it will, explain verse 21 and the verse count. You now know something most people do not.
- **Read the Rite of Marriage consent questions before next session** if your parish can give them to you. Session 7 begins the movement toward the vows themselves.

Closing Prayer

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you loved the Church and handed yourself over for her, and you did not wait for her to deserve it. Teach these men what that costs and give them the courage to want it. Teach these women what they have been promised and give them the freedom to expect it. Take the wound of Eden out of our households. Make our marriages a sign that tells the truth about you, especially on the days when we would rather it did not.

St. John Chrysostom, pray for us. Holy Family of Nazareth, pray for us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

Ephesians 5:25

Part 3. Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in the order it appears.

- Ephesians 5:21-33. The session text.
- Ephesians 5:21-6:9; Colossians 3:18-4:1; 1 Peter 2:18-3:7. The household code comparison, done by the group.
- Genesis 2:24. Quoted at Ephesians 5:31. Third appearance in the study.
- Genesis 3:16. Read against Ephesians 5:25.
- Ezekiel 16:9-14. The washing and adorning of the bride, behind Ephesians 5:26-27.
- Revelation 19:7-8. Held for Session 14.

Catechism Paragraphs Used

CCC 369-372, 1616-1617, 1642, 1645, 2204-2206.

Before Next Session

Ask your parish for a copy of the consent questions and the vows from the Rite of Marriage, and bring them to Session 7 if you can get them.

Session 7. Not Just a Ceremony

Movement II. Christ Restores It

Passages: Ephesians 5:31-32; 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, 39; Hebrews 13:4; 1 Timothy 4:1-5

Part 1. Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. That the group works out from the New Testament that Christians were never free to treat marriage as a purely private arrangement, and can then state accurately what the Church means by calling marriage a sacrament, who its ministers are, and what makes a wedding valid.

Catholic Touchstone. A valid marriage between two baptized persons is by that very fact a sacrament. Consent makes the marriage, the spouses themselves are its ministers in the Latin Church, and the Church requires a public form because a covenant witnessed by God is not a private transaction (CCC 1621-1631; canons 1055, 1057, 1108).

What You Need to Know

Tonight is the most practical session of the first half, and it answers the questions couples are actually asking their parish office. It also contains the hardest apologetic argument in the study, so give yourself time to prepare it rather than improvising.

WHAT THE CHURCH CLAIMS, STATED PRECISELY

Say it in this order and your room will not get lost.

- Marriage exists by creation and belongs to all people. Two unbaptized people who marry validly are really married. Not pretending, not living together, married.
- Between two baptized persons, a valid marriage is a sacrament. There is no third category. The Code puts it plainly: a valid matrimonial covenant between the baptized is by that very fact a sacrament (canon 1055 §2). This means a validly married Baptist couple are sacramentally married, which surprises nearly everyone.
- Consent makes the marriage. Not consummation, not the ceremony, not the paperwork. The consent of the parties, lawfully manifested, and no human power can supply for it (canon 1057).
- In the Latin Church the spouses are the ministers of the sacrament to each other. The priest or deacon assists, asks for the consent, and receives it in the name of the Church. In the Eastern Churches the priest is the witness of the consent, and the Catechism states that his blessing is also necessary for the validity of the sacrament (CCC 1623).

That last point is worth teaching carefully because it embarrasses nobody and it teaches the room how the Church actually works: one faith expressed through different liturgical and canonical traditions in East and West.

WHY A FORM IS REQUIRED AT ALL

Since consent makes the marriage, why does the Church insist that Catholics marry before a priest or deacon and two witnesses (canon 1108)? Because a covenant sworn before God is not a private matter, and because clandestine marriages produced serious injustice, often against women, when one party later denied that

consent had ever been given. Canonical form also gives the Church and the community public certainty about who is married. The requirement of public form is the Church protecting the weaker party from exactly that.

The Church can dispense from the form for serious reasons, most commonly in a marriage with a non-Catholic party, which is why a Catholic can sometimes validly marry in the other spouse's church with the bishop's dispensation.

IMPEDIMENTS, BRIEFLY AND ACCURATELY

Do not attempt a canon law seminar. Teach the categories.

- **Impediments** are conditions that make a person unable to marry validly: for example, a prior bond, insufficient age, consanguinity within certain degrees, holy orders, a public perpetual vow, and disparity of cult, that is, a marriage between a Catholic and an unbaptized person. Some can be dispensed by the bishop, some cannot.
- **Defects of consent** are different. Here the person could have married, but what they actually gave was not marital consent: total simulation, exclusion of permanence, exclusion of children, exclusion of fidelity, grave lack of discretion of judgment, incapacity to assume the essential obligations, force or fear, or consent obtained by deceit about a quality that gravely disturbs the partnership. Session 9 takes these up, because they are the substance of most nullity cases.

The practical point for tonight: impediments are usually discovered on paper, and defects of consent are matters of the heart. The parish paperwork exists to find the first kind. The second concerns what was interior at the moment of consent, calls for truthful self disclosure, and is referred to the priest and, where needed, the tribunal.

MIXED MARRIAGE AND DISPARITY OF CULT

Get the vocabulary right, because couples use these interchangeably and the Church does not.

- **Mixed marriage** is between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic. It requires the permission of the local ordinary. It is valid without that permission is not the case; the permission concerns lawfulness, and canonical form still applies unless dispensed. The Catholic party promises to do all in his or her power to have the children baptized and raised Catholic, and the other party is to be informed of that promise.
- **Disparity of cult** is between a Catholic and an unbaptized person. This is an impediment, and without a dispensation the marriage is invalid, not merely irregular.

If you are not certain which case a couple in your room is in, that is a question for the priest and not for you. Say so plainly.

THE GRACE OF THE SACRAMENT

Finish here rather than on canon law. The Church teaches that the sacrament gives grace: it perfects the spouses' love, strengthens their unity, and helps them attain holiness together and welcome and educate children (CCC 1641-1642).

Say clearly what that does not mean. It does not mean the marriage will be easy, and it does not operate on people who refuse to cooperate with it. It means that in a sacramental marriage the couple is not attempting the impossible on their own resources. Session 4 made the demand look impossible. This is the answer to that.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- Genesis 2:24 stands behind the whole discussion: the union is from creation, which is why it belongs to everyone and not only to the baptized.

- Ephesians 5:31-32 is the principal scriptural ground for calling marriage a sacrament, and the group met it last week.
- 1 Corinthians 7:39 says a widow is free to marry whom she wishes, only in the Lord. The qualification is the point.
- 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 addresses a Christian married to an unbeliever and tells the believer not to leave, which is the seed of what the Church later develops as the Pauline privilege. Session 9.
- Hebrews 13:4 says marriage should be held in honor among all, and 1 Timothy 4:1-5 condemns those who forbid marriage. 1 Timothy is aimed at teachers who forbade marriage. Hebrews is a general exhortation to hold marriage in honor.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH ON MARRYING WITH THE CHURCH'S KNOWLEDGE

Writing to St. Polycarp on his way to martyrdom early in the second century, St. Ignatius of Antioch taught that those who marry should do so with the knowledge and approval of the bishop, so that the marriage is according to the Lord and not according to mere desire.

This is very early, and it is decisive for one particular claim: the idea that the Church's involvement in weddings is a medieval invention does not survive contact with a letter written within living memory of the apostles.

Letter to Polycarp, chapter 5.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. AUGUSTINE ON THE BOND THAT REMAINS

St. Augustine taught, in substance, that among the goods of marriage there is something that persists even when the spouses fail: a bond, which he called by the Latin word *sacramentum*, that is not dissolved by separation or by the sins of either party.

He is arguing from the Church's practice rather than from a lexicon. Christians already refused to treat a broken marriage as an ended one, and he is explaining what that practice implies.

Summary of his teaching on the goods of marriage, especially in On the Good of Marriage.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: THE COUNCIL OF TRENT ON THE SEVEN

The Council of Trent taught that matrimony is truly and properly one of the seven sacraments of the Gospel, instituted by Christ, and it condemned the contrary claim.

Note for your couples what a council does and does not do. Trent did not invent the doctrine in the sixteenth century. It defined, under challenge, what the Church had long held and practiced, which is the ordinary way doctrine gets defined.

Council of Trent, Session XXIV, canons on the sacrament of matrimony, canon 1.

Catechism Connection

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 1601 gives the definition of the matrimonial covenant, drawn from canon 1055: ordered to the good of the spouses and to the procreation and education of offspring, and raised between the baptized to the dignity of a sacrament.

CCC 1621-1624 covers the celebration, why marriage between Catholics is normally celebrated within Mass, and the East and West difference about who the minister is.

CCC 1625-1632 covers consent, freedom, the canonical form, and preparation.

CCC 1633-1637 covers mixed marriages and disparity of cult, including the honest recognition that these situations bring real difficulties along with real opportunities.

CCC 1638-1642 covers the effects: the bond, and the grace of the sacrament.

A scope note: the Catechism describes the discipline of the Latin Church. Particular questions about a specific couple's case belong to the parish and the diocese, not to a Catechism paragraph.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

One Flesh appears tonight in a new key: the reason the bond persists is that the union was never merely an agreement. Do not overexplain. Session 9 needs this.

The Bridegroom is quiet.

Sealed guess: one session out. Tell the room tonight that the sheets get opened next week, that they should bring them sealed, and that nobody will be asked to read theirs aloud unless they choose to. Some people will have forgotten. Give them a blank sheet tonight and let them write it now, alone, before they hear Session 8.

Leader note. Do not let tonight become a canon law clinic. When a specific case comes up, write it down, say that it belongs with the priest, and move on. You will lose the session otherwise, and canon law answers given by amateurs cause real harm.

IF A COUPLE IS IN AN IRREGULAR SITUATION (LEADER ONLY)

Tonight is when the paperwork issues surface, which is exactly what tonight is for.

A couple civilly married already, or married outside the Church. This is common and it is fixable. The Church calls the remedy convalidation. Canon 1156 requires a new act of consent in canonical form, so it is not merely a blessing on an existing situation, though it need not be a ceremonial renewal of vows in front of guests. Where the conditions are met the bishop can instead grant a radical sanation, and that determination belongs to the priest. Tell them plainly that it is ordinary, that the priest handles it, and that they should raise it this week. Do not attempt to diagnose whether their current union is valid.

A couple where one party is unbaptized. Make sure they know the difference between mixed marriage and disparity of cult, and that the second requires a dispensation for validity. Then send them to the priest to confirm which applies. Do not let them leave assuming it is handled.

A couple planning to marry outside a church building. In the Latin Church this requires a dispensation from canonical form or permission for the place, depending on the circumstances, and it is not always granted. Better they hear it tonight than after the deposit is paid.

A couple whose paperwork has stalled. Ask directly whether anyone is stuck. A surprising number of couples are quietly waiting on a baptismal certificate from another country and have told nobody.

Session Goals

1. The group finds in the New Testament that Christians were never free to treat marriage as a purely private arrangement.

2. Every participant can state that consent makes the marriage, and that in the Latin Church the spouses are the ministers.
3. Every participant can state the difference between an impediment and a defect of consent.
4. The group can distinguish mixed marriage from disparity of cult and knows which one affects validity.
5. The objection that sacramental marriage rests on a Latin mistranslation is answered without either dismissing it or overclaiming.
6. Every couple leaves knowing at least one concrete thing they must confirm with their parish this week.

Time Note and Pre-Chosen Cuts

Ninety-minute plan. Opening prayer, 5 minutes. Win questions, 10. Live discovery moment, 14. Build questions 1 through 4, 22. The steelman, 18. Build questions 5 through 7, 15. Send and Live It, 4. Closing prayer, 2.

Seventy-five minute plan. Cut Build question 6 and the Dig Deeper box, and shorten the Win section to one question. Do not cut the impediments and consent distinction; couples need it.

If the room is full of questions about their own cases, which is likely, keep a visible list on paper and tell them the list goes to the priest. This makes the deferral feel like service rather than evasion.

Part 2. Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

OPENING PRAYER

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lord, tonight we are dealing with forms and requirements and words that sound like law, and it would be easy for us to lose you in the middle of it. Remind us why the Church is careful. Remind us that every rule here exists because somebody was once harmed by its absence. Give us patience with the paperwork and reverence for what the paperwork is guarding. Amen.

Win. Getting Started

Open questions. No wrong answers, no answer box. Let every couple speak once before anyone speaks twice.

- A.** What is one thing about the wedding preparation process that has surprised you or annoyed you so far?
- B.** Why do you think the state cares whether people are married? Why would God?

Build. Into the Text

LIVE DISCOVERY MOMENT

Start with the discovery tonight rather than ending with it.

The instruction: find every place in the New Testament where a Christian's marriage is regulated, qualified, or made a matter of the Church's concern rather than purely private choice. Ten minutes, in pairs.

What they will find: 1 Corinthians 7:39, where a widow may marry whom she wishes, only in the Lord. 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, where the apostle gives rulings about a believer married to an unbeliever. Ephesians 5:31-32, where marriage is said to be about Christ and the Church. Hebrews 13:4, where marriage is to be held in honor among all. 1 Timothy 3:2 and 12, where a man's conduct in marriage bears on his fitness for office. Some will find 2 Corinthians 6:14 about being unequally yoked, which is broader than marriage in context; accept it with that qualification.

Then ask: on this evidence, was marriage ever a purely private matter for Christians? Take answers. Then note that St. Ignatius of Antioch, writing early in the second century, tells Christians to marry with the bishop's knowledge. The Church's involvement is not a later invention.

- 1.** The Church says a valid marriage between two baptized persons is by that very fact a sacrament. What follows about two baptized Protestants who marry?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

That they are sacramentally married. There is no separate category of merely natural marriage for the baptized. The Code states it directly (canon 1055 §2).

This usually surprises people, and it is worth letting the surprise land. The Church is not claiming that only Catholic weddings are real.

And what about two unbaptized people? They are really married too, by creation, though not sacramentally.

Their marriage is genuine, binding, and honored by the Church.

2. What makes a marriage: the consent, the ceremony, or the consummation?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

The consent. The Code is explicit that consent makes the marriage and that no human power can supply for it (canon 1057).

Consummation matters for a different question, namely whether a ratified marriage becomes absolutely indissoluble, and Session 9 will explain the distinction. But the marriage exists at the consent.

Practical consequence for the wedding day: the vows are not the emotional high point of a ceremony that has other business. The vows are the business.

3. Who is the minister of this sacrament?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

In the Latin Church, the spouses themselves. They confer the sacrament on each other by their consent. The priest or deacon assists, asks for the consent, and receives it in the name of the Church (CCC 1623).

In the Eastern Churches the priest is the witness of the consent, and his blessing is also necessary for the validity of the sacrament (CCC 1623). It is a good example of one faith expressed through different liturgical and canonical traditions.

Ask the room what changes if the two of them are the ministers. Most couples have been thinking of themselves as the subjects of a ceremony performed on them.

4. If consent makes the marriage, why does the Church require a public form at all?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Because a covenant sworn with God as witness is not private, and because secret marriages produced serious disputes in which one party, usually the man, later denied that consent had ever been given, and the woman and any children bore the cost. The form also gives the Church and the community public certainty about who is married.

The requirement of two witnesses and a priest or deacon (canon 1108) is the Church protecting the weaker party. It is worth framing it that way rather than as bureaucracy.

The Church can dispense from the form for serious reason, which is how a Catholic sometimes validly marries in a non-Catholic spouse's church.

BUILD THEN PRESS: MARRIAGE IS NOT A SACRAMENT, AND THE DOCTRINE RESTS ON A MISTRANSLATION

Build it at full strength.

This is the strongest Protestant argument in the whole study. Build it at its best, with the history included, because your couples will meet a version of it and a weak version will not prepare them.

Ephesians 5:32 says this is a great mystery. The Latin Vulgate rendered that word sacramentum, and Latin

theology later read back into the text a technical meaning the Greek does not carry. The word simply means a hidden thing now revealed, and it is used elsewhere of the Gospel itself, which nobody calls a sacrament. Beyond that, marriage lacks what the other sacraments have: there is no dominical word of institution, no matter and form given by Christ, no promise of grace attached to it in Scripture, and marriage is available to pagans, which is a strange feature for a rite of the New Covenant. The formal list of seven sacraments does not appear until the twelfth century and was not defined until Florence and Trent, which is exactly what we would expect if the number were a later systematization. Luther made this case in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and he made it well: marriage is a holy ordinance of creation, good and God given, and calling it a sacrament confuses the order of creation with the order of redemption.

Then press.

Concede what is true, and concede it without wriggling. There is no institution narrative for marriage. The list of seven was formalized late. *Mysterion* does not by itself mean sacrament, and a Catholic who argues from the Vulgate alone has lost the argument.

Press first on the East. The Eastern Orthodox Churches, which never used the Vulgate, never accepted Latin theological development, and have been out of communion with Rome for most of a millennium, hold marriage to be a mystery and a sacrament, and their rite makes the priest its minister. A Latin translation error in the West cannot explain a Greek East that agrees. This single fact does more damage to the objection than any amount of lexical argument.

Press second on what the Church actually argues. She does not argue from the word. She argues that marriage between the baptized is, by the nature of the case, a real sign of the union of Christ and the Church, that St. Paul says so, and that a sign of that union between two people joined to Christ by baptism does not merely represent grace but conveys it. Late formalization of a list is not evidence against a practice; the canon of Scripture was also formalized late.

Press third on the pagan objection, which cuts the other way. The Church agrees that marriage belongs to creation and is available to everyone. That is exactly why she says it is raised for the baptized rather than created for them. Grace perfects nature rather than replacing it.

Do not overclaim. Do not say Ephesians 5:32 by itself proves seven sacraments. Say that the Church reads Scripture within her tradition and practice, that the practice is very old, and that the Christian East is an independent witness to it.

5. What is the difference between an impediment and a defect of consent?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

An impediment is a condition that makes a person unable to marry validly: a prior bond, insufficient age, close blood relationship, holy orders, a public perpetual vow, or disparity of cult, among others. Some can be dispensed by the bishop and some cannot.

A defect of consent is different. The person could have married, but what they gave was not marital consent. Examples: excluding permanence, excluding children, excluding fidelity, grave lack of discretion or judgment, incapacity to assume the essential obligations, force or fear, or deceit about a quality that gravely disturbs the partnership.

Simple form: impediments are usually found on paper. Defects of consent are found in the heart. The parish paperwork is designed to catch the first. The second concerns what was interior at the moment of consent, calls for truthful self disclosure, and is referred to the priest and, where needed, the tribunal. Session 8 is about attending to it honestly.

6. What is the difference between a mixed marriage and disparity of cult, and why does it matter?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

A mixed marriage is between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic, and it requires the permission of the local ordinary. Disparity of cult is between a Catholic and an unbaptized person, and that is an impediment requiring a dispensation for validity.

The difference matters because one concerns lawfulness and the other concerns whether there is a marriage at all.

In either case the Catholic party promises to do all in his or her power to have the children baptized and raised in the Catholic Church, and the other party is to be made aware of that promise. That last clause is worth stating clearly, because the Church has no interest in a promise the other spouse learns about later.

If anyone in your room is unsure which case they are in, that goes to the priest this week.

DIG DEEPER: CONVALIDATION

If a couple has already married civilly, or outside the Church without the required form or dispensation, the remedy is called convalidation. It is not merely a blessing on an existing situation. Canon 1156 requires a new act of consent in canonical form, because consent is what makes the marriage, though it need not be a ceremonial renewal of vows in front of guests. Where the conditions are met the bishop can instead grant a radical sanation, and that determination belongs to the priest.

It is ordinary, it is common, and the priest handles it. If it applies to anyone in the room, that is a conversation for this week and not a reason for embarrassment.

7. The Church teaches that the sacrament gives grace. What would that actually look like in a marriage, and what does it not mean?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

It means the couple is not attempting Session 4 on their own strength. The grace of the sacrament perfects their love, strengthens their unity, and helps them toward holiness (CCC 1641-1642).

It does not mean the marriage will be easy, that feelings will not change, or that grace operates on people who refuse it. Grace is not magic and it is not a warranty.

Practical form: they will need the sacraments they already have. The Eucharist, confession, prayer, and ordinary Christian life are how spouses keep cooperating with that grace. A couple who stops going to Mass has not lost the bond, but they have stopped drawing on what the bond gives.

COUPLE CONVERSATION (JUST THE TWO OF YOU, NOT THE ROOM)

Just the two of you.

