

# Session 7. Not Just a Ceremony

## *Movement II. Christ Restores It*

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

## Part 1. Leader Preparation Guide

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### 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 of 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

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*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.