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 fiance 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.