List every document, dispensation, or permission still outstanding for our wedding. Write it down tonight and name who is chasing each one.

Then one harder question. Is there anything either of us has not told the other that a tribunal would consider a quality gravely disturbing the partnership? You do not have to answer out loud right now. But do not carry it to Session 8.

Send. Carrying It Out

Open questions again. No answer boxes.

- Y.** If the two of you are the ministers of this sacrament, what does that change about how you prepare for the day itself?
- Z.** Who taught you what a wedding is? What did they get right?

Live It This Week

- **Take your outstanding list to the parish this week.** Every document, permission, or dispensation still open. Ask the office directly what is missing and what the deadline is.
- **Ask the priest or deacon the one question you wrote down tonight.** Do not carry a canon law question around for six months.
- **Read the vows once, alone, each of you.** Do not discuss them yet. Session 8 is next week and it is the center of this study.
- **Bring your sealed sheet to the next session.** If you have lost it, write a fresh answer tonight, alone, before you hear anything else.

Closing Prayer

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, you did not leave us to invent our own way of coming together. You gave us a Church that guards what she did not make. Give us gratitude for her care, patience with her carefulness, and honesty in everything we are asked to declare. Prepare us for the words we are about to say, and let us not say them lightly.

St. Ignatius of Antioch, pray for us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the church.

Ephesians 5:32

Part 3. Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in the order it appears.

- 1 Corinthians 7:39. Only in the Lord.
- 1 Corinthians 7:12-16. The believer married to an unbeliever.
- Ephesians 5:31-32. The great mystery.
- Hebrews 13:4. Marriage held in honor among all.
- 1 Timothy 3:2, 12 and 1 Timothy 4:1-5. Marriage and office, and the condemnation of those who forbid marriage.
- 2 Corinthians 6:14. Often cited; note that its context is broader than marriage.
- Canons 1055, 1057, 1108. The legal statements of what the Church teaches.

Catechism Paragraphs Used

CCC 1601, 1621-1624, 1625-1632, 1633-1637, 1638-1642. Code of Canon Law, canons 1055, 1057, 1108.

Before Next Session

Bring your sealed sheet. Read the consent questions and vows once, alone, before Session 8.

Session 8. I Do

Movement III. The Consent

Passages: Song of Songs 8:6-7; Matthew 5:33-37; Genesis 1:28; Matthew 19:6; Ruth 1:16-17

Part 1. Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. That each participant compares what they privately thought they were promising against the words the Church will actually ask them to say, and can then state what each part of the consent commits them to.

Catholic Touchstone. Marriage arises from the consent of the parties, freely given, and the consent must be a human act by which the spouses mutually give and receive one another. If the consent is defective in its object, there is no marriage, however beautiful the day was (CCC 1625-1632; canons 1057, 1101).

What You Need to Know

This is the center of the study and the session the sealed sheets have been waiting for. Prepare it more carefully than any other night.

Before the session: get your parish's actual ritual book, or a printed copy of the consent questions and the forms of consent that your parish uses, and work from that text rather than from memory or from a website. English translations have been revised, parishes use different forms of consent, and other countries use different texts. Reading them the exact words they will say is the whole mechanic of tonight, and it only works if the words are right.

THREE QUESTIONS BEFORE ANY VOW IS SPOKEN

In the Roman rite, before the consent itself, the priest or deacon asks the couple a set of questions. In substance they ask whether the couple has come freely and without coercion, whether they are prepared to love and honor each other for as long as they both shall live, and whether they are prepared to accept children lovingly from God and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church. The third question may be omitted when circumstances suggest it, for example when the couple is advanced in years.

Notice what has happened before anyone says I do. The Church has asked, out loud, in front of witnesses, about freedom, permanence, and openness to children. Those are not sentiments. They are the essential properties and ends of marriage, and the questions exist so that nobody can later claim they did not know.

FREE, TOTAL, FAITHFUL, FRUITFUL

Marriage preparation commonly summarizes the consent under four words: free, total, faithful, fruitful. Be honest with your couples that this is a teaching summary rather than a formula from the Church's official texts. It is used because it maps accurately onto what the Church does require.

- **Free.** Consent given under force or grave fear inflicted from outside is invalid (canon 1103). This is why the first question is asked, and it is also why a wedding driven entirely by family pressure or a pregnancy is a genuine pastoral concern rather than a technicality.
- **Total.** The spouses give and receive one another, not a share of themselves. This is why deliberately withholding a part of the person, or marrying while intending to keep an escape available, damages the consent itself.

- **Faithful.** Exclusive, and for life. Consent that positively excludes fidelity or permanence by an act of the will does not produce a marriage (canon 1101 §2).
- **Fruitful.** Open to children. Consent that positively excludes children by an act of the will likewise does not produce a marriage.

Draw the line carefully on the last two. Fearing that you might fail is not excluding. Doubting your own strength is not excluding. A couple that cannot have children is not excluding. Exclusion is a positive act of the will that rules the thing out, and it is not the same as anxiety about it.

THE FORMS OF CONSENT

The Roman rite provides more than one form, and one form uses a question and answer structure that produces the familiar I do. Different parishes and countries use different texts. What is constant is the content: each takes the other as spouse, promises fidelity in good times and bad, in sickness and health, and promises love and honor for life.

Two things to point out from whatever text your parish uses.

- The promises are about what the speaker will do, not about how the speaker will feel. Nobody is asked to promise an emotion.
- The hard conditions are named in advance. Bad times and sickness are written into the promise. Nobody can later say the marriage encountered something the vow did not anticipate.

AFTER THE CONSENT

The priest or deacon receives the consent in the name of the Church and asks God to strengthen it. Rings are blessed and exchanged as a sign of love and fidelity. Later, after the Our Father, comes the nuptial blessing, which is one of the oldest and richest prayers in the Roman liturgy and which most couples never read in advance. Encourage them to read it this week; it will tell them what the Church is actually asking God to do to them.

THE SEALED SHEETS

Session 1 asked each person to write, alone, what they are actually promising on their wedding day. Tonight they open them.

Run the ritual in this order and do not improvise it. First, each person opens their own sheet and reads it silently. Second, each person reads their answer aloud to their fiancé only, in pairs around the room, not to the group. Third, you read the Church's consent questions and the form of consent aloud to the whole room. Fourth, each person turns the sheet over and writes a second answer, alone, in silence, and keeps it.

Give the fourth step at least five minutes of real silence. This is the moment the study is built around.

Do not ask anyone to share either answer with the group. If someone volunteers, let them, and do not comment on the content beyond thanking them.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- Genesis 2:24 stands behind the leaving and cleaving that the consent enacts.
- Genesis 1:28 stands behind the third question, about children.
- Matthew 19:6 stands behind the permanence: what God has joined together, let not man put asunder.
- Ruth 1:16-17 is the great Old Testament model of a binding promise between persons, sworn with God as the guarantor. Note honestly that it is spoken by a daughter in law to her mother in law, not between spouses, which makes it a poor choice for a wedding reading but a fine illustration of covenant speech.

- Matthew 5:33-37, where Jesus tells his disciples to let what they say be simply yes or no, is worth setting beside a wedding vow. The Church does not ask for an oath here. She asks for consent, which is graver still.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: THE CHURCH'S OWN WORDS AT THE WEDDING

Before the consent, the Church asks the couple in front of witnesses whether they have come freely, whether they will love and honor each other for life, and whether they will accept children lovingly from God and raise them in the faith.

Consider what kind of institution asks those questions out loud before allowing the wedding to proceed. She is not decorating a decision already made. She is making sure, publicly, that the thing being consented to is marriage.

The Order of Celebrating Matrimony, the questions before the consent. Note for the leader: a liturgical text, not the voice of a canonized saint. Use your parish's own ritual book for the exact wording.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. THOMAS AQUINAS ON WHAT LOVE ACTUALLY IS

St. Thomas taught that to love is to will the good of another. Not merely to feel warmly toward another, and he does not despise feeling or reduce love to it, but to will their good.

This is why a vow to love is not a promise about emotions and is not dishonest. A person can promise to will another's good for life. Nobody can promise a feeling, and the Church does not ask anyone to.

Summary of his teaching on love, Summa Theologiae I-II, question 26.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. FRANCIS DE SALES ON THE ORDINARY WORK OF IT

St. Francis de Sales taught, in substance, that devotion belongs in the married state as much as in the cloister, and that married people become holy through the actual conditions of their life rather than in spite of them: patience, faithfulness in small things, and the daily work of preferring one another.

He wrote for lay people in the world at a time when spiritual writing largely assumed a monastery. That is why he is worth quoting on a night about vows: he is describing what keeping them looks like on a Wednesday.

Summary of his teaching on the married state in the Introduction to the Devout Life, Part III.

Catechism Connection

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 1625-1632 covers the consent directly: who can marry, the requirement that consent be a free human act, and the Church's insistence on preparation so that the consent is what it appears to be.

CCC 1627 states that consent is the indispensable element that makes the marriage, and that if consent is lacking there is no marriage.

CCC 1628-1629 treats freedom and the consequences of its absence, and is where the Church's practice of declaring nullity is grounded.

CCC 1643-1645 describes the unity, indissolubility, and openness to fertility of conjugal love.

Canon 1101 §2 is the legal statement of exclusion: if either or both parties by a positive act of the will exclude marriage itself, or an essential element or property of marriage, they contract invalidly. Cite this precisely rather than paraphrasing it loosely, because couples hear looser versions and become frightened of their own doubts.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

The sealed guess opens tonight. Run the four step ritual exactly as written in the preparation notes. The order matters: silent reading, then reading to the fiancé only, then the Church's words, then a second answer written in silence and kept.

One Flesh pays off in a new register. The group has watched this verse move through Genesis, Matthew, and Ephesians. Tonight they discover it is about to come out of their own mouths.

They Have No Wine returns in Session 10.

Watch for the couple who go very quiet after the second writing. Sometimes the second answer surfaces something real. Be available afterward, do not chase, and have the priest's availability in your pocket.

IF A COUPLE IS IN AN IRREGULAR SITUATION (LEADER ONLY)

A couple where one is marrying under pressure. Tonight is the night this becomes visible, because the first question the Church asks is about freedom. Watch for a person who hesitates or laughs at that question. Follow up privately, ask an open question, and route it to the priest. Consent given under force or grave fear inflicted from outside is invalid, and the Church would rather find that out now.

A couple where one has privately decided about children. If the second sealed answer or the discussion reveals that one of them intends to exclude children permanently, this is not a preference difference to be negotiated later. It touches the validity of the consent. Do not adjudicate it. Tell them, kindly and clearly, that this must be discussed with the priest before the wedding, and that the Church asks the question out loud precisely so that it is not discovered afterward.

A couple where one is not telling the other something significant. You may have flagged this in Session 2 or Session 7. Tonight is the deadline. Say to the room generally, without looking at anyone, that consent is given to a real person and not to a presented version, and that anything serious being withheld should be said before the vows rather than after. Do not imply that every undisclosed fact touches validity. Canon 1098 concerns deception carried out in order to obtain consent about a quality that can gravely disturb the partnership, and that judgment belongs to the priest and the tribunal.

A pregnancy. Freedom is the question tonight, and a couple marrying primarily because of a pregnancy needs to hear that the Church wants them free. Do not imply the marriage is suspect. Do send them to the priest for a real conversation about freedom.

Session Goals

1. Every participant reads the actual consent questions and form of consent their parish will use.
2. Each person compares their private idea of what they are promising against the Church's words, in writing, before and after.
3. Every participant can name the four qualities of consent and give one concrete example of what excluding each would look like.

4. The group can distinguish fearing failure from excluding an essential property, and nobody leaves frightened by their own ordinary doubts.
5. Every couple knows to read the nuptial blessing before the wedding.

Time Note and Pre-Chosen Cuts

Ninety-minute plan. Opening prayer, 4 minutes. Win questions, 8. The sealed sheet ritual, all four steps, 20. Build questions 1 through 4, 22. Live discovery moment, 12. The steelman and Build questions 5 through 7, 18. Send and Live It, 4. Closing prayer, 2.

Seventy-five minute plan. Cut the Win section to one question, cut the Dig Deeper box, and cut Build question 6. Never shorten the sealed sheet ritual, and never shorten the silence in step four.

Protect the silence. Five minutes of quiet in a room of engaged couples feels like an hour to the leader and like a gift to the participants. Do not fill it.

Part 2. Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

OPENING PRAYER

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lord, tonight we read the words we are going to say to each other in front of you and everyone we love. Do not let us say them lightly, and do not let us say them afraid. Show each of us anything we have been holding back. Give us the freedom to promise everything, because you promised everything first. Amen.

Win. Getting Started

Open questions. No wrong answers, no answer box. Let every couple speak once before anyone speaks twice.

- A.** What is the most serious promise you have ever made, apart from this one? Did you keep it?
- B.** When someone makes you a promise, what makes you believe it?

Build. Into the Text

THE SEALED SHEETS

Run all four steps now, before any teaching. Read the steps aloud so everyone knows what is coming.

One. Each person opens their own sheet and reads it silently.

Two. Each person reads their answer aloud to their fiancé only. Nothing goes to the room.

Three. You now read aloud, from your parish's ritual book, the questions before the consent and the form of consent your parish uses. Read slowly. Read them twice.

Four. Each person turns the sheet over and writes a second answer, alone, in silence. Give five full minutes. They keep both.

Then, and only then, begin the questions below.

- 1.** Without telling us what you wrote, what is the difference between your first answer and your second?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

There is no answer box for this one in the usual sense. Take what comes and do not evaluate it.

What typically emerges: first answers describe a relationship, second answers describe a commitment. First answers say things like being there for each other. Second answers say things like permanence, children, fidelity, and honor.

If someone says their answer did not change, that is fine and may be true. Do not treat it as a failure.

- 2.** Before any vow is spoken, the Church asks three questions in public. What are they asking about?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Freedom, permanence, and openness to children. In substance: have you come freely and without coercion, will you love and honor each other as long as you both shall live, and will you accept children lovingly from God and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church.

Note that the third question may be omitted when circumstances suggest it, for example when a couple is advanced in years, which tells you something important: the Church is asking about the openness of their will, not making a prediction about biology.

Ask the room why the Church asks these out loud and in front of witnesses rather than privately. Because the public questions make the Church's understanding of the commitment unmistakable and invite an honest answer. They do not settle later questions about validity, which turn on evidence.

LIVE DISCOVERY MOMENT

The instruction: here are the three things the Church asks about before the consent. Freedom. Permanence. Openness to children. Find where the Scripture we have read illuminates each one, and be ready to say which session of this study we met it in.

Ten minutes, in pairs, no hints.

What they will find: permanence at Matthew 19:6 and Genesis 2:24, which they met in Sessions 1 and 4. Openness to children at Genesis 1:28, which they met in Session 1. Freedom is the one that takes longer; expect them to reach for the free consent of a covenant, the giving and receiving of persons in Ephesians 5, and possibly Hosea 2:19-20 where the betrothal is a free act on God's side.

Then say this and stop: every question the Church will ask you at the altar is illuminated by something you have already read in this study. Freedom of consent she states in her own law rather than derives from a proof text, so say that plainly if someone presses. She is not adding requirements. She is asking whether you mean what marriage has always been.

3. The consent promises love and honor, and fidelity in good times and bad, in sickness and in health. What is being promised, and what is not?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

What is promised: actions and a disposition of the will. To be true. To love and to honor. To remain.

What is not promised: a feeling. Nobody is asked to swear that they will always feel a certain way, and the Church has never asked that.

St. Thomas Aquinas defines love as willing the good of another. A person can promise that for life. That is why the vow is not dishonest.

Point out the second thing: the hard conditions are named in advance. Bad times and sickness are inside the promise. The vow does not assume a good outcome and then get surprised.

BUILD THEN PRESS: NOBODY CAN HONESTLY PROMISE FIFTY YEARS

Build it at full strength.

Build it well. This is the objection your couples' unmarried friends actually hold, and several people in the room half hold it themselves.

Human beings change. The person you are at twenty six is not the person you will be at fifty six, and neither is your spouse. Promising to love a stranger you have not met yet, on the basis of feelings you cannot control and

circumstances you cannot foresee, is not a serious promise; it is an aspiration dressed as an oath. Worse, treating it as binding traps people in marriages that have become empty or destructive, and the evidence that many marriages end suggests the promise is one that most people cannot keep. The honest thing would be a renewable commitment, seriously meant, revisited as people grow. That is not cynicism about love. It is respect for it.

Then press.

Concede what is true. People do change. Some marriages become destructive, and the Church does not require anyone to remain in danger; separation is permitted and Session 13 covers it. And it is true that a promise about feelings would be dishonest.

Press first on what is actually promised. Read the words again. Be true. Love and honor. Nothing in the vow is a prediction about emotion. It commits the will, and the will is exactly the faculty that can be committed.

Press second on the renewable alternative, and press hard, because it is weaker than it looks. A conditional promise changes the thing being received. If the other person can leave when the terms stop suiting them, then what you have been given is access, not a self. The very security that makes it possible to be fully known, which is where this study began in Genesis 2:25, depends on the promise being unconditional. A renewable marriage is a different object, not a more honest version of the same one.

Press third on the source of the confidence. Christians do not claim to be able to keep this promise on their own strength. That is precisely what the sacrament is for (Session 7). The disciples in Matthew 19 said it would be better not to marry, and Jesus did not answer by telling them it was easier than it looked.

Do not overclaim. Do not suggest that a couple who divorced simply failed to try. Many were left. Some were in danger. The Church's teaching is about the bond, not a ranking of people, and saying so is part of answering the objection honestly.

4. Canon law says that if someone by a positive act of the will excludes marriage itself, or an essential element or property of marriage, they contract invalidly. What is the difference between excluding something and being afraid of it?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Excluding is a decision of the will that rules the thing out. Standing at the altar having privately decided that this will end if it stops working, or that there will be no children ever, or that fidelity is negotiable.

Being afraid is not excluding. Doubting your own strength is not excluding. Hoping to delay children for a time, for serious reasons, is not excluding, and Session 11 will treat that properly.

Say this clearly, because it matters pastorally: ordinary anxiety about whether you will be good at this does not endanger your marriage. A private reservation does.

COUPLE CONVERSATION (JUST THE TWO OF YOU, NOT THE ROOM)

Just the two of you, and this is the most serious one in the study.

Read your second answer to each other. Both of you.

Then, each of you answer out loud: is there anything I am privately reserving? Anything I have decided in my own mind that I have not said to you? Say it now, or make a plan tonight for when you will say it, this week, before another session passes.

DIG DEEPER: THE NUPTIAL BLESSING

After the Our Father in the wedding Mass comes the nuptial blessing, one of the oldest prayers in the Roman liturgy. Most couples hear it for the first time on the day.

Read it in advance. It tells you what the Church is actually asking God to do to you: to bind you in mutual affection and peace, to give the wife a share in the blessings promised to the holy women of Scripture, to give the husband strength and integrity, and to bring them both at last to the kingdom.

Ask your priest for a copy this week and read it out loud together once before the wedding.

5. The Church calls the wedding day the giving and receiving of persons. What is the difference between giving your love to someone and giving yourself?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Love can be given in portions and withdrawn. A self cannot. That is why the Church speaks of the spouses mutually giving and receiving one another rather than exchanging affection.

And that is why the promise has to be unconditional to be the thing it claims to be. A conditional gift of self is not a smaller gift of self. It is a different kind of thing entirely.

Close here: next week we will look at what the Church does when it turns out that this was never actually given.

Send. Carrying It Out

Open questions again. No answer boxes.

- Y. What do you now know about your wedding day that you did not know two hours ago?
- Z. Who do you need to tell that you have decided to mean these words?

Live It This Week

- **Keep both sides of your sheet.** Put it somewhere you will find it on your first anniversary. Do not throw it away.
- **Say the reserved thing.** If you named a private reservation in the Couple Conversation, say it out loud to your fiancé this week. If it is serious, bring it to the priest together.
- **Ask for the nuptial blessing text** and read it aloud together once this week.
- **Read the consent aloud, once, to each other, in private.** Not as a rehearsal. Just to hear yourself say the words before the day arrives.

Closing Prayer

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, we have read the words. They are heavier than we thought and they are better than we hoped. Give us the freedom to mean them entirely, without reservation and without fear. Where we have been holding something back, give us the courage to say it out loud this week. And on the day, when we stand in front of you and say these things, give us the grace to know what we are doing.

