



Marriage Formation Sessions April - May 2026

Read the article, '**A Basic Theology of Marriage**' as an introduction to the sessions

24th April 2026

Session 1: Covenantal Relationship in a Marriage

(This session helps couples to understand the meaning of a Covenant and to see that Marriage entails the living out of this covenantal relationship)

Reading Materials:

- Casti Connubii nn. 5-40
- Code of canon Law nn. 1055, 1643, 1646
- Humanae Vitae, n. 9

8th May 2026

Session 2: Marital Spirituality

(This session deals with a lived spirituality for married couples according to the mind of the Church)

Reading Materials:

- Familiaris Consortio (Part 3)
- Evangelium Vitae nn. 17ff
- Gaudium et spes n. 12ff

15th May 2026

Session 3: The Family is the Domestic Church

(This session explores the Family as the Domestic Church and the corresponding responsibilities of the Ecclesia Domestica)

Reading Materials:

- Lumen Gentium n. 11ff
- CCC nn 1655-1658
- Familiaris Consortio (Part 3)

22nd May 2026

Session 4: Amoris Laetitia and its Relevance on Marriage and Family Life

(This session explores the impact of this document on Marriage and Family life)

Reading Materials:

- The Apostolic Exhortation, Amoris Laetitia

A Basic Theology of Marriage

The twentieth century witnessed significant developments in the Church's theology of marriage, beginning with Pope Pius XI's 1930 encyclical *Casti Connubii*, passing through the Second Vatican Council and Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, and culminating in the manifold writings and original insights of Pope John Paul II. In fact, over two thirds of what the Catholic Church has ever said about marriage in her two thousand years history has come from John Paul II's pontificate.

The Second Vatican Council marked a shift from a merely "juridical" presentation of marriage, typical of many previous Church pronouncements, to a more "personalist" approach. In other words, rather than focusing merely on the objective "duties," "rights," and "ends" of marriage, the Council Fathers emphasized how these same duties, rights, and ends are informed by the intimate, interpersonal love of the spouses. "Such love, merging the human and the divine, leads the spouses to a free and mutual gift of themselves, a gift providing itself by gentle affection, and by deed; such love pervades the whole of their lives, growing better and growing greater by its generosity.

Explaining how conjugal love is a "merging of the human and the divine" is the task of a theology of marriage. While much more can and should be said than this article allows, we can at least present a basic marital theology. We'll start with a definition of marriage gleaned from Vatican II and Canon Law, and then explain each of its points.

A Definition of Marriage

Marriage is the intimate, exclusive, indissoluble communion of life and love entered by man and woman at the design of the Creator for the purpose of their own good and the procreation and education of children; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament.

Intimate communion of life and love: Marriage is the closest and most intimate of human friendships. It involves the sharing of the whole of a person's life with his/her spouse. Marriage calls for a mutual self-surrender so intimate and complete that spouses – without losing their individuality – become "one," not only in body, but in soul.

Exclusive communion of life and love: As a mutual gift of two persons to each other, this intimate union excludes such union with anyone else. It demands the total fidelity of the spouses. This exclusivity is essential for the good of the couple's children as well.

Indissoluble communion of life and love: Husband and wife are not joined by passing emotion or mere erotic inclination which, selfishly pursued, fades quickly away. They are joined in authentic conjugal love by the firm and irrevocable act of their own will. Once their mutual consent has been consummated by genital intercourse, an unbreakable bond is established between the spouses. For the baptized, this bond is sealed by the Holy Spirit and becomes absolutely indissoluble. Thus, the Church does not so much teach that divorce is wrong, but that divorce is impossible, regardless of its civil implications.

Entered by man and woman: The complementarity of the sexes is essential to marriage. There is such widespread confusion today about the nature of marriage that some would wish to extend a legal “right” to marry to two persons of the same sex. The very nature of marriage makes such a proposition impossible.

At the design of the Creator: God is the author of marriage. He inscribed the call to marriage in our very being by creating us as male and female. Marriage is governed by his laws, faithfully transmitted by his Bride, the Church. For marriage to be what it is, it must conform to these laws. Man, therefore, is not free to change the meaning and purposes of marriage.

For the purpose of their own good: “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gn 2:18). Conversely, it’s for their own good, for their benefit, enrichment, and ultimately their salvation, that a man and woman join their lives in marriage. Marriage is the most basic expression of the vocation to love that all men and women have as persons made in God’s image.

