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 fiance 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.