Our Lady, Queen of Families, pray for us. St. Joseph, most just, pray for us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death.

Song of Songs 8:6

Part 3. Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in the order it appears.

- The Order of Celebrating Matrimony: the questions before the consent, the forms of consent, and the nuptial blessing. Use your parish's ritual book.
- Song of Songs 8:6-7. The memory verse and the closing image.
- Genesis 1:28; Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:6. Found by the group in the discovery moment.
- Hosea 2:19-20. Often found by the group when looking for freedom of consent.
- Matthew 5:33-37. Let what you say be simply yes or no, read beside the wedding consent.
- Ruth 1:16-17. Covenant speech. Note that it is spoken to a mother in law, not a spouse.
- Canon 1101 §2 and canon 1103. The legal statements on exclusion and on force or fear.

Catechism Paragraphs Used

CCC 1625-1632, 1627, 1628-1629, 1643-1645. Code of Canon Law, canons 1057, 1101 §2, 1103.

Before Next Session

Read 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 before Session 9, and notice which cases St. Paul treats differently from each other.

Session 9. What God Has Joined

Movement III. The Consent

Passages: 1 Corinthians 7:10-16; Matthew 19:6-9; Mark 10:9; Romans 7:2-3

Part 1. Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. That the group discovers in 1 Corinthians 7 that St. Paul himself distinguishes between cases, and can then state accurately what a declaration of nullity is, what it is not, and how the Church treats those whose marriages have ended.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church cannot dissolve a ratified and consummated sacramental marriage. She can judge that a particular marriage never came into existence, and she can dissolve certain marriages that are not ratified and consummated. These are different acts, and confusing them produces most of the misunderstanding on this subject (canons 1141-1143; CCC 1629).

What You Need to Know

This is the session with the most misinformation attached to it, inside the Church and outside. Your couples have heard that annulments are Catholic divorce, that they make children illegitimate, that they cost thousands of dollars, and that the divorced are excommunicated. All four are false, and two of them were commonly believed by their own grandparents.

Prepare this one from the sources rather than from memory. And decide in advance that you will say the honest thing about the criticisms as well as the false thing.

THREE DIFFERENT ACTS, KEPT DISTINCT

- **A declaration of nullity** is a judgment that a particular marriage was never valid, because consent, capacity, or form was defective from the beginning. It is a finding about the past, not a dissolution.
- **A dissolution** actually ends a real marriage bond. The Church claims this power only in limited cases, and never for a marriage that is both ratified, meaning sacramental, and consummated (canon 1141).
- **A civil divorce** is an act of the state concerning civil effects. It does not touch the bond. The Catechism recognizes that it may be the only way to secure legal rights, the care of children, or the protection of inheritance (CCC 2383). Where safety is the issue, the ground is the separation law, canons 1151 to 1153.

WHAT THE CHURCH CAN DISSOLVE

Be accurate here, because most Catholics do not know these exist.

- **A ratified but non-consummated marriage** can be dissolved by the Roman Pontiff for a just cause (canon 1142). This surprises people, and it follows from the logic the group has been building: the one flesh union is what makes the bond absolutely unbreakable.
- **The Pauline privilege** (canon 1143) applies where two unbaptized people were married, one is baptized, and the unbaptized party departs or will not live peacefully. The marriage is dissolved in favor of the faith when the new marriage is contracted. This is drawn directly from 1 Corinthians 7:12-15, and your group will find it there tonight before you name it.

- **Dissolution in favor of the faith**, sometimes called the Petrine privilege, is granted by the Pope in certain cases involving a party who was never baptized. Describe it in general terms; the norms governing it are technical and are handled by the diocese and the Holy See.

GROUNDINGS FOR NULLITY, IN PLAIN LANGUAGE

Group them so the room can hold them.

- **Defects of consent.** Grave lack of discretion of judgment about the essential rights and duties of marriage, or an inability to assume the essential obligations for reasons of a psychic nature (canon 1095). Exclusion of permanence, fidelity, children, or marriage itself by a positive act of the will (canon 1101). Force or grave fear from outside (canon 1103). Deception carried out in order to obtain consent, concerning a quality of the other party that by its nature can gravely disturb the partnership (canon 1098).
- **Impediments.** A prior bond, disparity of cult without dispensation, and the others met in Session 7.
- **Defect of form.** A Catholic who married outside the required form without dispensation. These cases are often straightforward and quickly handled.

HOW THE PROCESS ACTUALLY WORKS NOW

A petition is submitted, usually through the parish. The other party has a right to be notified and to participate. The diocesan tribunal, through the competent judge or judges, examines testimony and any expert evidence; a defender of the bond argues for the validity of the marriage; and a decision is issued on specific grounds. The judicial vicar directs the tribunal and may himself sit as a judge.

Two reforms from 2015 are worth knowing. The requirement that every affirmative decision be confirmed by a second court was removed, and a briefer process before the diocesan bishop was created for cases where nullity is evident. Episcopal conferences were asked to ensure, insofar as possible, that the process be free, while preserving just remuneration for tribunal workers, and many dioceses now charge nothing.

Say plainly what a declaration is not. It is not a statement that the relationship was worthless, that the spouses were insincere, or that the children are illegitimate. Children conceived or born of a valid or putative marriage are legitimate in the Church's law, a putative marriage being one celebrated in good faith by at least one party (canon 1137).

THE DIVORCED, AND THE DIVORCED AND REMARRIED

Distinguish two situations and do not blur them.

- **Divorced and not remarried.** No automatic canonical bar to the sacraments arises from being divorced, and the Catechism treats separated spouses who remain faithful with evident sympathy (CCC 1649, 1651). As with any grave sin, a person who unjustly destroyed a valid marriage has something to bring to confession; that is a different point from the myth that divorce itself excludes anyone. If someone in your room believes their divorced mother cannot receive communion, correct it tonight.
- **Divorced and civilly remarried without a declaration of nullity.** The Church holds that this situation objectively contradicts the union signified by the Eucharist, and that such persons are not admitted to Eucharistic communion while it persists (CCC 1650). They are not excommunicated, they are urged to participate in the life of the Church, and where the couple cannot separate for serious reasons, for example the raising of children, the Church has spoken of living in complete continence (Familiaris Consortio 84).

More recent magisterial teaching, particularly *Amoris Laetitia*, has emphasized accompaniment, discernment, and the examination of individual situations, and its application has been interpreted with some variation among bishops. Represent this honestly: the doctrine of indissolubility is not in question, the

pastoral application of the discipline in individual cases has been the subject of real discussion, and a person in that situation should speak with their pastor rather than rely on a study leader's summary. Say that last part out loud.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- Matthew 19:6 and Mark 10:9 give the principle: what God has joined together, let not man put asunder.
- 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 gives the apostolic ruling for two believers, presented as from the Lord.
- 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 gives a different ruling for a mixed case, presented explicitly as the apostle's own, and is the seed of the Pauline privilege.
- Romans 7:2-3 states that a wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives, which St. Paul uses as an illustration of something else entirely, and which is therefore good evidence about what he simply assumed.
- The prophets of Session 3 stand behind all of this: God does not treat a broken covenant as an ended one.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN FISHER AND THE PRICE OF A MARRIAGE CASE

St. John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, was executed in 1535 for refusing the oath at the center of the same crisis that killed St. Thomas More. He had defended the validity of the king's marriage when nearly the entire English hierarchy found a way not to.

Tell your couples the detail that matters. He was the only English bishop who publicly and consistently opposed the king's cause, and the only one executed for it. Whatever else this session is about, it is about a Church that has historically paid for saying that a marriage was valid when powerful people needed it not to be.

Historical summary. Fisher was tried and executed in 1535 for refusing the oath required under the Acts of Succession and Supremacy.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN PAUL II ON THOSE IN A SECOND UNION

St. John Paul II taught that the divorced and remarried belong to the Church, that pastors and the community must care for them so that they do not consider themselves separated from her, and that they should be encouraged to hear the word of God, attend Mass, pray, and raise their children in the faith.

He also reaffirmed that they are not admitted to Eucharistic communion while the situation persists, and spoke of the case of those who for serious reasons cannot separate and undertake to live in complete continence.

Both halves of that are his. Quoting only one of them misrepresents him.

Summary of his teaching in Familiaris Consortio, section 84.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: THE CHURCH REFORMING HER OWN COURTS

In 2015 Pope Francis reformed the process for judging nullity: the requirement that an affirmative decision be confirmed by a second court was removed, a briefer process before the diocesan bishop was created for cases of evident nullity, and episcopal conferences were asked to ensure, insofar as possible, a free process, while preserving just remuneration for tribunal workers, so that cost would not bar access.

The stated reason is worth repeating to a room that has heard the cynical version: that the faithful should not be kept waiting for years by the structures meant to serve them.

Mitis Iudex Dominus Iesus, 2015. Note for the leader: a papal legal document, not the voice of a canonized saint.

Catechism Connection

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 1629 states that when the Church, after examination, declares that a marriage never existed, the parties are free to marry, though they must fulfil the natural obligations of a previous union.

CCC 2382-2383 distinguishes the Church's teaching on divorce from the recognition that civil divorce may be tolerated where it is the only way to secure certain legal rights, the care of children, or the protection of inheritance. Where a spouse or child is in danger, the relevant law is the separation law, canons 1151 to 1153.

CCC 2386 is the paragraph on the innocent victim of a divorce, who has not contravened the moral law. Have it ready and use it out loud.

CCC 1649 treats separation while the bond remains, and the community's duty toward those living it. **CCC 1651** is where the Church states that they are not separated from her.

CCC 1650-1651 treats the situation of the divorced and civilly remarried, including the reasons they are not admitted to Eucharistic communion and the Church's insistence that they are not separated from her.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

One Flesh resolves in its legal form tonight. The reason a ratified but non-consummated marriage can be dissolved, and a consummated one cannot, is that the one flesh union completes the sign. If someone in the room makes that connection unprompted, the thread has done its work.

The Bridegroom returns quietly: God does not treat a broken covenant as an ended one, and neither does his Church.

Watch for the person who has been waiting for this session since Session 4. Somebody in your room has a parent, a sibling, or a past of their own attached to this material. Do not single them out. Do follow up privately this week.

IF A COUPLE IS IN AN IRREGULAR SITUATION (LEADER ONLY)

A participant currently in a nullity process. Do not ask about the grounds and do not ask how it is going in front of others. If they raise it, be warm and brief. Never speculate about the outcome, and never suggest that a favorable decision is likely, however sympathetic the story.

A participant whose petition was denied. This is the hardest case in the room and it does happen. Do not relitigate it, do not suggest they try another diocese, and do not imply the tribunal was wrong. Tell them plainly that they are not outside the Church, connect them with the priest, and make sure they know about CCC 1649.

A couple who assumed the process was a formality. Some couples set a date before the case is resolved. Say clearly that no date should be set until a declaration is issued, and that this is not a matter on which the parish can make exceptions.

Someone who says a family member was told they could never receive communion again because

they are divorced. Correct it. Being divorced does not bar anyone from the sacraments. Remarriage without a declaration of nullity is the situation the discipline concerns. That distinction has been badly taught for decades and your room may be able to fix it in one family this week.

Session Goals

1. The group finds in 1 Corinthians 7 that St. Paul himself distinguishes cases, before anyone explains the Pauline privilege to them.
2. Every participant can state the difference between a declaration of nullity and a dissolution, and between both and a civil divorce.
3. Every participant can name at least three grounds on which a marriage may be found null.
4. Nobody leaves believing that annulment makes children illegitimate, that being divorced bars a person from communion, or that the process requires money.
5. The criticism that annulments function as Catholic divorce is answered honestly, including the parts of it that are fair.

Time Note and Pre-Chosen Cuts

Ninety-minute plan. Opening prayer, 4 minutes. Win questions, 8. Live discovery moment, 15. Build questions 1 through 4, 22. The steelman, 18. Build questions 5 through 7, 16. Send and Live It, 4. Closing prayer, 3.

Seventy-five minute plan. Cut the Dig Deeper box and Build question 6. Keep the discovery moment and keep the steelman.

A pacing warning. This session generates specific personal questions faster than any other. Keep a list, defer them to the priest by name, and do not let one case consume the evening.

Part 2. Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

OPENING PRAYER

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lord, tonight we are talking about marriages that ended and about people we love. Keep us from cruelty and keep us from carelessness. Give us clear minds about what your Church teaches, and soft hearts toward everyone it touches. For anyone here carrying a wound from this, be near them tonight. Amen.

Win. Getting Started

Open questions. No wrong answers, no answer box. Let every couple speak once before anyone speaks twice.

- A.** What have you heard about annulments, before tonight, from anyone at all? Say it even if you suspect it was wrong.
- B.** When have you seen a rule applied well, in a way that actually protected somebody?

Build. Into the Text

LIVE DISCOVERY MOMENT

Start here. Do not define anything first.

The instruction: read 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 carefully and answer two questions in pairs, twelve minutes.

One. How many different situations does St. Paul address, and what does he say about each?

Two. Who does he say each ruling comes from?

What they will find: in verses 10 and 11 he addresses the married, says the charge is not his but the Lord's, and rules that a wife should not separate, and if she does she must remain single or be reconciled. Then in verse 12 he says to the rest I say, not the Lord, and addresses a believer married to an unbeliever: do not divorce them if they consent to live together. And in verse 15 he says that if the unbelieving partner desires to separate, let it be so, and that the brother or sister is not bound.

Then ask the question that matters: the same apostle who said a wife who separates must remain single now says a believer in a different situation is not bound. What is he distinguishing?

Let them work it out. They will get close to it: the two cases are not the same kind of marriage. Only then name the Pauline privilege, and tell them that the Church's law on this comes from the passage they just read (canon 1143).

- 1.** A declaration of nullity and a divorce both end with two people free to marry. What is the actual difference?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

A divorce says a marriage existed and now is over. A declaration of nullity says that after examination, the Church judges that a marriage never came into existence, because consent, capacity, or canonical form was defective at the beginning, or because an impediment such as a prior bond stood in the way.

The difference is not cosmetic. One claims a power to dissolve; the other claims to have discovered a fact about the past. The Church says she has no power to do the first, for a ratified and consummated marriage (canon 1141).

Push the room on this: is that a real distinction or a convenient one? Take the objection seriously. It is exactly the steelman coming up.

2. On what grounds could a marriage be found null? Try to name as many as you can before we list them.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Group them in three families.

Defects of consent: grave lack of discretion of judgment, incapacity to assume the essential obligations for reasons of a psychic nature (canon 1095), exclusion of permanence, fidelity, children, or marriage itself (canon 1101), force or grave fear (canon 1103), and deception carried out in order to obtain consent, about a quality that by its nature can gravely disturb the partnership (canon 1098).

Impediments: a prior bond, disparity of cult without dispensation, and the others from Session 7.

Defect of form: a Catholic who married outside the required form without dispensation.

Note what almost all of these have in common. They are about what happened before and during the wedding, not about what happened afterward. That is the whole logic of nullity.

3. The Church says she can dissolve some marriages but not others. Which ones, and why those?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

She cannot dissolve a marriage that is both ratified, meaning sacramental between two baptized persons, and consummated (canon 1141).

She can dissolve a ratified but non-consummated marriage, by act of the Pope for a just cause (canon 1142). A natural marriage is dissolved under the Pauline privilege by the fact that the baptized party contracts a new marriage once the conditions of canon 1143 are met, the Church verifying those conditions rather than performing a discretionary act. Certain marriages may also be dissolved in favor of the faith where one party was never baptized.

Ask why consummation would matter. Bring them back to Genesis 2:24 and to Session 6. The one flesh union completes the sign of Christ and the Church. Where the sign is complete, the Church has nothing left to act on.

BUILD THEN PRESS: ANNULMENTS ARE CATHOLIC DIVORCE WITH BETTER PAPERWORK

Build it at full strength.

Build it hard and do not flinch. This is the single most common objection your couples will hear, and a defensive answer confirms it.

The Church says she cannot dissolve marriages, and then grants tens of thousands of declarations a year. For decades the United States, with a small fraction of the world's Catholics, produced a large share of the world's annulments, which is difficult to explain by anything other than local practice. The grounds have expanded over time, particularly the psychological grounds, to the point where a sufficiently thorough account of any

couple's immaturity at the time of the wedding could support a case. Prominent and wealthy Catholics have received declarations after long marriages with several children, and ordinary people have watched. The recent reforms made the process faster and removed the automatic review by a second court, which is exactly what a body wishing to grant more of them would do. So the charge is not that the distinction between nullity and dissolution is unintelligible. It is that the distinction has become a formality that permits the Church to keep her doctrine while behaving, in practice, like everyone else.

Then press.

Concede first, and concede the real parts. The volume disparity was real and was criticized inside the Church, by bishops and by Rome, not only by outsiders. Tribunals can and do err, since a declaration is a human judgment on evidence and not an infallible statement about a soul. And scandal caused by prominent cases is a fair complaint.

Press first on what the distinction actually does. It is not rhetorical. It changes what must be proven. In a nullity case nobody asks whether the marriage failed; they ask what happened at the moment of consent, which is why cases turn on evidence about the wedding and the period before it. A tribunal that found a marriage had become intolerable would have to rule against the petitioner. That is a real constraint and it produces real denials.

Press second on the direction of the reforms. Speed is not laxity. The reforms removed a mandatory second review that had originally been introduced to stop abuses in a particular era, and replaced it with a right of appeal that any party or the defender of the bond may exercise. The defender of the bond, whose job is to argue for validity, was not abolished. And the push toward gratuity, addressed to episcopal conferences and qualified by the duty to pay tribunal workers justly, cuts against the charge that money buys results.

Press third on the alternative. If the Church abandoned the process, the outcome would not be fewer broken marriages. It would be no mechanism for a person who was forced into a wedding at nineteen, or deceived about a sterilization, or married to someone incapable of consent, to have that recognized. The process exists because those cases are real.

Do not overclaim. Do not tell the room that the numbers were fine, that no tribunal has ever been lax, or that the psychological grounds have never been stretched. Say that the doctrine binds the Church and that her practice is judged by it, which is a standard she has publicly set for herself.

4. If a marriage is declared null, what does that say about the relationship, and about the children?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

About the relationship: nothing dismissive. It does not say the love was fake, that the spouses were insincere, or that the years did not happen. It says that what the Church requires for a marriage bond was not present at the beginning.

About the children: children conceived or born of a valid or putative marriage are legitimate in the Church's law (canon 1137), a putative marriage being one celebrated in good faith by at least one party. And the natural obligations toward a former spouse and toward children remain and must be fulfilled (CCC 1629). Say this plainly, because the false version has caused real pain in families your couples know.

5. Can a divorced Catholic receive communion?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Yes. Being divorced creates no automatic canonical bar to the sacraments, and the Catechism treats separated

spouses who remain faithful with evident sympathy (CCC 1649, 1651). As with any grave sin, someone who unjustly destroyed a valid marriage has something to bring to confession, which is a different point from the myth that divorce itself excludes a person.

The situation the discipline concerns is a person who has divorced and civilly remarried without a declaration of nullity. The Church holds that this objectively contradicts the union signified by the Eucharist and does not admit such persons to communion while it persists (CCC 1650). They are not excommunicated and are urged to remain part of the life of the Church.

Add the honest note: more recent teaching has emphasized accompaniment and the discernment of individual situations, and its application has been interpreted with some variation among bishops. The doctrine of indissolubility is not in question. Anyone actually in that situation should speak with their pastor rather than with a study leader, and you should say those exact words.

DIG DEEPER: WHY THE TRIBUNAL ASKS SUCH PERSONAL QUESTIONS

People who go through the process are often surprised by how far back the questions reach: dating, family background, what each party said and believed before the wedding, who advised them, what they intended about children.

That is because the question under examination is the consent, and consent is invisible. The only way to reach it is through the circumstances that surrounded it.

For your couples this has a forward looking use. Everything a tribunal would one day ask about is something they can attend to now, in Session 8's language: freedom, honesty, capacity, and knowing what they mean.

COUPLE CONVERSATION (JUST THE TWO OF YOU, NOT THE ROOM)

Just the two of you.

Is there anyone in either of our families whose situation we have quietly misunderstood, or judged, because we did not know what the Church actually teaches? Name them.

Is there anything at all in either of our histories that we have not disclosed to the priest preparing us? If yes, when this week will we do it?

