

# What Makes a Catholic Union Different From Other Marriages

▲ by Maria C. Morrow

Marriage existed long before Christianity, so we might ask ourselves: Did Christianity do anything to transform marriage, to make it distinct from what had come before?

And in our cultural context today, we might ask ourselves a similar question: Is Catholic marriage in any way distinct from the other marriages we see in our world?

St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians answers these two questions with a resounding yes. Paul discusses how Christians are called to live in love: "So be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God for a fragrant aroma" (Eph 5:1-2).

Christ's life, death and resurrection transformed everything about how to live. Thus it is no surprise that marriage, despite

predating Christianity, also took on a new meaning, which Paul is eager to explain.

Marriage is a distinct way of "living in love." It is a way of "making the most of the opportunity," as Paul says in verse 16.

This perception of marriage is a far cry from the institution of convenience, usefulness or pleasure. Rather, it is a call to service of Christ in a particular context with its own demands of running a Christian household and raising children to serve the Lord.

As husband and wife share the common purpose of loving and serving God, they are united in a unique way, finding in each other a call to embody Christ's sacrificial love as they pursue holiness in their marriage and thus their lives together.

Paul speaks of the great mystery of the unity of Christ and the Church. Christ loved the Church to the point of death on the

cross, and in his death, all his followers became part of his body, such that the Church is the body of Christ.

Quoting Genesis, Paul states, "a man shall leave father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh" (Eph 5:31). This is an important instruction about the reality of marriage, which has greater significance given the relationship of Christ and the Church.

The marriage relationship can be a source of great joy and comfort, but it also entails difficulty and sacrifice, just as does Christian life more generally.

When undertaken together in the Christian spirit of living in love, even these sacrifices and sufferings can be transformed and become a source and sign of unity.

In the Catholic sacrament of marriage, there is something different than the concept of marriage that preceded it. Paul's description indicates something new and distinct, characterized by a common goal of Christian love and service, and inspired by Christ's love and sacrifice for the church.

There is consolation in the knowledge of shared love for Christ, as well as challenge found in the struggle to love as Christ loved; both the Eucharist and confession provide strength for this journey, making unity possible.

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## Prayer for Married Couples

Almighty and eternal God,

You blessed the union of married couples so that they might reflect the union of Christ with His Church: look with kindness on them.

Renew their marriage covenant, increase your love in them and strengthen their bond of peace so that, with their children, they may always rejoice in the gift of your blessing.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

— United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

*"A happy marriage is the union of two good forgivers."*

— Robert Quillen

# Don't Let the Stress of Engagement Dampen Enthusiasm for Marriage

▲ by John Grusso and Nicole M. Perone

(CNS) — It's hard to believe that this past January marked one year of being engaged. Both of us can remember every detail of that day: John recalls an atypically warm day preceded by a sleepless night of anticipation and excitement. Nicole mostly lived in ignorance and recalls nearly foiling the plot — first by slicing her left hand while cutting meat and then by going into work on a Saturday.

Everything had (surprisingly) gone according to plan. We were supposed to "meet" a friend for breakfast next to St. Thomas More, the Catholic chapel and center at Yale University. Once the two of us had arrived at the center, our friend would text us that she was "running late," and while we waited for her, we would go into the chapel to say a prayer. This was a normal occurrence for us, as we often found ourselves ducking into churches during our travels to offer up a quick prayer.

As soon as we entered the chapel, John got down on one knee. After quickly realizing that he was not joking, Nicole

practically tackled John before he could say his carefully rehearsed speech. After popping champagne with that same co-conspirator friend, we were off to lunch. The next surprise? Our parents awaited us. The icing on the cake? John's siblings joined us for celebratory ice cream. The entire day was bliss.

A few weeks later, wedding planning began in earnest. Each thing we did — from selecting our venue to designing save the date announcements — only increased our excitement. The best part about being engaged, though, has been dreaming together about what our shared life will look like.

However, we would be lying if we said it has all been easy.

We have found ourselves fighting with more frequency than either of us are comfortable with as the stress of planning an enormous event intensifies. The expectations of society, the emotions of friends and family (and our own), and the desire to make this experience memorable are all

difficult to navigate!

Compound that with the challenges of working in ministry, as well as experiencing massive life changes all at once, and it's an easy recipe for stress.

The stress certainly hasn't dampened our giddy enthusiasm toward our future marriage, but it is a reality of any healthy relationship that disagreements occur.

As we walk the premarital path, we are reminded of the journey of discipleship: It is not always easy or quite as fun as hashtag-laden posts on faith-based inspirational social media accounts might have us believe. Discipleship is HARD.

Christ asks us to enter into difficult places, go where we may not want to go and carry crosses along the way. While we need to be honest that the Christian life is not always easy, that should not stop us from consistently manifesting the joy that is a hallmark of our faith. While challenges and suffering certainly will arise, we know too of the blessed assurance that is God's unconditional love and Christ's sacrifice.

If we're being honest, we were both reticent to share this part of our engagement experience. Perhaps we were caught between the two realities of the social media generation:

On the one hand, you have carefully crafted public personas, who ensure that every photo is artfully filtered and every

caption is thoughtfully written to present an overall image of unattainable perfection. On the other hand, a simple scroll through Facebook's newsfeed will reveal many couples airing their "dirty laundry."

So, where is the middle ground? As Catholics, we are a "both-and" people. There is no reason that we can't be honest about some of the challenges of this chapter in our relationship without it totally coloring the experience.

We can be focused on the joyful, fun aspects of this time while acknowledging that it hasn't always been smooth sailing. We both thought it was important to share all aspects of what we've experienced throughout our engagement.

We have come to learn the lesson that many wise married couples have already learned (and shared with us): Marriage isn't always "easy," but if it is rooted in our Catholic faith, it can weather any storm; and while our storms may be quite minor these days, it is comforting to know that we have built our relationship and future marriage on such a rock-solid foundation.

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