Send. Carrying It Out

Open questions again. No answer boxes.

Y. What is one thing you can now correct, kindly, when it comes up at a family gathering?

Z. Who in your life needs to hear that the Church has not written them off?

Live It This Week

- **Correct one false belief this week**, gently, in a real conversation. Most families carry at least one of the four myths from tonight.
- **Call the person you thought of.** The divorced aunt, the remarried cousin, the friend whose marriage ended. Do not bring up theology. Just call them.

- **Disclose anything outstanding to the priest.** If the Couple Conversation surfaced something, book the appointment this week.
- **Read 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 before Session 10,** and note what St. Paul says the body is for.

Closing Prayer

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, you said that what God has joined, no one should separate, and you meant it. Give your Church the courage to keep saying it and the tenderness to say it to real people. For everyone we know whose marriage has ended, and for their children, we ask your healing. Keep us from judging what we have not lived. And prepare us so carefully that we mean every word we are about to say.

St. John Fisher, pray for us. St. Thomas More, pray for us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

Matthew 19:8

Part 3. Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in the order it appears.

- 1 Corinthians 7:10-16. The session's discovery text.
- Matthew 19:6-9 and Mark 10:9. The principle.
- Romans 7:2-3. What St. Paul assumed while arguing about something else.
- Genesis 2:24. Behind the significance of consummation.
- Canons 1141, 1142, 1143. What can and cannot be dissolved.
- Canons 1095, 1098, 1101, 1103. The principal grounds concerning consent.
- 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. Assigned reading before Session 10.

Catechism Paragraphs Used

CCC 1629, 1649, 1650-1651, 2382-2383, 2386. Code of Canon Law, canons 1095, 1098, 1101, 1103, 1141-1143.

Before Next Session

Read 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 before Session 10. Note what St. Paul says the body is for.

Session 10. The Language of the Body

Movement IV. The Body

Passages: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8; Romans 12:1; Genesis 2:24-25

Part 1. Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. That the group finds Genesis 2:24 quoted in an unexpected place in 1 Corinthians 6 and works out for itself why St. Paul thinks the body cannot be a neutral instrument.

Catholic Touchstone. The body is not a possession the person happens to own and may lend out. It expresses the person. Chastity is the successful integration of sexuality within the person, not the suppression of it, and it is asked of everyone, married and unmarried alike (CCC 2332, 2337, 2348-2350).

What You Need to Know

Tonight is the session where the leader is most tempted to be either soft or harsh, and both are failures. A large share of engaged couples presenting for marriage preparation are already living together or already sleeping together. They know what the Church teaches. What they have usually never heard is why, in terms that treat them as adults.

Decide before the session that you will not shame anyone and you will not blur anything. Those are compatible. The whole session is an argument that the Church's position follows from what the body is, and an argument can be made warmly.

THE STRANGEST QUOTATION OF GENESIS 2:24 IN THE BIBLE

In 1 Corinthians 6:16, St. Paul is arguing against men visiting prostitutes, and he quotes Genesis 2:24: the two shall become one flesh. Sit with how odd that is. He applies the marriage verse to a transaction that nobody involved regarded as a marriage.

His logic is the heart of tonight. The bodily act means something whether or not the participants intend it to. If a purely commercial encounter still makes one flesh, then the body is not a neutral instrument that carries whatever meaning we assign to it. It has a language of its own, and we can speak that language truthfully or falsely, but we cannot switch it off.

Your group can find this themselves. It is the fourth time Genesis 2:24 has appeared in this study and by now they should be able to spot it.

WHAT THE BODY IS FOR, ACCORDING TO THE PASSAGE

Walk through the claims in order, because St. Paul stacks them.

- The body is not meant for immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body (6:13).
- Your bodies are members of Christ (6:15). This is not a metaphor about attitude; it is a claim about what baptism did.
- Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you (6:19).
- You are not your own; you were bought with a price (6:19-20).

That last sentence is the memory verse and it is the whole argument in miniature. The modern case for sexual autonomy rests on the premise that my body is mine. St. Paul denies the premise, and he denies it on the grounds of the cross rather than on the grounds of rules.

CHASTITY IS NOT WHAT MOST PEOPLE THINK IT IS

The Catechism defines chastity as the successful integration of sexuality within the person (CCC 2337), and describes the apprenticeship in self-mastery at CCC 2339. Notice that word: integration, not suppression. The virtue is not the absence of desire but the ordering of it, which is why chastity is asked of married people too, in a different form.

St. Thomas Aquinas placed chastity under temperance, whose work is to order an appetite toward the good rather than to destroy it. This is worth saying to a room that half suspects the Church regards sex as a regrettable concession.

And say the positive thing outright: the Church's teaching on sex is one of the highest views of the body held by anyone. She thinks it means so much that she will not permit it to be said casually.

THE NUPTIAL MEANING OF THE BODY

The vocabulary comes from St. John Paul II's catecheses. The claim is straightforward: the body has a capacity to express love as a gift of the whole person, and that capacity is what makes the marital act what it is.

Put it in the language of Session 8. The vows say: I give you all of myself, permanently, exclusively, and I am open to what comes. The marital act says the same thing without words. When the body says that sentence and the will has not yet said it, the body is saying something that is not yet true.

That is the actual Catholic argument about sex before marriage, and it is not about rules or risk. It is about telling the truth with your body.

COHABITATION, HANDLED WITHOUT CHEATING

Be careful and be honest, because this is where leaders reach for arguments that will not hold.

Do not build your case on social science claiming that living together raises the risk of divorce. Research on the so called cohabitation effect is genuinely contested, findings have shifted as cohabitation has become common, and a couple who later reads a study that contradicts you will conclude that the whole session was propaganda. Say plainly that the data is disputed and that the Church's position does not rest on it.

The Church's actual argument is the one above: the body speaks, and a shared bed says what has not yet been sworn. There is a second and more practical point that couples find persuasive: it is very hard to test freedom while living as though the question is settled. Session 8 asked whether they came freely. A couple whose lease, furniture, and finances have merged has fewer degrees of freedom in that question than they think.

A CONCRETE PATH, BECAUSE OTHERWISE THE TEACHING IS ABSTRACT

Couples who are already living together will ask what to do, and you must have an answer that is not simply move out tonight.

- The ideal, where it is possible, is separate residences until the wedding. Many couples find this easier than they expected once they name a date.
- Where separate housing is genuinely not possible, because of finances, a lease, or children, the ordinary pastoral counsel is to live in continence, with separate sleeping arrangements, and to say so honestly to the priest preparing them.
- In either case: confession, and a plan rather than an intention. Intentions do not survive Friday night. Plans do.

And say the pastoral thing clearly: cohabitation is not by itself a canonical impediment or an automatic bar to marrying, and nobody here is being graded. Do not promise that no wedding will ever be affected; the priest preparing them may have things to raise, and honesty with him is the point. Session 8 already covered what actually threatens consent, and this is not on that list.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- Genesis 2:24-25 is the foundation, and it is quoted in tonight's text. Fourth appearance in this study.
- Genesis 3:7, where shame enters and the covering begins. The body is still the same body; what changed is our ability to be seen.
- The prophets of Session 3 use bodily infidelity as the image of covenant infidelity, which only works if the body means something.
- 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8 is among the earliest surviving Christian instructions on sexual holiness and is remarkably direct.
- Romans 12:1 asks for bodies presented as a living sacrifice, which places the whole discussion under worship rather than under regulation.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. AUGUSTINE ON WANTING IT AND NOT WANTING IT

In his Confessions, St. Augustine describes praying, in his younger years, for chastity and for continence, and asking God to grant it but not yet. He is honest that part of him was afraid the prayer would be answered.

He is the patron voice for this session because he does not pretend the struggle was small, and because he came out the other side. Anyone in the room who has been quietly assuming that the Church's teaching is written by people who never wanted anything should meet him.

Summary of his account in Confessions, Book VIII.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN PAUL II ON USING A PERSON

Before he was pope, St. John Paul II argued that a person is the kind of being who may never be treated merely as a means to an end, and that this holds inside a relationship as much as outside one. The opposite of love, in his account, is not hatred but use.

Applied to a couple: the question is not only whether both parties agreed. It is whether each is being received as a person or employed as a source of something.

Summary of his argument in Love and Responsibility.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. THOMAS AQUINAS ON ORDERING AN APPETITE

St. Thomas treats chastity as a part of temperance, whose work is to order an appetite toward the good rather than to eliminate it. On his account the chaste person is not the person with the weakest desires but the person whose desires have been ordered by reason toward the true good.

Say this to a room that suspects the Church of hostility to the body. She is not asking anyone to despise desire. She is asking that desire be purified and ordered by reason and love, and wanted truthfully.

Summary of his treatment of chastity, Summa Theologiae II-II, question 151.

Catechism Connection

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 2332 states that sexuality affects all aspects of the person, in the unity of body and soul, and concerns especially affectivity, the capacity to love and to procreate, and the aptitude for bonds of communion.

CCC 2337 defines chastity as the successful integration of sexuality within the person and the inner unity of the person in body and spirit. **CCC 2339** is where the Catechism describes the apprenticeship in self-mastery.

CCC 2348-2350 states that all the baptized are called to chastity in the form proper to their state, and that those engaged to be married are called to live it in continence, discovering in that time a mutual respect and an apprenticeship in fidelity.

CCC 2390 addresses the free union, meaning a sexual union without public and permanent commitment, and identifies the underlying problem as a refusal or an inability to commit, and speaks of the fragility of a union that has no public and permanent character.

CCC 1632 connects preparation for marriage with the freedom of the consent, which is the practical link to Session 8.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

One Flesh reappears in the strangest place in the study. Wait for the group to notice that Genesis 2:24 is being quoted about a prostitute. That recognition is the engine of tonight and it should come from them.

They Have No Wine returns. This is where a couple's own resources run out first, and running out is not a character verdict. Use the phrase out loud tonight: this is the first place most couples discover they have no wine.

The Bridegroom is quiet.

Leader restraint. Do not turn a general session into a private correction of the couple you know is cohabiting. Teach the room. Follow up individually later if it is right to do so.

IF A COUPLE IS IN AN IRREGULAR SITUATION (LEADER ONLY)

A couple who are living together. Assume there is at least one and possibly several. Do not look at them, do not build the session around them, and do not ask anyone to disclose anything. Give the concrete path from the front, to the whole room, in a matter of fact tone, and make sure it includes the case where moving out is not possible. Then be available afterward without hovering.

A couple who are sleeping together but living apart. They will often assume tonight is not about them. Make sure the teaching is about what the body says rather than about addresses.

A couple who have been chaste and are visibly proud of it. Watch for contempt. Say something in the room about how this virtue is not a scoreboard, and that the Church asks chastity of everyone in every state including within marriage.

Pornography. It will be present in your room whether or not it is mentioned. Handle it in the Dig Deeper box, without drama, with a real path: confession, honesty with the fiancé, and practical accountability. If someone discloses a compulsive pattern, route them to the priest and to professional help, and note kindly that this is the kind of thing a fiancé should know before consent rather than after.

Any disclosure of past abuse. If tonight surfaces a history of sexual abuse, receive it, do not probe, and route to the priest and to a qualified counselor. Do not attempt to counsel it yourself, and do not treat it as a chastity

issue. It is not one.

Session Goals

1. The group discovers Genesis 2:24 quoted in 1 Corinthians 6 and can explain why St. Paul uses it there.
2. Every participant can state the Catholic argument about sex before marriage in terms of what the body says, without reference to rules or risk.
3. Every participant can define chastity as integration rather than suppression, and can say why the married are also called to it.
4. The cohabitation question is handled honestly, including the concession that the social science is disputed.
5. Any couple currently cohabiting leaves with a concrete path and a person to talk to, and without having been singled out.

Time Note and Pre-Chosen Cuts

Ninety-minute plan. Opening prayer, 4 minutes. Win questions, 10. Live discovery moment, 14. Build questions 1 through 4, 22. The steelman, 18. Build questions 5 through 7 and the Dig Deeper, 16. Send and Live It, 4. Closing prayer, 2.

Seventy-five minute plan. Cut Build question 5 and shorten the Win section to one question. Keep the concrete path and keep the steelman.

Tone warning. If your voice changes when you reach the cohabitation material, the room will hear it. Practice saying that paragraph out loud beforehand in the same tone you use for everything else.

Part 2. Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

OPENING PRAYER

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lord, you made our bodies and you took one for yourself, and you have never once been embarrassed by us. Tonight we are going to talk about things most rooms do not talk about honestly. Keep us from shame and keep us from pretending. Teach us what we are actually saying to each other, and give us the courage to say only what is true. Amen.

Win. Getting Started

Open questions. No wrong answers, no answer box. Let every couple speak once before anyone speaks twice.

- A.** What is something your body says without you deciding to say it? Blushing, flinching, a face you cannot control. Any examples?
- B.** Where did you first learn what sex means? Not the mechanics. The meaning.

Build. Into the Text

Read 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 aloud. All of it. Then wait before asking anything.

LIVE DISCOVERY MOMENT

The instruction: somewhere in the passage you just heard, St. Paul quotes a verse we have met four times in this study. Find it, and then answer one question: why on earth would he quote that verse here?

Eight minutes, in pairs.

What they will find: verse 16 quotes Genesis 2:24, the two shall become one flesh, in the middle of an argument about a man and a prostitute.

Then press the question. Nobody in that transaction thinks they are getting married. St. Paul says one flesh happens anyway. What does that imply about the act itself?

Let them reach it: the meaning is not assigned by the participants. It is in the act. The body has a language and we do not control what the words mean, only whether we say them truthfully.

Second instruction, five minutes: find everything in this passage that St. Paul says the body is for. They will list: for the Lord, a member of Christ, a temple of the Holy Spirit, and not your own because you were bought with a price.

- 1.** Verse 12 quotes a slogan the Corinthians were apparently using: all things are lawful for me. How does St. Paul handle it?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He does not deny it outright. He qualifies it twice: not all things are helpful, and he will not be enslaved by anything.

That is a more interesting move than a flat prohibition. He is asking about mastery rather than permission.

The question is not only may I, but who is in charge of me.

Ask the room where else in their lives they have discovered that being allowed to do something was not the same as being free.

2. Take the sentence you are not your own, you were bought with a price. What premise is that denying, and what does it replace it with?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

It denies the premise that my body is my own property to dispose of as I choose. That premise underlies almost every contemporary argument about sex, and St. Paul rejects it directly.

He replaces it not with a rule but with an event: you were bought with a price. The claim on the body comes from the cross.

Note the tone. This is not said as a threat. Two verses earlier he has called their bodies temples of the Holy Spirit. The argument runs on dignity, not on shame.

3. Think back to Session 8, to the words you will say at the altar. Now describe what the marital act says, if the body has a language.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

It says what the vows say. I give you all of myself. Permanently. Exclusively. And I am open to whatever comes of this.

Which means: when the body says that sentence and the will has not yet said it publicly, the body is saying something that is not yet true. That is the Catholic argument about sex before marriage, and it is worth stating cleanly because most people have never heard it stated at all.

Notice what the argument is not. It is not that sex is dirty, that the couple will be punished, or that a rule has been broken for its own sake. It is a claim about truthfulness.

BUILD THEN PRESS: WE ARE GETTING MARRIED ANYWAY, SO THIS IS NOT A LIE

Build it at full strength.

Build it fully and generously. Most of your room holds some version of it and they deserve to hear it made well.

The Catholic argument says the body speaks a language of total, permanent, exclusive self gift, and that saying it before the wedding makes it false. But we are not two strangers. We are engaged. We have decided, publicly, in front of our families, that this is permanent. The wedding will formalize something that is already true, and treating a date on a calendar as the moment when the same act flips from lie to truth is legalism, not truthfulness. Living together, meanwhile, is often simply prudent: rent is expensive, we are already committed, and learning to share a household before the wedding removes an enormous source of stress in the first year. It is difficult to see who is harmed, and easy to see the strain the alternative places on couples who are already stretched thin.

Then press.

Concede several things at once, and mean them. The prudential points about rent and stress are real. Nobody

in that room is a stranger to their fiancée. And a Catholic who argues from social science that cohabitation raises divorce risk should stop: that literature is genuinely contested, findings have shifted as cohabitation has become common, and the Church's position does not rest on it.

Press first on freedom. Session 8 asked whether they come freely. A couple whose lease, furniture, finances, and daily life have merged retains fewer real degrees of freedom in that question than they believe. The engagement is exactly the period in which the answer is supposed to still be open, and the strongest reason for the Church's counsel is that it keeps it open.

Press second on the difference between deciding and swearing. An engagement is a serious intention. It is also, at present, revocable by either party, though ending one can still be done unjustly or dishonestly, and canon law recognizes that a promise of marriage can carry obligations. That is not a technicality; it is the actual difference between what an engagement is and what a marriage is. The body's sentence is not I intend to give myself. It is I give myself.

Press third, gently, on experience. Ask the room whether anyone has ever known a couple who were certain, who lived as though it were settled, and for whom it was not. Almost every room has one. The point is not fear; it is that the seriousness of intention is not itself the thing that makes it permanent.

Do not overclaim. Do not say their relationship is a lie, do not predict their marriage will suffer, and do not treat this as the most important thing the Church teaches about marriage. It is not, and pretending otherwise has driven more people out of marriage preparation than any teaching in this study.

A CONCRETE PATH

Give this to the whole room, evenly, without looking at anyone.

Where separate residences are possible before the wedding, that is the ideal, and most couples who name a date find it more workable than they expected.

Where it is genuinely not possible, because of a lease, finances, or children, the ordinary pastoral counsel is to live in continence with separate sleeping arrangements, and to tell the priest preparing you honestly.

In either case: go to confession, and make a plan rather than form an intention. Intentions do not survive Friday night. Plans do.

And say this plainly: cohabitation is not by itself a canonical impediment or an automatic bar to marrying, and nobody here is being graded. Be honest with the priest preparing you rather than assuming nothing will be raised. Session 8 covered what actually threatens consent, and this is not on that list.

4. The Catechism defines chastity as the successful integration of sexuality within the person. Why integration rather than suppression, and why is it asked of married people too?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Because the goal is not the absence of desire but its ordering. St. Thomas puts chastity under temperance, whose work is to bring an appetite into line with what the person actually wants, not to kill it.

And married people are asked for it because desire does not become automatically well ordered by a wedding. Chastity within marriage means desire that receives the spouse as a person rather than employing them, that is faithful in the imagination as well as the body, and that remains capable of restraint when love requires it.

Practical version for the room: whatever you practice now, you will be practicing then, with the same nervous system.

DIG DEEPER: PORNOGRAPHY, SAID PLAINLY AND WITHOUT DRAMA

It is in nearly every room, and silence about it is not kindness. The Catechism treats it as gravely contrary to chastity because it separates sexuality from the person and turns another human being into an object for consumption, injuring both the viewer and those depicted (CCC 2354).

The path is ordinary: confession, honesty with your fiancé, and practical accountability rather than resolve alone. Where the pattern is compulsive, professional help alongside the sacraments is not a failure of faith, it is competence.

One thing to say directly. This belongs in the honesty of Session 8. A serious ongoing pattern that will affect married life should be disclosed before consent rather than discovered afterward, and the timing, scope, and privacy of that conversation are worth taking to a priest or a qualified counselor rather than improvising.

COUPLE CONVERSATION (JUST THE TWO OF YOU, NOT THE ROOM)

Just the two of you, and this one is confidential to you.

What are we actually doing, and what have we been telling ourselves about it? Say it plainly, without either of us defending ourselves.

What is our plan between now and the wedding? Not our intention. Our plan, with specifics: where, when, and what changes this week.

Is there anything either of us needs to say to the other about our past or our present that we have been avoiding?

5. Genesis 2:25 said they were naked and not ashamed. Given everything tonight, what would it take to get back to that?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Not the removal of clothing. The removal of the reasons to hide.

Which means honesty first, then forgiveness, and then a covenant strong enough that being fully known is not dangerous. That is the order, and it explains why the Church puts the vows before the bed rather than after.

End the session here rather than on the practical material. The goal of tonight is not compliance. It is Genesis 2:25.

Send. Carrying It Out

Open questions again. No answer boxes.

- Y.** What is one true thing you want your body to say to your spouse for the next fifty years?
- Z.** Who do you know who needs to hear that the Church's teaching about the body is a high view of it rather than a low one?

Live It This Week

- **Make the plan, not the intention.** Write down what changes this week, with specifics, and tell one other person besides your fiancé.

- **Go to confession.** Anyone conscious of grave sin should go before receiving communion, and everyone here is warmly encouraged to go this week regardless. If it has been a long time, say so at the start and let the priest help.
- **Say the avoided thing.** If the Couple Conversation surfaced something about your past or present that has gone unsaid, say it this week.
- **Read Genesis 1:28 and Psalm 127 before next session,** and notice how children are described.

Closing Prayer

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, you made these bodies and you are not ashamed of them. Teach us to tell the truth with them. Where we have said with our bodies what was not yet true, forgive us, and do not let shame keep us from you. Give us the freedom of the garden, where two people could be fully seen and not afraid. Bring us to our wedding day with nothing hidden.

St. Augustine, pray for us. Our Lady, Mother most pure, pray for us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Part 3. Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in the order it appears.

- 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. The session text.
- Genesis 2:24. Quoted at 1 Corinthians 6:16. Fourth appearance in this study.
- Genesis 2:25 and 3:7. Naked and unashamed, and the covering.
- 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8. Among the earliest Christian instructions on sexual holiness.
- Romans 12:1. Bodies as a living sacrifice.
- Genesis 1:28 and Psalm 127. Assigned reading before Session 11.

Catechism Paragraphs Used

CCC 1632, 2332, 2337, 2348-2350, 2354, 2390.

Before Next Session

Read Genesis 1:28 and Psalm 127 before Session 11, and notice how children are described.

Session 11. Be Fruitful

Movement IV. The Body

Passages: Genesis 1:28; Psalm 127:3-5; Psalm 128:3-4; 1 Samuel 1:1-20; Luke 1:24-25

Part 1. Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. That the group surveys how Scripture actually speaks about children, and can then state the Church's teaching on openness to life as a single argument about the meaning of one act rather than as a list of prohibitions.

Catholic Touchstone. The unitive and the procreative meanings of the marital act are inseparably connected by God himself, and man may not break that connection on his own initiative. The Church's teaching on contraception and on reproductive technology is organized around that one claim, together with the dignity of the child and of embryonic human life developed in *Donum Vitae* and *Dignitas Personae* (*Humanae Vitae* 12; CCC 2366-2370).

What You Need to Know

This is the session your couples expect to be a lecture. If it becomes one, you lose them. Teach it as a single argument, made carefully, that they are free to examine.

Two disciplines will make or break the night. First, teach the actual argument rather than a list of forbidden things. Second, refuse weak evidence even when it is convenient.

DO NOT BUILD THE ARGUMENT ON GENESIS 38

The story of Onan is frequently deployed as the biblical proof text against contraception, and you should not use it that way. The text ties the judgment to his refusal of the levirate duty owed to his dead brother, and it says so explicitly. Serious readers disagree about how much weight the passage can carry on the separate question, and a room of intelligent adults will notice if you lean on a text that will not hold.

Say this out loud in the session. It teaches the room something about how to argue, and it makes everything else you say more credible. The Church's case does not need that passage.

THE ACTUAL ARGUMENT, IN FOUR STEPS

- **One.** The marital act has two meanings that belong to it by its nature: it unites the spouses, and it is the kind of act by which new life comes to be. Neither meaning is added by intention; both are in the act.
- **Two.** The Church teaches that these two meanings are inseparably connected, and that this connection is not one that human beings may break on their own initiative (*Humanae Vitae* 12; CCC 2366).
- **Three.** Contraception acts against the procreative meaning while keeping the unitive one. In the language of Session 10, it makes the body say I give you everything while a part is deliberately withheld.
- **Four.** Reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilization break the same connection from the other side, producing life apart from the act that unites the spouses. Same principle, opposite direction (*Donum Vitae*; CCC 2376-2377).

Notice how much this simplifies the evening. There is one teaching, not two, and a couple who understands the principle can work out the applications themselves.

THE DISTINCTION COUPLES MOST OFTEN REJECT

They will say that a couple using natural family planning to avoid a pregnancy intends exactly what a contracepting couple intends, and that the Church is distinguishing between methods rather than between acts.

The answer is that intention and act are different things and the moral life turns on both. A couple abstaining is not performing an act and stripping it of a meaning; they are not performing the act. A couple contracepting is performing the act while acting against something the act means.

The analogy that works best in this study, because the room has already built it, comes from Session 8. There is a difference between declining to make a promise and making the promise while privately intending not to keep it. The outcome may be the same. The two are not the same act, and everyone knows it.

NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING, DESCRIBED HONESTLY

Natural family planning is not the rhythm method, and it is not Catholic contraception. Modern methods, including sympto-thermal, Creighton, Billings, and Marquette approaches, read observable biological markers to identify the fertile window. They require instruction from a trained teacher, they require both spouses to participate, and effectiveness varies substantially by method and by how carefully a couple uses it. Do not quote a percentage from memory; direct them to a certified instructor who can give real numbers for the method they choose.

The Church teaches that spouses may, for just reasons, space births (CCC 2368; *Humanae Vitae* 10, 16). She deliberately does not publish a list of qualifying reasons. That latitude is genuine and you should present it as such: the couple discerns before God, with generosity, taking into account their physical, economic, psychological, and social conditions.

Two honest notes to your couples. Learning a method takes months, not days, so it belongs on their calendar now rather than in the week before the wedding. And couples regularly report that the required conversation about whether they have serious reasons is itself the most valuable part.

REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGY

Give this its own space rather than a footnote, because a significant share of couples will need it.

- The Church strongly supports treating infertility. Diagnosing and correcting the underlying cause is medicine and is encouraged.
- Techniques that assist the marital act to achieve its end are morally acceptable. Techniques that replace the marital act are not (CCC 2377).
- In vitro fertilization is judged illicit because it separates procreation from the conjugal act, ordinarily involves the creation of more embryos than will be transferred, and thereby involves the loss or indefinite freezing of human embryos, and because it introduces a technician into the origin of a person's life. Third party gametes and surrogacy raise further objections (*Donum Vitae*; *Dignitas Personae*).
- Say the necessary thing clearly: a child conceived through IVF is a human person of full and equal dignity, loved by God, and no judgment whatsoever attaches to that child. Somebody in your room may have been conceived this way or may have a niece or nephew who was.

AND WHEN THE CHILD DOES NOT COME

Do not let this session end on technology. The Catechism says that spouses to whom God has not granted children can nevertheless have a conjugal life full of meaning, and speaks of the fruitfulness of charity, of hospitality, and of sacrifice (CCC 1654, 2379).

Session 13 handles the grief of infertility properly. Tonight, name it, do not resolve it, and make sure any couple already carrying that fear knows it is coming.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- Genesis 1:28. The blessing, and the first command addressed to human beings.
- Psalm 127:3-5 and Psalm 128:3-4. Children as a heritage from the Lord and a reward.
- 1 Samuel 1:1-20. Hannah, and the sorrow of childlessness taken seriously by Scripture rather than explained away.
- Luke 1:24-25. Elizabeth speaks of her reproach among men being taken away, which tells you what barrenness cost a woman socially.
- Genesis 38 is where Onan appears. Note carefully that the text ties the judgment to his refusal of the levirate duty. Do not build the contraception argument on it.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. PAUL VI ON THE CONNECTION THAT MAY NOT BE BROKEN

In *Humanae Vitae*, St. Paul VI taught that there is an inseparable connection, established by God and which man may not break on his own initiative, between the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning of the marital act.

That sentence is the foundation of the teaching. Much of what the Church has said since about contraception and about reproductive technology applies it, alongside her teaching on the dignity of the child and of embryonic human life.

Humanae Vitae, section 12.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. GIANNA BERETTA MOLLA

St. Gianna Beretta Molla was an Italian pediatrician, married with children, who in 1962 faced a serious medical condition during pregnancy and chose the course of treatment that preserved the life of her unborn child. She died shortly after giving birth, and was canonized in 2004 with her husband present.

Two things are worth saying carefully. Her decision was extraordinary and the Church has never taught that a mother is obliged to make it. And she was not a martyr to a rule; she was a working physician and a wife who loved her marriage, which is why she is a fitting patron for a room of engaged couples.

Historical summary. Canonized in 2004; her husband attended the canonization.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: THE CHURCH ON THE CHILD AS GIFT

Teaching on reproductive technology, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith argued that a child is not owed to anyone as a right and may not be treated as an object of ownership, but is a gift, and that the child has the right to be conceived within the marital act of his own parents.

That framing is the reason the Church's objection to certain technologies is not a suspicion of medicine. It is a claim about how a person ought to come into existence.

Summary of the teaching of Donum Vitae (1987), developed in Dignitas Personae (2008). Note for the leader: doctrinal instructions,

Catechism Connection

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 2366 states the inseparable connection between the two meanings of the conjugal act, citing *Humanae Vitae*.

CCC 2368 teaches that for just reasons spouses may wish to space the births of their children, and that they must verify that their desire does not arise from selfishness. Note that the Church declines to publish a list of qualifying reasons.

CCC 2370 distinguishes periodic continence, which respects the bodies of the spouses, from actions that render procreation impossible, and states that the latter are intrinsically evil. Quote this paragraph precisely rather than paraphrasing it, because loose paraphrases produce both false rigor and false laxity.

CCC 2373-2375 speaks warmly of couples who suffer infertility and supports research aimed at reducing human sterility.

CCC 2376-2377 treats reproductive technologies, distinguishing techniques that assist the conjugal act from those that replace it.

CCC 1654 and 2379 address spouses to whom God has not granted children.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

They Have No Wine returns in its second form. Session 10 was where self control runs out. Tonight is where plans run out: the couple who cannot conceive, the couple who conceive far sooner than intended, the couple who discover the method is harder than the class implied. Name it out loud.

One Flesh underlies the whole argument tonight: the two meanings belong to one act because the act is the one flesh union itself.

Watch for the couple who go quiet during the infertility material. Some couples already know something. Follow up privately, and make sure they know Session 13 exists.

IF A COUPLE IS IN AN IRREGULAR SITUATION (LEADER ONLY)

A couple already contracepting, or a bride already on a prescription. Do not ask, and do not create a situation in which anyone must disclose. Note in passing, to the room, that hormonal medication is sometimes prescribed for genuine medical reasons unrelated to contraception, that this is a matter for a doctor and a confessor, and move on.

A couple where one has been sterilized. This happens, including in second marriages. It does not prevent a valid marriage, and the pastoral questions around it belong to the priest. If it surfaces, be matter of fact and route it.

A couple who have already experienced infertility or pregnancy loss. Tonight can be very painful for them. Say early in the session that Scripture takes the sorrow of childlessness seriously, and point to Hannah before you point to any teaching. Follow up privately.

A couple who reject the teaching outright. They exist and they are not enemies. Do not extract agreement. Ask them to hold the argument rather than the conclusion, tell them plainly that the Church asks a hearing

rather than an instant assent, and encourage them to raise it with the priest. A couple who leaves understanding the argument and disagreeing is a better outcome than a couple who leaves pretending.

A couple facing a genetic risk or a serious medical situation. This needs a doctor and a priest, not a study leader. Say so and help them make the appointment.

Session Goals

1. The group surveys how Scripture speaks about children and about childlessness before any teaching is presented.
2. Every participant can state the Church's teaching as one principle rather than as a list of prohibitions.
3. Every participant can explain the difference between abstaining from an act and acting against a meaning of the act.
4. Natural family planning is described accurately, including that instruction takes months and that effectiveness varies by method and use.
5. The teaching on reproductive technology is presented without any implication about the dignity of children conceived through it.
6. Every couple leaves with a concrete next step: finding an instructor and booking a course.

Time Note and Pre-Chosen Cuts

Ninety-minute plan. Opening prayer, 4 minutes. Win questions, 8. Live discovery moment, 14. Build questions 1 through 4, 22. The steelman, 20. Build questions 5 through 7, 16. Send and Live It, 4. Closing prayer, 2.

Seventy-five minute plan. Cut Build question 6 and the Dig Deeper box. Keep the discovery, the steelman, and the concrete next step.

Do not run long tonight. A session on this subject that overruns feels like pressure. End on time even if you have to drop a question.

Part 2. Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

OPENING PRAYER

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lord, you are the author of life and you have never made a person you did not intend. Tonight we are talking about the most personal thing there is, and some of us are afraid, and some of us are already grieving. Give us open minds and honest hearts. Where we disagree, keep us listening. Where we long for something we do not have, be near. Amen.

Win. Getting Started

Open questions. No wrong answers, no answer box. Let every couple speak once before anyone speaks twice.

- A.** How many children did you grow up assuming you would have, and where did that number come from?
- B.** What is the best thing about the family you came from? Not the most impressive. The best.

Build. Into the Text

LIVE DISCOVERY MOMENT

Start with Scripture before any teaching, and do not tell them what they will find.

The instruction: find as many places as you can where the Bible describes children, or describes not being able to have them. Twelve minutes, in pairs. Write down what the text actually says, not what you expect it to say.

What they will find: Genesis 1:28, the blessing and the first command addressed to human beings. Psalm 127:3-5, a heritage from the Lord and a reward. Psalm 128:3-4. Genesis 33:5, the children God has graciously given. Ruth 4:13. And then the other side: 1 Samuel 1, where Hannah weeps and will not eat; Genesis 30:1, where Rachel says give me children or I shall die; Luke 1:25, where Elizabeth speaks of her reproach being taken away.

Then ask two questions. First: is there anywhere Scripture treats a child as a burden or an interruption? Second: does Scripture minimize the grief of not having them? Take answers.

They will notice that the passages they surveyed are unembarrassed on both sides. Children are repeatedly presented as gift, and childlessness as a real sorrow that nobody is told to get over.

- 1.** Genesis 1:28 is the first command addressed to human beings. What is it, and what does it come attached to?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Be fruitful and multiply. And it comes attached to a blessing: God blessed them, and God said to them.

That order matters. Fruitfulness is presented as part of the blessing, not as a duty imposed on top of it.

Ask the room whether they have ever heard children described primarily as a cost. Most of them have, constantly, and it is worth naming how unusual the biblical framing sounds now.

2. Think back to Session 10. If the marital act says something, what does it say about children?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

It says: I am open to what comes of this. That is part of the sentence the body speaks, alongside the total and permanent and exclusive gift.

Which means the openness is not an add on that religious people attach to sex. It is one of the things the act already means.

The Church's language for this is that the unitive and procreative meanings are inseparably connected, and that this connection is not ours to break (*Humanae Vitae* 12; CCC 2366). Everything else tonight follows from that one sentence.

3. Given that principle, work out for yourselves why the Church says what she says about contraception, and then why she says what she says about in vitro fertilization.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Let them do it. Most rooms get there.

Contraception performs the act while acting against one of its meanings. In the language of Session 10, the body says I give you everything while something is deliberately withheld.

In vitro fertilization breaks the same connection from the other direction: it produces life apart from the act that unites the spouses, and in practice ordinarily involves creating more embryos than will be transferred, with the loss or indefinite freezing of the rest.

One principle, two directions. If your group sees that, tonight has worked.

Say the necessary sentence out loud: a child conceived by IVF is a person of full and equal dignity and no judgment attaches to that child, ever.

BUILD THEN PRESS: THIS TEACHING IS UNLIVABLE, AND THE DISTINCTION IT RESTS ON IS A DISTINCTION WITHOUT A DIFFERENCE

Build it at full strength.

Build it at full strength. Most of the Catholics in your room privately hold some version of it, and a great many have never heard it stated honestly by someone who then answered it.

Two objections, and they reinforce each other. First, the distinction fails. A couple using natural family planning to avoid a child and a couple using contraception to avoid a child want exactly the same outcome, plan for it with the same deliberation, and act on the same knowledge of biology. Calling one openness to life and the other a refusal of it looks like a distinction drawn by method rather than by morality, and methods are not what makes an act good.

Second, the history is uncomfortable. Paul VI convened a commission to study the question, its majority recommended that the teaching could change, and he decided otherwise. Since 1968 the teaching has been very widely disregarded by practicing Catholics, including devout ones, and the practical result has been widespread quiet dissent rather than assent. A teaching that the faithful cannot receive, issued against the advice of the body convened to examine it, looks less like the voice of the Spirit and more like an institution unable to move.

Then press.

Concede the real things first and do not hedge them. The commission existed. Its majority did favor change. Paul VI decided against that recommendation, and the encyclical was received with widespread dissent. Any presentation that hides this is not going to survive a curious person with a search engine, and the couples will be right to distrust everything else you said.

Press first on intention and act, because that is where the argument lives. Morality has never turned on intention alone. Two people can want the same outcome and do different things, and the difference between the things they do is exactly what moral evaluation is for. Use the analogy this study has already built: there is a difference between declining to make a promise and making the promise while intending not to keep it. The outcome can be identical. Nobody thinks the acts are.

Press second on what abstaining actually is. A couple practicing periodic continence is not performing the act and disabling part of it. They are not performing it. Whatever else can be said, the act they do perform still says the whole sentence.

Press third on the cost of the alternative. If the two meanings can be separated whenever a couple judges it prudent, the same logic applies from the other side, and there is then no principled objection to producing children in a laboratory, selecting among embryos, or contracting a third party to carry them. That is the principled implication of the argument rather than a claim about what any particular person will do next, and it is why the Church holds the two questions together.

Press fourth on the reception argument, carefully. Widespread non-reception is a serious pastoral fact and the Church has to reckon with it. It is not, by itself, an argument that a teaching is false, unless one is prepared to say the same about teachings on wealth, forgiveness of enemies, and honesty in business, which are disregarded at similar rates.

Do not overclaim. Do not tell them this is easy, do not tell them everyone who disagrees is a dissenter, and do not present *Humanae Vitae* as a defined dogma; it is authoritative moral teaching that the Church presents as belonging to her constant tradition, and theologians have discussed its precise note. Say that the Church asks them to examine the argument seriously, and to talk with a priest, rather than demanding instant agreement tonight.

4. The Church says spouses may space births for just reasons but does not publish a list of what counts. Why not, and what does that ask of a couple?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Because the judgment depends on circumstances only the couple and God know: their health, their means, their state, the needs of the children they already have (CCC 2368; *Humanae Vitae* 10, 16).

What it asks is genuine discernment rather than either presumption or scrupulosity. The Church asks them to be generous and to examine whether the reason is real. She does not ask them to submit a form.

This is one of the places in Catholic moral teaching where the latitude is real, and you should say so plainly rather than inventing a stricter rule than the Church has given.

5. What do you actually know about natural family planning, and what have you heard about it?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Correct the common errors. It is not the rhythm method, which was calendar based. Modern methods read

observable biological signs to identify the fertile window.

It ordinarily calls for instruction from a trained teacher, participation by both spouses, and consistent daily observation. Effectiveness varies substantially by method and by how carefully it is used, so do not quote a number; send them to a certified instructor who can give real figures for the method they choose.

Two practical notes. Learning takes months, so it belongs on the calendar now. And the conversation it forces, about whether they have serious reasons this month, is the part couples most often say changed their marriage.

DIG DEEPER: WHY NOT GENESIS 38?

Onan is regularly produced as the biblical proof against contraception, and this study does not use him. The text ties the judgment to his refusal of the duty owed to his dead brother, and says so directly.

That does not settle every question about the passage, and serious readers differ. But an argument should be built on its strongest ground, and the strongest ground here is the meaning of the act, not a disputed reading of a difficult chapter.

Tell your couples why you are declining to use it. Learning to refuse a convenient bad argument is worth more to them than one more proof text.

COUPLE CONVERSATION (JUST THE TWO OF YOU, NOT THE ROOM)

Just the two of you.

How many children have each of us been quietly assuming? Say the number out loud. If they differ, do not resolve it tonight.

Have we ever actually said to each other what we intend to do about all of this, in plain words? If not, say it now.

Who is booking the natural family planning course, and by when?

6. What does the Church say to a couple who want children and cannot have them?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

That their marriage is not diminished, that their conjugal life keeps its meaning and value, and that fruitfulness can take the form of charity, hospitality, and sacrifice (CCC 1654, 2379).

And that treating infertility is good medicine which the Church actively encourages, including research aimed at reducing sterility (CCC 2375). The Church encourages diagnosis, treatment, and research that respect human dignity; the objection is to techniques that replace the marital act rather than assist it.

Do not tie this off neatly. Say that Session 13 takes up the grief itself, and mean it.

Send. Carrying It Out

Open questions again. No answer boxes.

Y. What is one thing about children you now believe that you did not believe three hours ago?

- Z.** What would it look like for your home to be fruitful in ways that have nothing to do with how many children you have?

Live It This Week

- **Book the course.** Find a certified natural family planning instructor this week and register. Not research it. Register.
- **Say your number.** Tell each other how many children you have quietly been assuming, and how strongly you hold it.
- **Read Humanae Vitae 12 and CCC 2366 to 2370, together, once.** It is short. Read the actual text rather than commentary about it.
- **Read Genesis 1:27 and Matthew 19:4 before next session.**

Closing Prayer

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, you are the giver of life and every person who has ever existed was your idea first. Make us generous. Take away our fear of what we cannot control. For the couples here who will conceive easily, give them gratitude; for those who will not, give them your presence and our friendship. Teach us to receive children the way you gave them, as a gift and not a project.

St. Gianna, pray for us. St. Anne and St. Joachim, pray for us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

Lo, sons are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward.

Psalms 127:3

Part 3. Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in the order it appears.

- Genesis 1:28. The blessing and the first command.
- Psalm 127:3-5 and Psalm 128:3-4. Children as heritage and reward.
- 1 Samuel 1:1-20; Genesis 30:1; Luke 1:24-25. The sorrow of childlessness, taken seriously.
- Genesis 33:5; Ruth 4:13. Found by the group in the discovery moment.
- Genesis 38. Noted and deliberately not used as the basis of the argument.
- Humanae Vitae 10, 12, 16. The core teaching.
- Genesis 1:27 and Matthew 19:4. Assigned reading before Session 12.

Catechism Paragraphs Used

CCC 1654, 2366, 2368, 2370, 2373-2375, 2376-2377, 2379.

Before Next Session

Read Genesis 1:27 and Matthew 19:4 before Session 12.

Session 12. What Marriage Is and Is Not

Movement IV. The Body

Passages: Genesis 1:27; Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4-6; Mark 10:6-9; Ephesians 5:31

Part 1. Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. That the group notices which two verses Jesus quotes when he is asked to define marriage, and can then state why the Church holds that she is unable rather than unwilling to change what marriage is.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church did not invent marriage and therefore cannot redefine it. She recognizes it, guards it, and raises it for the baptized to the dignity of a sacrament. And she teaches that every person, without exception, is to be received with respect, compassion, and sensitivity, and that every sign of unjust discrimination is to be avoided (CCC 1603, 2358).

What You Need to Know

This is the session most likely to be recorded on someone's phone, and it is the session where tone matters most. Two failures are available to you: cruelty dressed as clarity, and vagueness dressed as charity. Both betray the people in the room.

Prepare it by writing out, in advance, the two sentences you will say if a participant discloses that they or a family member are in a same sex relationship. If you have not written them, you will improvise, and improvising here goes badly.

START WHERE THE STUDY STARTED

Everything tonight follows from Session 1. If marriage is designed rather than invented, then the question of what marriage is has an answer that is discovered rather than voted on. The Church's position is not that she prefers a traditional definition. It is that she has no authority over the thing itself (CCC 1603).

That claim is a limitation on the Church before it is a limitation on anyone else. She also cannot dissolve a ratified and consummated sacramental marriage, cannot marry a Catholic who is not free, and cannot treat as marriage what she has no power to constitute. Certain other marriages can be dissolved in favor of the faith, as Session 9 showed. Present it as the same limitation showing up in different places.

WHICH VERSES JESUS QUOTES

When Jesus is questioned about divorce in Matthew 19, he answers by appealing to God's design in Genesis, and he quotes two verses. Everyone remembers the second, Genesis 2:24, about the one flesh union. Fewer notice the first: he begins by quoting Genesis 1:27, that from the beginning the Creator made them male and female.

Let the group find this rather than telling them. The definition Jesus gives contains both elements, and he supplies them by quotation rather than by argument.

WHY SEXUAL DIFFERENCE IS TREATED AS CONSTITUTIVE RATHER THAN INCIDENTAL

State the reasoning cleanly, because most people have only encountered the conclusion.

- Marriage, on the Church's account, is the union described in Genesis 2:24: a comprehensive union of two persons, bodily as well as emotional and spiritual.
- A bodily union is not merely two bodies in proximity. It is two persons coordinating toward a single biological end which neither can accomplish alone. The one activity in which a human body is ordered to something it cannot do by itself is the generative one.
- Sexual difference is therefore not decoration on a union constituted by love. It is what makes that particular kind of bodily union possible at all.
- Because marriage is ordered toward children by its nature, the Church holds that the union is by its nature the kind that is open to them, whether or not any particular couple conceives.

Be honest that this argument is philosophical as well as scriptural, that it is contested by serious people, and that the Church holds it as a matter of what marriage is rather than as a policy preference.

CIVIL MARRIAGE AND SACRAMENTAL MARRIAGE

Distinguish them plainly. The state defines a civil status and attaches legal effects to it, and many states have changed that definition. The Church holds that the reality of marriage precedes the state and is not created by it.

Two practical consequences your couples should know. Their wedding will ordinarily have civil effects as well as sacramental ones, and where civil law provides for it the priest or deacon also serves as the civil witness or registrant. And the Church's judgment about whether a marriage exists does not track the state's, which the group already saw in Session 9.

WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES ABOUT PERSONS

Say all of this, in full, and do not hurry it.

- Every person is made in the image of God and is to be received with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination is to be avoided (CCC 2358).
- The Catechism teaches that the inclination itself is not chosen, that for most who have it the situation is a trial, and that these Christians are called to chastity as every Christian is called to chastity in the form proper to their state (CCC 2358-2359).
- A 2021 Responsum of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith stated that the Church does not have the power to bless unions as marriages or as equivalent to marriage. The 2023 declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* then permitted spontaneous, non ritualized, non-liturgical blessings of couples in irregular situations, including same sex couples, while stating explicitly that such a blessing is not a ritual, does not validate their status, and must never be confused with the celebration of marriage. Its reception has varied among bishops' conferences, and if a couple asks about it, tell them honestly that the distinction is between persons and unions, and refer the specifics to the pastor.

Say the plain pastoral thing out loud: if a person in your room has a brother, a daughter, a best friend, or a past of their own attached to this, the Church's teaching that they must be received with respect and compassion is not a footnote. It is teaching, at the same level as everything else tonight.

THE WEDDING GUEST LIST

Nearly every couple in your room will face a practical version of this: which family members attend, who is seated with whom, and how to be gracious without pretending. This is a matter of prudence rather than doctrine, and the Church has not legislated it. Tell them so. Encourage generosity, warn against making the wedding day a statement, and send the difficult cases to the priest.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- Genesis 1:27. Male and female he created them. Quoted by Jesus at Matthew 19:4.

- Genesis 2:24. The one flesh union. Quoted by Jesus at Matthew 19:5 and by St. Paul at Ephesians 5:31.
- Matthew 19:4-6 and Mark 10:6-9. Both accounts join the two Genesis verses together.
- Romans 1:26-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 are the passages usually raised in this discussion. Handle them, if raised, with care: read them in their contexts, note that 1 Corinthians 6:11 immediately says such were some of you, and do not let the session become a proof text exchange.
- Revelation 19:6-9. The union that all of this is a sign of. Session 14.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: THE CHURCH ON WHAT SHE CAN AND CANNOT DO

Teaching on proposals to give legal recognition to unions between persons of the same sex, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith argued that marriage exists as a reality prior to any state recognition, that it is ordered by its nature to the procreation and education of children, and it argued on that basis against granting other unions legal recognition equivalent to marriage.

Note what the argument does not appeal to. It does not appeal to majority opinion, tradition for its own sake, or the preferences of believers. It appeals to what marriage is.

Summary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons (2003). Note for the leader: a doctrinal document, not the voice of a canonized saint.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. THOMAS AQUINAS ON WHAT AN INSTITUTION IS FOR

St. Thomas argued that marriage is natural to human beings not because we feel drawn to it but because of the ends it serves: the begetting and raising of children, which he treats as the principal end and which requires a stability other creatures do not need, together with the mutual help of the spouses. Later magisterial formulations order these differently, so do not flatten the two together.

His method is worth as much as his conclusion. He asks what the thing is for, and reasons from there. It is the same method the Church uses tonight, and it is why she thinks the question is not hers to settle by preference.

Summary of his treatment of marriage as a natural institution in the Summa Theologiae.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. TERESA OF CALCUTTA ON THE DEEPEST POVERTY

St. Teresa of Calcutta taught, in substance, that the worst poverty she encountered was not hunger but the experience of being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for, and that this poverty exists in wealthy countries as much as in poor ones.

She is here for a reason. Whatever else your couples take from tonight, a household that leaves anyone with that particular poverty has failed in the charity the Church requires.

A thematic summary of a teaching repeatedly associated with her. No single address or work is cited here; if you want to quote her, go to a published text and quote it exactly.

Catechism Connection

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 1601-1603 gives the definition and states that God himself is the author of marriage. This is the ground of the Church's claim that she cannot change it.

CCC 2331-2333 teaches the goodness and personal significance of being created male and female, and that

sexual identity is to be acknowledged and accepted. It does not by itself make the metaphysical claim that difference is essential rather than accidental, so do not cite it for that.

CCC 2357 states the Church's judgment on homosexual acts, and cites Scripture and the tradition.

CCC 2358 states that these persons must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity, and that every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard is to be avoided. Read this paragraph aloud in the session. It is teaching, not a softening of teaching.

CCC 2359 states that they are called to chastity and to Christian perfection, as all the baptized are in the form proper to their state.

A note on how to use these. Read 2357 through 2359 as a unit or not at all. Quoting one without the others misrepresents the Catechism, and your couples will meet people who have been hurt by exactly that.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

One Flesh reaches its argumentative form tonight. Every session since Session 1 has been building the claim that the one flesh union is a real bodily union and not a metaphor. Tonight that claim does the work.

The Bridegroom is held back deliberately. Do not reach for Revelation tonight; Session 14 needs it, and using the marriage supper as a closing flourish here would spend it.

Leader restraint. Do not allow tonight to become the session everyone remembers as the study's climax. It is not. Sessions 13 and 14 are, and the arc of this study is deliberately pointed past this argument rather than at it.

IF A COUPLE IS IN AN IRREGULAR SITUATION (LEADER ONLY)

A participant with a family member in a same sex relationship. This will be common. Have your two sentences written. Something like: your brother is your brother and nothing tonight changes that, and the Church's teaching that he must be received with respect and compassion is as binding on you as anything else she teaches. Then stop talking and listen.

A participant who experiences same sex attraction. They may be present and silent. Assume it. Never speak about such persons in the third person as though none were in the room. Read CCC 2358 aloud. Follow up only if they initiate.

A participant who is angry at the Church's teaching. Let them say it fully. Do not win. Ask them to state the Church's argument back accurately, and offer the same courtesy in return. A person who leaves understanding and disagreeing is a far better outcome than a person who leaves silenced.

A participant who is contemptuous. This is the one to intervene on. If anyone in your room speaks about people with derision, stop it in the moment, kindly and without a speech. Say that this room does not talk about anyone that way, and move on. Do not wait until afterward.

The guest list question. Expect it. Say it is prudential, that the Church has not legislated it, that generosity is the default, and that the specifics belong with the priest who knows their family.

Session Goals

1. The group finds that Jesus quotes both Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24 when asked to define marriage.

2. Every participant can state the Church's claim as an inability rather than a preference, and can connect it to Session 1.
3. Every participant can explain why the Church treats sexual difference as constitutive rather than incidental.
4. The strongest objection, the infertile couple, is built at full strength and answered without evasion.
5. CCC 2357 through 2359 is read as a unit, aloud, in the room.
6. Nobody in the room hears a single sentence spoken with contempt about any person.

Time Note and Pre-Chosen Cuts

Ninety-minute plan. Opening prayer, 4 minutes. Win questions, 8. Live discovery moment, 12. Build questions 1 through 4, 22. The steelman, 22. Build questions 5 through 7 and the pastoral material, 18. Send and Live It, 3. Closing prayer, 2.

Seventy-five minute plan. Cut Build question 6 and the Dig Deeper box. Never cut the reading of CCC 2357 through 2359, and never cut the steelman.

End on time. A session that runs long here feels like a campaign.

Part 2. Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

OPENING PRAYER

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lord, tonight we are talking about people we love and about a teaching that has been used both to tell the truth and to wound. Give us clarity without cruelty and charity without cowardice. Keep us from contempt. Let no one leave this room feeling that they were spoken about rather than spoken to. Amen.

Win. Getting Started

Open questions. No wrong answers, no answer box. Let every couple speak once before anyone speaks twice.

- A.** Where did you get your definition of marriage before you were asked to think about it?
- B.** When have you changed your mind about something serious? What actually changed it?

Build. Into the Text

LIVE DISCOVERY MOMENT

The instruction: in Matthew 19, Jesus is questioned about divorce and answers by quoting Scripture about marriage. Find every verse he quotes, look each one up, and write down exactly what each says. Then do the same with Mark 10:6-9. Ten minutes, in pairs.

What they will find: he quotes two verses, not one. Matthew 19:4 quotes Genesis 1:27, that from the beginning the Creator made them male and female. Matthew 19:5 quotes Genesis 2:24, the one flesh verse they have now met five times. Mark 10:6-8 does the same thing in the same order.

Then ask one question: asked about divorce, he answers with two quotations about marriage rather than an argument. Why those two?

Take answers and do not resolve it yet. The rest of the session is the answer.

- 1.** Go back to Session 1. If marriage is designed rather than invented, what follows about who gets to define it?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

That the question has an answer to be discovered rather than a policy to be chosen. The Church's claim is that she has no authority over the thing itself (CCC 1603).

Say clearly that this is a limitation on the Church before it is anything else. She also cannot dissolve a ratified and consummated sacramental marriage, cannot marry a person who is not free, and cannot constitute a bond she has not been given the power to constitute. It is the same limitation appearing in different places.

Ask the room whether an institution that could redefine marriage when the culture shifted would be more trustworthy or less.

- 2.** Why would sexual difference be treated as essential to marriage rather than as a traditional detail?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Work through it in steps rather than asserting it.

Marriage as Genesis describes it is a comprehensive union, including a bodily one. A bodily union is more than proximity: it is two persons coordinating toward a single end that neither can achieve alone. The generative act is the one place in human life where that is true of the body.

So sexual difference is not decoration on a union constituted by affection. It is what makes that specific kind of bodily union possible.

And because marriage is by its nature ordered toward children, the union is the kind that is open to them, whether or not a particular couple conceives.

Be honest with the room: this is a philosophical argument as well as a scriptural one, it is contested by serious people, and the Church holds it as a claim about what marriage is.

BUILD THEN PRESS: IF MARRIAGE IS ABOUT CHILDREN, WHAT ABOUT THE COUPLE WHO CANNOT HAVE THEM?

Build it at full strength.

This is the strongest objection in the entire study and you must build it at full strength. Do not caricature it, and do not let anyone in the room dismiss it quickly.

The Church says marriage requires sexual difference because marriage is ordered toward children. But she marries the infertile without hesitation. She marries the seventy year old widow and the widower, and in that case her own rite omits the question about children altogether. She marries a woman who has had a hysterectomy. In every one of those cases she witnesses a union that cannot possibly produce a child, and where both spouses are baptized she calls it a real marriage and a sacrament. So the criterion cannot really be children, because if it were, those marriages would be excluded too. Which means the actual criterion is the physical configuration of the bodies involved, which looks far less like a principle and far more like an aesthetic preference given a philosophical vocabulary. And the human cost of maintaining it is not abstract: it falls on real people who want the same permanence and faithfulness the Church spends this entire study praising.

Then press.

Concede first, and concede the human part before the logical part. The cost is real. People who want fidelity and permanence are told the Church cannot recognize what they have, and the Church's own teaching requires that they be received with respect and compassion, which they have often not been. If your room does not hear you say that, they will not hear anything else.

Press first on the distinction the objection needs and does not make: between the kind of act and its outcome. The Church's criterion has never been fertility, which she does not test and cannot predict. It is the kind of union: the elderly couple and the infertile couple perform the very act by which children come to be, an act ordered toward that end by its nature, in which their bodies coordinate as one. That the end is not reached does not change what kind of act it is. We distinguish this way constantly elsewhere: a heart that does not pump well is still an organ for pumping blood.

Press second on the rite itself, which the objection cites and which actually supports the answer. The question about accepting children is omitted for a couple advanced in years precisely because the Church is asking about the openness of the will, not making a prediction. She never omits the requirement that the union be the kind it is.

Press third by asking what the alternative criterion would be. If marriage is constituted by love and commitment rather than by a comprehensive bodily union, then the reasons for restricting it to two people, or

for treating permanence and exclusivity as essential, become much harder to state. Many who accepted the first revision have found the others difficult to resist. Point this out as a question about coherence, not as an accusation about anyone's motives.

Do not overclaim. Say honestly that this objection has philosophical force, that it is argued at a high level by serious people on both sides, and that the Church's answer rests on a view of the body that a person may examine and find unconvincing. Then read CCC 2357 through 2359 aloud, all three, and let that be the last thing said before you move on.

READ THIS ALOUD

Read CCC 2357, 2358, and 2359 out loud, as a unit, without commentary between them.

Then say one sentence in your own words: this is integral to the Church's teaching, it is not optional, and it binds everyone in this room.

Then move on. Do not preach it.

3. What is the difference between civil marriage and sacramental marriage, and why does the Church not treat the state's definition as authoritative?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Civil marriage is a legal status with legal effects, defined by the state, and many states have changed their definition. Sacramental marriage is the reality the Church recognizes, and she holds that it precedes the state and is not created by it.

Practically: their wedding will ordinarily carry both civil and sacramental effects, and where local law provides for it the priest or deacon also serves as the civil witness. And the Church's judgment about whether a marriage exists does not track the state's, as they already saw in Session 9.

Ask them what it would mean for a Church to hold that the state defines the sacraments. The question answers itself.

DIG DEEPER: BLESSING PERSONS AND BLESSING UNIONS

Couples will ask about blessings. Two documents are in play. A 2021 Responsum of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith stated that the Church has no power to bless unions as marriages or as equivalent to marriage.

The 2023 declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* then permitted spontaneous, non ritualized blessings of couples in irregular situations, including same sex couples, while stating explicitly that such a blessing is not a rite, does not validate or approve their status, and is never to be confused with the celebration of marriage. Its reception has varied among bishops' conferences.

If asked, say the distinction plainly, say honestly that the pastoral application has been discussed differently in different places, and refer the specifics to the pastor rather than adjudicating it yourself.

COUPLE CONVERSATION (JUST THE TWO OF YOU, NOT THE ROOM)

Just the two of you.

Who in our families will be affected by what we heard tonight, and how have we been talking about them

privately?

Is there anyone we have been dreading on the guest list? What would generosity actually look like on the day, given that this is our wedding and not a statement?

4. If your marriage is a sign, what is it a sign of, and what does that mean about how you talk about people who disagree with what you believe about marriage?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

A sign of the union of Christ and the Church, which is where Session 6 left them.

Which means the manner is part of the message. A couple who hold the Church's teaching and speak about people with contempt are contradicting the thing they claim to be signifying. Christ did not win the Church by argument.

Close with the practical version: they are going to be asked about this at work and at family dinners for the rest of their lives. The question is not only whether they can state the teaching, but whether the person they are talking to feels loved by the end of it.

Send. Carrying It Out

Open questions again. No answer boxes.

- Y. Who in your life needs to hear from you that they are loved, independent of anything you believe about marriage?
- Z. What is one way you could state the Church's teaching, accurately, to someone who finds it painful, without either softening it or wounding them?

Live It This Week

- **Call the person you thought of.** Not to discuss anything from tonight. Just to talk to them.
- **Practice the sentence.** Write down, in two sentences, how you would explain what the Church teaches to a friend who disagrees. Read it to your fiancé and ask whether it sounds like contempt.
- **Settle one guest list question this week,** and settle it on the side of generosity if you can.
- **Read 1 Corinthians 13 before next session.** Not as a wedding reading. As a description of what is about to be asked of you.

Closing Prayer

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, you made us male and female and you called it very good, and you have never regretted a single person you made. Give us the courage to hold what you have taught and the humility to hold it kindly. Guard our mouths. Let our marriages be a sign that draws people rather than one that shuts them out. And be near to everyone we love who found tonight hard.

Our Lady, Mother of the Church, pray for us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Genesis 1:27

Part 3. Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in the order it appears.

- Matthew 19:4-6 and Mark 10:6-9. Both quote two Genesis verses. Found by the group.
- Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24. The two verses quoted.
- Ephesians 5:31. The same verse quoted again by St. Paul.
- Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. Handle only if raised, in context, including verse 11.
- CCC 2357, 2358, 2359. Read aloud as a unit in the session.
- 1 Corinthians 13. Assigned reading before Session 13.

Catechism Paragraphs Used

CCC 1601-1603, 2331-2333, 2357, 2358, 2359.

Before Next Session

Read 1 Corinthians 13 before Session 13. Not as a wedding reading, but as a description of what is about to be asked of you.

Session 13. When the Cross Comes

Movement V. The Home and the Destination

Passages: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; 1 Samuel 1:1-18; Job 2:9-10; Luke 2:41-51; John 19:25-27

Part 1. Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. That the group looks at marriages in Scripture that suffered, names what carried them, and can distinguish forgiveness from reconciliation, from restored trust, and from the absence of consequences.

Catholic Touchstone. The bond is permanent. That does not mean anyone is obliged to remain in danger. The Church recognizes legitimate separation while the bond remains, and she does not ask a spouse or a child to endure violence for the sake of the sacrament (canons 1151-1155; CCC 2383).

SAFEGUARDING NOTE (LEADER ONLY, READ BEFORE THE SESSION)

Read this before preparing the session, and act on it at any point in the study, not only tonight.

Say it in the room. No one is obliged to remain in a dangerous situation. The Church recognizes legitimate separation, permits civil divorce where it is the only way to secure protection, and does not ask anyone to endure violence for the sake of the sacrament.

If there is any indication of immediate danger, contact emergency services. Do not wait, do not consult the group, and do not seek the other spouse's side. In the United States the National Domestic Violence Hotline is available at 1-800-799-7233 or by texting START to 88788.

Mandatory reporting. If you are a mandated reporter under your state's law or under diocesan policy, you must follow those obligations, and knowing whether you are is your responsibility before the session rather than after a disclosure. Any suspicion of abuse or neglect of a minor or a vulnerable adult is reported to civil authorities according to that law and to the diocesan safe environment office.

Confidentiality has limits, and you must say so before anyone discloses. Tell participants at the start of this session that you will hold what they share in confidence except where safety requires otherwise or the law requires a report. Do not promise absolute confidentiality. You cannot keep that promise, and offering it makes the situation worse.

Do not investigate. Do not interview, do not contact the other party, do not gather evidence, and do not attempt to assess whether an account is accurate. That is not your role, and doing it can endanger the person and compromise a later inquiry.

Do not mediate or counsel. Refer to the priest or deacon, to the diocesan safe environment office, and to qualified professional help. Then stay available and stay warm.

Note for a leader who is a priest or deacon. The seal of confession is absolute and nothing here qualifies it. Be clear with yourself and with participants about when a conversation is sacramental and when it is not.

What You Need to Know

Read the safeguarding note before you prepare anything else in this session, and prepare that part first.

This is the session that will be remembered in ten years. Your couples are a few months from a wedding, everything around them is bunting and seating charts, and tonight somebody tells them the truth. Do it warmly. Do not perform gravity.

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 13 AS WHAT IT IS

It is on every wedding program in the Western world, which has nearly destroyed it. St. Paul did not write it for weddings. He wrote it to a congregation that was fighting about status, and it is a rebuke.

Read it slowly with the room and notice how much of it is negative: not jealous, not boastful, not arrogant, not rude, does not insist on its own way, not irritable, not resentful. That is a description of how somebody behaves when they are being provoked. Verse 7 is the one to carry: bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

That is not a description of a wedding day. It is a description of year eleven.

THE FOUR CROSSES TO NAME

Do not attempt all four in depth. Name all four, and go deep on whichever your room needs.

- **Loss and infertility.** Session 11 gave the teaching; tonight give the grief its due. Scripture does. Hannah weeps and will not eat, and nobody in the story tells her to be grateful for what she has.
- **Illness, including mental illness, and addiction.** In sickness and in health is in the vow. Most couples imagine cancer at seventy. It is at least as likely to be depression at thirty two, or a drinking problem that arrives slowly enough that nobody names it.
- **Betrayal.** Adultery, financial deceit, a hidden life. The prophets of Session 3 are the frame, and they are unsparing about what it costs the faithful party.
- **Abuse.** Physical, sexual, emotional, or financial. This one differs in kind from the other three, and the Church's answer differs in kind. See the safeguarding note and say it out loud in the room.

SEPARATION, STATED ACCURATELY

Couples are often astonished that this exists, because they have absorbed a version of Catholic teaching in which the bond obliges endurance of anything.

The Church's law holds that spouses have the obligation and the right to maintain their common life unless a legitimate cause excuses them, and it recognizes such causes: canon 1152 recognizes a right of separation for the innocent spouse in cases of adultery, subject to that canon's conditions, including that the innocent spouse has not condoned it; and grave danger of spirit or body to a spouse or to the children, or conduct that renders common life too hard, are recognized grounds. In urgent cases a spouse may separate on their own authority (canons 1151-1155). The bond remains, neither party is free to remarry, and nobody is required to keep living in the same house.

The Catechism also recognizes that civil divorce may be tolerated where it is the only possible way to secure certain legal rights, the care of children, or the protection of inheritance (CCC 2383). Where the issue is danger, the ground is the separation law, canons 1151 to 1153.

Say it in plain words, because a woman somewhere has stayed in a dangerous house believing the Church required it: the sacrament is not a reason to be hurt.

FORGIVENESS, AND WHAT IT IS NOT

This is the most practically useful teaching of the night. Separate four things that get collapsed together.

- **Forgiveness** is the release of the debt, and it is commanded (Matthew 6:14-15). It is an act of the will, it can be given before the feelings follow, and it usually has to be repeated.

- **Reconciliation** requires two people. Forgiveness can be unilateral. Reconciliation cannot.
- **Restored trust** is earned over time by changed behavior. Forgiving someone does not mean handing them the credit card again next week.
- **The absence of consequences** is not part of any of this. A person may be genuinely forgiven and still face the results of what they did.

A couple that knows these four distinctions is better prepared than a couple that has been told to forgive without ever being told what the word means.

THE WINE THAT RAN OUT

Tonight is where the Cana thread arrives at its lowest point. Say it explicitly: this is what it looks like when a marriage has no wine. Not a rough patch. Nothing left in the jars.

Then say the thing they will need: the story does not end at verse 3. Somebody notices, somebody says it out loud to the only person who can act, and the servants are told to do whatever he says. Session 14 finishes it.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- 1 Samuel 1:1-18. Hannah's grief, and a husband who says the wrong thing while trying to help. Verse 8 is worth reading twice.
- Job 2:9-10. A wife at the end of her endurance, and a husband who does not condemn her. Handle her with sympathy; she lost the same ten children he lost.
- Hosea, from Session 3. Betrayal, and a covenant kept from one side.
- Luke 2:41-51. Even the Holy Family loses a child for three days, and the text says plainly that they did not understand.
- John 19:25-27. Mary standing at the cross. The word woman returns, as the group discovered in Session 5.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: STS. LOUIS AND ZELIE MARTIN

Louis and Zelie Martin married in 1858, had nine children, and buried four of them. Zelie ran a lace business and carried much of the family's income, and died of breast cancer in 1877 while the children were young. Louis raised the surviving daughters, suffered a severe decline in his final years, and died in 1894. They were canonized together in 2015, the parents of St. Therese of Lisieux.

They are here because they answer the suspicion that holy marriages are the ones that go well. Four dead children, a business, a long illness, and a widower's decline. The Church looked at that and said: this is what a holy marriage looks like.

Historical summary. Canonized together in October 2015.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. MONICA, WITH A NECESSARY QUALIFICATION

St. Monica prayed for the conversion of her husband and of her son for decades. Her son, St. Augustine, records in the Confessions that her husband was difficult and that she persevered, and that both were eventually baptized.

Now the qualification, and say it in the room. Augustine also reports counsel she gave other wives about enduring difficult husbands, and the Church today does not counsel anyone to remain in danger. What is worth taking from St. Monica is the perseverance of her prayer across decades, not a model for handling a

violent household. Say both halves or leave her out.

Confessions, Book IX, on Monica and Patricius. Note for the leader: read the qualification above before using this voice.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: THE CHURCH ON SEPARATION

The Church's law holds that spouses are to maintain their common life unless a legitimate cause excuses them, and it recognizes such causes: adultery, subject to the conditions of canon 1152, grave danger of spirit or body to a spouse or to the children, and conduct that makes common life too hard. In urgent cases a spouse may act on their own authority.

The bond remains and neither is free to remarry. Nobody is required to stay in the house.

Summary of the Code of Canon Law, canons 1151-1155. Note for the leader: a legal text; consult the current text for exact wording.

Catechism Connection

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 1642 describes the grace of the sacrament as strengthening the spouses to bear one another's burdens, to forgive, and to love with a supernatural love.

CCC 1615 acknowledges directly that the teaching on indissolubility can seem impossible, and that it is livable only by grace.

CCC 2383 recognizes that separation may be legitimate, and that civil divorce may be tolerated where it is the only way to secure certain legal rights, the care of children, or the protection of inheritance. It does not use the language of protecting an endangered spouse; for danger, cite canons 1151 to 1153.

CCC 2373-2379 covers infertility, the suffering it causes, and the Church's support for research and for the fruitfulness of charity.

CCC 2842-2845 treats forgiveness, including the honest admission that it is not in our own power and requires grace.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

They Have No Wine reaches its lowest point tonight, and this is the payoff of planting it in Session 5. Use the phrase directly. Then hold the resolution for next week.

The Bridegroom is present at the cross, which the group found in Session 5. If someone raises it, affirm it and hold.

Watch everyone. This session surfaces more than any other: family histories, a parent's drinking, a participant's own past. Plan to stay afterward, have the priest's number in your pocket, and make no other commitments that evening.

IF A COUPLE IS IN AN IRREGULAR SITUATION (LEADER ONLY)

A participant who discloses abuse in their family of origin. Receive it, thank them, do not probe for detail, and follow the safeguarding note. Ask what support they already have. Do not make it the room's business.

A participant who discloses something concerning about their own relationship. This is the most

serious thing that can happen in a marriage preparation study, and it does happen. Do not evaluate the relationship. Do not tell them to call off the wedding, and do not reassure them either. Get the priest involved this week, and if there is any indication of danger, act on the safeguarding note immediately.

A couple carrying a recent loss. A miscarriage, a parent's death, a serious diagnosis. Ask them privately beforehand whether this is a session they would rather sit out. Giving them the choice is a kindness. Making them explain in front of the room is not.

A participant whose parent had an affair. The betrayal material will hit them hard. Watch for it, follow up privately, and do not assume you know which parent they blame.

Anyone who says they will simply never let any of this happen to them. Be gentle. Many couples do not expect these hardships to touch them. Say it once, kindly, and move on.

Session Goals

1. The group reads 1 Corinthians 13 as a description of behavior under provocation rather than as a wedding sentiment.
2. The group finds marriages in Scripture that suffered, and can say what carried them.
3. Every participant knows that legitimate separation exists, that the bond remains, and that no one is asked to remain in danger.
4. Every participant can distinguish forgiveness, reconciliation, restored trust, and the absence of consequences.
5. Every couple names, out loud, the two people they would call at two in the morning.
6. The safeguarding information is stated in the room, plainly, whether or not anyone appears to need it.

Time Note and Pre-Chosen Cuts

Ninety-minute plan. Opening prayer, 4 minutes. Win questions, 8. Reading 1 Corinthians 13 aloud, 5. Live discovery moment, 14. Build questions 1 through 4, 22. Separation and forgiveness material, 20. The steelman, 12. Send and Live It, 3. Closing prayer, 2.

Seventy-five minute plan. Cut Build question 4 and the Dig Deeper box. Never cut the separation material and never cut the four distinctions about forgiveness.

Do not schedule anything after this session. Stay in the room. The conversations that matter tonight happen while you are stacking chairs.

Part 2. Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

OPENING PRAYER

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lord Jesus, you did not promise us an easy road and you did not leave us on it alone. Tonight we are going to talk about the hardest things that happen to people who love each other. Give us courage instead of fear. For anyone here already carrying something heavy, be close to them. And teach us now, while it is calm, what we will need to know when it is not. Amen.

Win. Getting Started

Open questions. No wrong answers, no answer box. Let every couple speak once before anyone speaks twice.

- A.** Tell us about a marriage you know that went through something hard and came out the other side. What did you actually see?
- B.** Who is the person in your life who shows up when things go wrong, and what do they do?

Build. Into the Text

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 aloud, slowly. Ask the room to listen for how many of the descriptions are negative.

- 1.** Count the negatives in verses 4 through 7. What does that tell you about the situation St. Paul is describing?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Not jealous, not boastful, not arrogant, not rude, does not insist on its own way, not irritable, not resentful. Most of the passage describes what love refrains from doing.

You only need that list when you are being provoked. This is not a description of a wedding day. It is a description of somebody keeping their temper in year eleven.

Note the context if it helps: St. Paul wrote this to a congregation that was fighting about status. It is a rebuke before it is a poem.

LIVE DISCOVERY MOMENT

The instruction: find marriages in Scripture that suffered. Any kind of suffering. Write down what went wrong, and what, if anything, held.

Twelve minutes, in pairs. Do not give them references.

What they will find: Abraham and Sarah, waiting decades and handling it badly in between. Elkanah and Hannah, where verse 8 has a husband saying something well meant and useless. Job and his wife, who lost the same ten children he did. Hosea and Gomer, from Session 3. Zechariah and Elizabeth, old and childless. Joseph and Mary, who flee a country and later lose their son for three days.

Then ask two questions. First: does Scripture ever present a marriage that suffered as a failed marriage? Second: what actually held, in the cases where something held?

Expect these answers: God's promise, prayer, and time. Expect somebody to notice that in most of these cases the couple never received an explanation.

2. Look at 1 Samuel 1:8, where Elkanah asks Hannah whether he is not more to her than ten sons. What is he doing, and how does it go?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He is trying, and he is minimizing her grief while trying. He wants her to be consoled by him rather than to be sad.

The text does not condemn him, and it does not say it worked. She goes to the temple and weeps bitterly, which is what she needed to do.

Practical lesson, said plainly: when your spouse is grieving, the instinct to fix it by offering yourself as compensation is well meant and does not work. Sit with them instead.

3. In sickness and in health is in the vow. What kinds of sickness are you actually likely to face?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Most couples picture cancer at seventy. They are at least as likely to meet depression at thirty two, a chronic pain condition, an anxiety disorder, an addiction that arrives slowly, or a parent's dementia that lands on both of them.

Ask the room whether they have discussed mental illness as a live possibility rather than as an abstraction. Most have not.

Then say the useful sentence: the vow already covers it. Nothing will need renegotiating. What they will need is to know where the help is.

SEPARATION, AND WHAT THE CHURCH ACTUALLY PERMITS

4. If the bond cannot be dissolved, is a spouse obliged to keep living with the other no matter what?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

No, and this surprises most Catholics. The Church's law holds that spouses maintain their common life unless a legitimate cause excuses them, and recognizes causes including adultery, subject to the conditions of canon 1152, grave danger of spirit or body to a spouse or to the children, and conduct that makes common life too hard. In urgent cases a spouse may act on their own authority (canons 1151-1155).

The bond remains and neither is free to remarry. But nobody is required to stay in the house.

The Catechism also recognizes that civil divorce may be tolerated where it is the only way to secure certain legal rights, the care of children, or the protection of inheritance (CCC 2383). Where the issue is danger, the ground is the separation law, canons 1151 to 1153.

Say the sentence directly, because somebody's grandmother believed otherwise: the sacrament is not a reason to be hurt.

BUILD THEN PRESS: PERMANENCE TRAPS PEOPLE, AND THE CHURCH KNOWS IT

Build it at full strength.

Build it honestly. This is the humane version of the objection and it deserves better than a slogan.

Whatever the theology, the practical effect of teaching that marriage cannot end is that people stay in situations they should leave. Women in particular have been counseled to endure, told to offer it up, told that their suffering was redemptive, and told that leaving would scandalize the parish. The Church may formally permit separation, but the formal permission is invisible next to the constant emphasis on permanence, and the message people actually receive is the one that keeps them in the house. If a teaching's predictable effect is that vulnerable people remain in harm, the teaching bears some responsibility for that effect regardless of its intentions.

Then press.

Concede the whole first half, and concede it without qualification. That counsel was given. It was wrong. It was not the Church's teaching, it was given by people who spoke for her, and the harm was real. Do not defend it.

Press first on the remedy the objection implies. If the bond were dissolvable, the person in danger would not be safer tonight; they would have a different legal status. What makes someone safe is leaving, help, and money, all of which the Church's own teaching permits, and which her ministers should actively help a person reach through civil, diocesan, and professional channels. The failure here has been pastoral rather than doctrinal, and the fix is pastoral: say the permission out loud, constantly, which is exactly what this session is doing.

Press second on what the permanence protects. The same permanence a violent man could exploit is the reason a woman whose husband has a stroke at forty is not quietly replaced. Any safeguard can be turned into a weapon by someone determined to do so. The question is what the arrangement does across the whole range of cases.

Do not overclaim. Do not say that no one was ever harmed by bad counsel, and do not claim the Church has fully reckoned with it. Say that the teaching permits separation, that failing to say so loudly has been a real fault, and that in this room it is being said loudly.

Then read the safeguarding information aloud, including the hotline number, whether or not anyone in the room appears to need it.

FORGIVENESS, AND THREE THINGS IT IS NOT

5. Distinguish forgiveness from reconciliation, from restored trust, and from the absence of consequences.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Forgiveness is releasing the debt. It is commanded (Matthew 6:14-15), it is an act of the will rather than a feeling, and it usually has to be repeated more than once for the same offense.

Reconciliation takes two people. You can forgive alone. You cannot reconcile alone.

Restored trust is earned by changed behavior over time. Forgiving somebody does not mean giving them the passwords back on Tuesday.

The absence of consequences is not part of any of it. A person can be genuinely forgiven and still lose something because of what they did.

Say why it matters. Couples who have never been given these distinctions either withhold forgiveness because they think it means pretending, or grant it and then feel obliged to act as though nothing happened. Both are avoidable.

DIG DEEPER: THE WINE THAT RAN OUT

Session 5 planted a phrase. Tonight it lands. When a marriage has nothing left in the jars, that is not a failure of planning and it is not proof that the wrong two people married each other.

Notice the sequence at Cana. Somebody noticed. Somebody said it out loud to the only person who could do anything. And the servants were told to do whatever he said.

That is the whole pastoral strategy of this study: notice, say it, and do what he tells you. Next week finishes the story.

COUPLE CONVERSATION (JUST THE TWO OF YOU, NOT THE ROOM)

Just the two of you. This is the practical heart of the session.

Who are the two people we would call at two in the morning? Say their names. If we cannot name two, that is the thing to fix this year.

What is our full financial picture, including every debt, loan, and obligation either of us has? If either of us has not disclosed something, say it tonight.

What is the hardest thing in my family history that you should know before we marry? Both of you answer.

6. In John 19, Mary stands at the cross. What is she doing, and what is she not doing?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

She is standing there. She is not fixing it, not explaining it, and not being spared it.

The group found this scene in Session 5 while tracing the hour. The woman from the wedding at Cana is at the cross, and he speaks to her with the same word.

Say the application plainly: much of what a spouse will be asked to do in the hard years is to remain present at something they cannot fix. That is not failure. In that passage the center is Christ's self-offering, and her faithful presence is a profound witness of persevering love.

Send. Carrying It Out

Open questions again. No answer boxes.

Y. What is the one thing from tonight you most hope you will remember in fifteen years?

Z. What would you want your spouse to do for you, specifically, on the worst day of your life?

Live It This Week

- **Name your two people, and tell them.** Call the two you would ring at two in the morning and ask them, out loud, to be those people. Most will say yes and be honored that you asked.
- **Full financial disclosure this week.** Every debt, every loan, every obligation, both directions. Sit down with actual numbers rather than summaries.
- **Write down where the help is.** Your parish's number, a counselor your parish recommends, and the domestic violence hotline. Put them in both your phones now, while nothing is wrong.

- **Read Revelation 19:6-9 before the last session,** and read Ephesians 5:31-32 one more time alongside it.

Closing Prayer

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you know exactly what it costs to keep a promise that hurts. You did not come down, and you did not stop loving us. Give us that kind of steadiness. Prepare us now, while things are good, for the days when they are not. Where anyone here is already in the dark, be there with them. And when our wine runs out, make us the kind of people who notice, and say it, and do whatever you tell us.

Sts. Louis and Zelie Martin, pray for us. Our Lady of Sorrows, pray for us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

1 Corinthians 13:7

Part 3. Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in the order it appears.

- 1 Corinthians 13:1-13. The session text, read as a description of behavior under provocation.
- 1 Samuel 1:1-18, especially verse 8. Hannah's grief and Elkanah's well meant answer.
- Job 2:9-10. Job's wife, handled with sympathy.
- Luke 2:41-51. The Holy Family loses a child for three days.
- John 19:25-27. Mary at the cross. The group met this in Session 5.
- Matthew 6:14-15. Forgiveness commanded.
- Canons 1151-1155. Separation while the bond remains.
- Revelation 19:6-9 and Ephesians 5:31-32. Assigned reading before Session 14.

Catechism Paragraphs Used

CCC 1615, 1642, 2383, 2842-2845. Code of Canon Law, canons 1151-1155.

Before Next Session

Read Revelation 19:6-9 before Session 14, and read Ephesians 5:31-32 once more alongside it.

Session 14. The Domestic Church and the Marriage Supper

Movement V. The Home and the Destination

Passages: Revelation 19:6-9; Revelation 21:1-4, 9-11; Matthew 22:23-32; Acts 2:42-47; Ephesians 5:31-32

Part 1. Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. That the group discovers where they have already been hearing the words of Revelation 19:9, and can say what it means that marriage is a sign which will one day give way to the thing it signifies.

Catholic Touchstone. Marriage is a sign of the union of Christ and the Church, and signs give way to what they signify. The Christian home is where that sign is lived daily, which is why the Church calls the family a domestic church (CCC 1655-1658; Lumen Gentium 11).

What You Need to Know

This is the last night. Two things have to happen: the threads have to close, and the couples have to be sent. Everything else is optional.

Plan the ending in advance rather than trusting the evening to produce one. Know exactly what your final five minutes are.

THE BIBLE ENDS WITH A WEDDING

Session 1 said it in one line and then left it alone for thirteen weeks. Tonight it pays.

Scripture opens in a garden with a marriage and closes in a city with a marriage supper. In between, God calls himself a husband, Christ calls himself the bridegroom, and St. Paul says that the Genesis verse about one flesh was about Christ and the Church all along. The last book brings it home: the marriage of the Lamb has come, his Bride has made herself ready, and blessed are those invited to the supper (Revelation 19:6-9).

THEY HAVE ALREADY HEARD VERSE 9

This is the discovery of the night and it is worth protecting carefully.

In the Roman Rite, when the priest holds up the host and says behold the Lamb of God, he continues with an invitation adapted from Revelation 19:9 about those called to the supper of the Lamb. It is an adaptation rather than the verse verbatim. Your couples have said the response to that hundreds of times. Almost none of them know where it comes from.

Do not tell them. Let them find it, and then wait for the room to react.

THE BRIDE IS A CITY, AND SHE IS PEOPLE

In Revelation 21 the imagery moves. The Bride is the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven, and one of the angels says explicitly, come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb, and then shows John a city (21:9-10).

The point is that the Bride is not an individual soul and not an abstraction. She is a people, assembled, with walls and gates and a common life. Marriage is a sign of something corporate, which is exactly why a Christian marriage is not a private arrangement.

THE HARD VERSE, HANDLED HONESTLY

In Matthew 22:30 Jesus says that in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels in heaven. Do not hide this and do not rush past it. It means marriage is temporary. The sacramental bond is for this life.

Say what follows and say what does not follow. What follows is that marriage is a sign, and signs are not needed once you have the thing. What does not follow is that the love is discarded or that the spouses become strangers. The Church has not defined the details of how relationships persist in the resurrection, and you should not invent them. What she holds out is the hope that nothing good is lost in God.

For a room of engaged couples this lands as both sobering and freeing. Their marriage is not the ultimate thing. It is a sign of the ultimate thing, and that is a higher status than being ultimate would give it, because a sign of the marriage supper is exactly what a wedding ring is for.

THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

The Second Vatican Council called the family a domestic church, and the Catechism takes up the phrase directly (Lumen Gentium 11; CCC 1655-1658, 2204-2205). The idea is older than the phrase: the New Testament repeatedly describes churches meeting in houses.

Give the couples something concrete, because the phrase evaporates without it.

- **Prayer with a shape.** A grace before meals, a decade in the car, night prayer together. Ordinary and repeatable beats ambitious and abandoned.
- **Sunday as an actual boundary.** Decide now what Sunday will look like, before jobs and children decide it for you.
- **Hospitality.** The first Christians broke bread in their homes (Acts 2:46), and Scripture names churches that met in houses (Romans 16:5). A married couple who feed people are doing something ecclesial, not merely social.
- **Forgiveness as a practice.** Session 13 gave the distinctions. A domestic church is a place where apologies are ordinary rather than dramatic.
- **The faith taught by parents.** The Catechism calls parents the first heralds of the faith for their children (CCC 1656) and says they bear the first responsibility for their education (CCC 2223). Not the parish. Them.

THE GOOD WINE KEPT UNTIL NOW

Close the Cana thread. The steward said the bridegroom had kept the good wine until now, which reverses how anyone runs a party. Session 13 was the empty jars. Tonight is the answer: with God the best is later, and Scripture's final vision includes a wedding feast.

Say it to a room of people planning receptions: your wedding is a rehearsal for a bigger one.

ENDING THE STUDY

Do the commissioning as written in the discussion guide, and do not extend it. Say the names of every couple aloud, with their wedding dates if you have them. Pray over them. Then stop.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- Genesis 2:24. Where it started. Sixth and final appearance in this study.

- Isaiah 25:6 and Isaiah 62:5. The messianic feast, and God rejoicing over his people as a bridegroom over a bride.
- Hosea 2:19-20. The betrothal. Session 3.
- John 2:1-11. The wedding where the good wine came last. Session 5.
- Ephesians 5:31-32. The great mystery. Session 6.
- Revelation 19:6-9 and 21:1-4, 9-11. Where it arrives.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: AN EARLY CHRISTIAN DESCRIPTION OF A CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

Writing to his wife around the turn of the third century, Tertullian described the beauty of a marriage between two Christians: two who share one hope, one discipline, and one service, who pray together and fast together, who instruct and encourage one another, and who are found together in the church and at the table.

Note for your couples: Tertullian later left the communion of the Church, and he is quoted here as an early witness rather than as a saint. What he describes is what tonight is about, and Christians were doing it by the early third century.

Summary of To His Wife, Book II, chapter 8. Note for the leader: an early Christian author, not a canonized saint.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL ON THE FAMILY AS A CHURCH

The Council taught that the family is, in a sense, a domestic church, in which parents by word and example are the first heralds of the faith to their children.

The word to notice is heralds. Not supporters of the parish's efforts. First heralds. The Catechism carries the same language at CCC 1656 and says at CCC 2223 that parents bear the first responsibility for their children's education.

Lumen Gentium 11, and CCC 1655-1658. Note for the leader: a council document, not the voice of a canonized saint.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM ON MAKING A HOME INTO A CHURCH

Preaching to ordinary married Christians, St. John Chrysostom urged husbands and wives to make the household itself into a church, and to take up Scripture together at home rather than leaving it to the assembly.

He is a good final voice because he asks for nothing exotic. Read together, pray together, eat together, and let the house be consistent with the faith.

Summary of a theme in his preaching to married Christians, associated especially with Homily 20 on Ephesians. Note for the leader: verify the locus before quoting him, and do not attribute wording to him.

Catechism Connection

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 1655-1658 treats the family as the domestic church, describes the home as the first school of Christian life, and includes a warm note about those who live alone.

CCC 2204-2206 develops the family as a communion of persons and a sign of the communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

CCC 1656 and 2223 state that parents are the first and principal educators of their children in the faith.

CCC 1642 returns one last time: the grace of the sacrament sustains the spouses on the way to eternal life.

CCC 1618-1620 is worth naming tonight, since consecrated celibacy and marriage illuminate each other, and both point at the same wedding feast.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

All three threads close tonight, in this order.

One Flesh. Genesis 2:24 has appeared in Sessions 1, 4, 6, 8, 10, and 12. Tonight it arrives at the union it was always pointing at.

The Bridegroom. Planted in Session 3 with the prophets, developed at Cana, named outright in Ephesians 5, and resolved tonight at the marriage supper of the Lamb.

They Have No Wine. Planted in Session 5, deepened in Sessions 10 and 11, at its lowest in Session 13, and answered tonight: the good wine was kept until now.

Do not rush the discovery moment. The recognition that they have been hearing Revelation 19:9 at every Mass since childhood is the single best moment available in this study. Let the silence after it be long.

IF A COUPLE IS IN AN IRREGULAR SITUATION (LEADER ONLY)

A couple whose wedding is far off, or whose plans have changed. Some couples finish a study like this and quietly realize they are not ready, or a wedding gets postponed. Make sure the commissioning does not exclude them: bless the couples, not the calendar.

A couple who have grown distant during the study. Occasionally fourteen weeks of honesty reveals something. Do not pretend not to notice, and do not confront them in front of the room. Follow up privately within the week and involve the priest.

A participant who is not baptized, or not Catholic. They have sat through fourteen weeks of Catholic teaching. Thank them by name tonight, sincerely, and mean it. If any of them ask what comes next, connect them with the priest rather than pressing.

Everyone else. Tell them, plainly, that the study ending is not the end of their preparation, and that you would like to hear how the weddings go. Then actually follow up. A leader who writes to each couple in the week of their wedding is doing more good than another session would have done.

Session Goals

1. The group discovers on its own where the words of Revelation 19:9 are heard at every Mass.
2. Every participant can say why the Bride in Revelation is a city and what that implies about their marriage not being private.
3. The group handles Matthew 22:30 honestly and can state what follows from it and what does not.
4. Every couple leaves with one concrete practice for the domestic church that they have named out loud.
5. All three threads are closed.
6. Every couple is prayed over by name before they leave.

Time Note and Pre-Chosen Cuts

Ninety-minute plan. Opening prayer, 4 minutes. Win questions, 10. Live discovery moment, 15. Build questions 1 through 4, 22. The steelman, 14. Domestic church material and Build questions 5 through 6, 15. Commissioning and closing prayer, 10.

Seventy-five minute plan. Cut Build question 5 and the Dig Deeper box, and shorten the Win section to one question. Never cut the discovery moment and never cut the commissioning.

Guard the last ten minutes absolutely. If you have to abandon a question mid answer to protect the commissioning, do it.

Part 2. Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

OPENING PRAYER

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lord God, fourteen weeks ago we opened to the first page of the Bible and found a wedding. Tonight we come to the last page and find another one. Show us tonight what all of this has been for. Send us out to our own weddings knowing what we are doing, and keep us until the day you gather us at yours. Amen.

Win. Getting Started

Open questions. No wrong answers, no answer box. Let every couple speak once before anyone speaks twice.

- A.** What is the single thing from these fourteen weeks that you did not expect and will not forget?
- B.** Describe the home you want in ten years. Not the house. The home.

Build. Into the Text

Read Revelation 19:6-9 aloud, then Revelation 21:1-4 and 21:9-11. Do not comment yet.

LIVE DISCOVERY MOMENT

Do this before anything else, and do not hint.

The instruction: read Revelation 19:9 again, slowly. Somebody in this room has heard those words hundreds of times. Where?

Give them a full two minutes of silence before anyone speaks. Do not rescue it. If nobody has it after two minutes, ask what the priest says while holding up the host.

What they will find: in the Roman Rite, after behold the Lamb of God, the priest continues with an invitation adapted from this verse about those called to the supper of the Lamb. Point out that it is an adaptation, not the verse word for word.

Then let the room sit with it. Most of them have said the response since childhood without knowing they were being invited to a wedding.

Second instruction, eight minutes: go back through the whole study and collect every place you can remember where God or Christ was called a bridegroom, or the people were called a bride. Prophets, Gospels, Paul, Revelation.

Then ask: what has this study actually been about? Take the answers. Somebody will say it out loud, and it should be them and not you.

- 1.** In Revelation 21:9 an angel offers to show John the Bride, the wife of the Lamb, and then shows him a city. What is that telling you?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

That the Bride is a people, not an individual soul and not an idea. She has walls, gates, and a common life.

Which means marriage is a sign of something corporate. That is why the Church has insisted throughout this

study that a wedding is an ecclesial act, ordinarily public, celebrated in canonical form before the Church's witness rather than privately arranged.

Ask the room what it means for their marriage that the thing it signifies is a city full of people.

2. In Matthew 22:30, Jesus says that in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage. What does that do to everything we have said for fourteen weeks?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

It tells us marriage is temporary. The bond is for this life. Do not soften this, and do not let anyone in the room pretend he did not say it.

What follows: marriage is a sign, and a sign is not needed once you have the thing it points to. That is not a demotion. A wedding ring is not diminished by the marriage it signifies.

What does not follow: that the love is discarded, that spouses become strangers, or that any of it was wasted. The Church has not defined how relationships persist in the resurrection, so do not invent an answer. What she holds out is the hope that nothing good is lost in God.

For a room of engaged couples this is freeing. Their marriage is not the ultimate thing, which means it does not have to bear a weight it was never built to carry. No spouse can be someone's final happiness, and expecting it is how marriages break.

BUILD THEN PRESS: IF IT ENDS AT DEATH, IT WAS NEVER ULTIMATE, AND SAYING SO IS CRUEL

Build it at full strength.

Build it with real sympathy. Somebody in your room has a widowed grandmother.

You have spent fourteen weeks telling us that marriage is a sacrament, indissoluble, a sign of Christ and the Church, worth ordering our entire lives around. And now you say it ends at death and there is no marriage in the resurrection. Then the whole edifice is provisional. Worse, it is a cruel thing to say to a woman who has been married for fifty years and buried her husband. Telling her that the central relationship of her life was temporary scaffolding, and that in heaven he will be no more to her than anyone else, is not consolation. It sounds like the Church taking back with one hand what she gave with the other.

Then press.

Concede that the verse says what it says, and that a careless presentation of it has genuinely wounded widows. Do not blunt the text and do not blunt the pain.

Press first on what temporary means here. A scaffold is discarded because it was never the point. A sign is fulfilled because the thing it pointed to has arrived. The Church's claim is the second, not the first. Marriage ends the way an engagement ends at a wedding: not by being cancelled.

Press second on what the Church actually says and does not say. She teaches that the sacramental bond is for this life. She has not taught that the persons forget each other, that the love is annulled, or that the years meant nothing. Anyone who says those things has gone past the doctrine, and you should say so plainly rather than defending them.

Press third on the pastoral gain, which is real. If a marriage is not ultimate, then no spouse has to be somebody's final happiness. That is a mercy for both of them. Every marriage that has tried to bear that weight has cracked under it.

Do not overclaim. Do not promise the widow that she will be married to her husband in heaven in the way she

was here, because the Church has not said that. Say that nothing good is lost in God, that what she is longing for is what marriage was pointing at all along, and that she will not be given less than she had.

THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

3. The Council calls the family a domestic church. What would have to be true of a home for that phrase to mean anything?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Push for specifics rather than sentiment. Prayer with an actual shape. Sunday treated as a real boundary. Hospitality, since the first Christians broke bread in their homes and Scripture names churches meeting in houses (Acts 2:46; Romans 16:5). Forgiveness practiced ordinarily rather than dramatically. And the faith taught by the parents themselves, since the Catechism calls them the first heralds of the faith for their children (CCC 1656) and says they bear the first responsibility for their education (CCC 2223).

Ask each couple to name one, out loud, that they will actually start. One. Then hold them to it in the Live It section.

Warn them: ordinary and repeatable beats ambitious and abandoned. A decade in the car every day for thirty years will form a family. A plan for an hour of family adoration nightly will last eleven days.

DIG DEEPER: MARRIAGE AND CELIBACY, POINTING THE SAME DIRECTION

Session 4 ended with Jesus placing the vocation of those who renounce marriage for the kingdom right beside the teaching on permanence. Tonight explains why they belong together.

Marriage is a sign of the union of Christ and the Church. Consecrated celibacy is a life lived as though that union has already arrived. One points forward and the other lives ahead of time, and both are aimed at the same wedding feast (CCC 1618-1620).

Practical version for your couples: the priest who assists at their marriage is not a spectator at somebody else's vocation. He is the other half of the same sign. And remember from Session 7 that in the Latin Church the spouses themselves are the ministers.

4. Go back to Cana one last time. The steward said the good wine had been kept until now. What does that mean for a couple standing three months out from their wedding?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

That with God the best is later. Every human party front loads the good wine because people stop noticing. God runs it the other way.

Session 13 was the empty jars, and it is honest about what marriages actually meet. Tonight is the rest of the sentence: Scripture's final vision includes a wedding feast, and the wine at that one has been aging since the beginning.

Say it plainly to a room full of people planning receptions: your wedding is a rehearsal for a bigger one.

COUPLE CONVERSATION (JUST THE TWO OF YOU, NOT THE ROOM)

The last one. Just the two of you.

Name the one practice we are actually starting, this week, that will make our home a domestic church. One, not five. Say when and where it happens.

Then say to each other, out loud, the thing you most want to be true of your marriage in fifty years.

COMMISSIONING

Guard ten minutes for this and follow it exactly.

One. Ask each couple to stand, one at a time. Say their names aloud, and their wedding date if you have it.

Two. Ask the rest of the room to extend a hand toward them while you pray a short prayer over them by name. Keep it to two or three sentences per couple.

Three. When every couple has been prayed for, pray the closing prayer below with the whole room standing.

Four. Tell them the two things they should take with them: the sealed sheet from Session 8, which goes somewhere they will find it on their first anniversary, and the Before the Altar list, which is now a checklist rather than a devotion.

Then stop. Do not add a summary of the fourteen weeks. Let the blessing be the last thing.

Send. Carrying It Out

Open questions again. No answer boxes.

Y. On your wedding day, when you hear the priest say behold the Lamb of God, what will you now hear that you would not have heard fourteen weeks ago?

Z. Who is the first person you are going to tell about the wedding you just found at the end of the Bible?

Live It This Week

- **Start the one practice this week.** The single thing you named in the Couple Conversation. This week, not after the wedding.
- **Put the sealed sheet somewhere you will find it on your first anniversary.** Both halves. Do not read it again before then.
- **Work the Before the Altar list as a checklist.** Fourteen weeks of items are now one page of things to finish before the day.
- **Invite somebody to dinner.** The first Christians broke bread in their homes, and some churches met in houses. Start before the wedding rather than after, because the habit is easier to begin than to add.
- **Go to confession together before the wedding,** and read the nuptial blessing aloud once more the week of.

Closing Prayer

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord God, you began the Scriptures with a wedding and you will end all things with one. You have brought these couples through fourteen weeks and you know exactly what each of them is carrying tonight.

Bring them to their wedding day free, whole, and unafraid. Give them homes where you are prayed to, where forgiveness is ordinary, and where the door is open. When their wine runs out, let them notice, and say so, and do whatever you tell them. And keep them, through every year you give them, until you seat them at the supper of the Lamb.

Our Lady, Queen of Families, pray for us. St. Joseph, pray for us. Sts. Louis and Zelie Martin, pray for us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Revelation 19:9

Part 3. Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in the order it appears.

- Revelation 19:6-9. The marriage of the Lamb.
- Revelation 21:1-4 and 21:9-11. The Bride who is a city.
- Matthew 22:23-32, especially verse 30. Handled honestly.
- Genesis 2:24. Sixth and final appearance.
- Ephesians 5:31-32. Read alongside Revelation 19.
- John 2:9-10. The good wine kept until now.
- Acts 2:42-47, especially verse 46, on breaking bread in their homes; and Romans 16:5 for a church meeting in a house.
- Lumen Gentium 11. The family as domestic church.

Catechism Paragraphs Used

CCC 1618-1620, 1642, 1655-1658, 2204-2206, 2223.

Before Next Session

Nothing further is assigned. Go to your weddings.