And the procreation and education of children: “By their very nature, the institution of marriage itself and conjugal love are ordained for the procreation and education of children and find in them their ultimate crown.” Children are not added on to marriage and conjugal love, but spring from the very heart of the spouses mutual self-giving, as its fruit and fulfillment. Intentional exclusion of children, then, contradicts the very nature and purpose of marriage.

Covenant: While marriage involves a legal contract, this must be subordinate to the spousal covenant which provides a stronger, more sacred framework for marriage. A covenant goes beyond the minimum rights and responsibilities guaranteed by a contract. A covenant calls the spouses to share in the free total, faithful, and fruitful love of God. For it is God who, in the image of his own Covenant with his people, joins the spouses in a more binding and sacred way than any human contract.

The dignity of a sacrament: Marriage between baptized persons is an efficacious sign of the union between Christ and the Church, and, as such, is a means of grace (see below for a more thorough discussion). The marriage of two non-baptized persons, or of one baptized person and one non-baptized person, is considered by the Church a “good and natural” marriage. While not sacramental, such marriages are holy unions that share in the same goods and purposes of sacramental marriage.

The Centrality of Marriage in God’s Plan

“Sacred Scripture begins with the creation of man and woman in the image and likeness of God and concludes with a vision of the ‘wedding feast of the Lamb.’ Scripture speaks throughout of marriage and its ‘mystery,’ its institution and the meaning God has given it, its origin and its end, ...the difficulties arising from sin, and its renewal ‘in the Lord.’” Throughout the Old Testament, God’s love for his people is described as the love of a husband for his bride. In the New Testament, Christ embodies this love. He comes as the Heavenly Bridegroom to unite himself indissolubly to his Bride, the Church.

Marriage, then, is not a peripheral issue in the Christian life. It finds itself right at the heart of the Christian mystery and, by means of its grand analogy, serves to illuminate it. All analogies are inadequate in their attempts to communicate God’s mystery. Yet, speaking of marriage and the family John Paul states, “In this entire world there is not a more perfect, more complete image of God, Unity and Community. There is no other human reality which corresponds more, humanly speaking, to that divine mystery.”

Pope John Paul II goes so far as to say that we cannot understand the Christian mystery unless we keep in mind the “great mystery” involved in the creation of man as male and female and the vocation of both to conjugal love. According to the analogy, God’s eternal plan is to “marry” us (see Hos 2:19). He wanted this eternal plan to be so present to us that he stamped an image of it in our very being by creating us male and female and calling us to marriage.

Male & Female: Image of God

The human person is made in God’s image (see Gn 1:27). John Paul II brings a dramatic development to Catholic thinking by positing this image not only in our humanity as individuals, but also in the communion of male and female.

As John Paul II says, “God is love and in himself he lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in his own image, ... God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion. Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.” The Pope continues, “Christian revelation recognizes two specific ways of realizing the vocation of the human person, in its entirety, to love: marriage, and virginity or celibacy. Either one is in its own proper form an actuation of the most profound truth of man, of his being ‘created in the image of God.’”

Thus, marriage and Christian celibacy are not in conflict, but stem from the very same call to the sincere gift of self in “nuptial” love. Every man is called, in some sense, to be both a husband and a father. Every woman is called, in some sense, to be both a wife and a mother. This is why the terms husband, wife, father, mother, brother, and sister are applicable to both marriage and the celibate vocation. Both, in different but complementary ways, form us into the one family of God.

Marriage is an earthly foreshadowing of the heavenly reality of love and communion. When Christ calls some to celibacy “for the sake of the kingdom” (Mt 19:12), he calls some to “leapfrog” over the sacrament in order to devote all of their desires for union to the marriage that alone can satisfy: the heavenly marriage of Christ and the Church.

Marriage: Sacrament of Christ & the Church

The marriage of Christians is a sacrament by virtue of the spouses’ baptisms. In other words, marriage is a living sign that truly communicates the love of Christ and the Church. The spouses’ vows lived out in their daily commitment, and most specifically in their “one flesh” union, constitute this living sign. As St. Paul says, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the church” (Eph 5:31-32).

Since the “one flesh” union of man and wife foreshadowed Christ and the Church right from “the beginning,” John Paul II speaks of marriage as the primordial sacrament. “All the sacraments of the new covenant find in a certain sense their prototype in marriage,” says the Holy Father. This is why Baptism is a “nuptial bath” and why the Eucharist is “the Sacrament of the Bridegroom and of the Bride.” When we receive the body of Christ into our own, in a mysterious way, like a bride, we conceive new life in us – life in the Holy Spirit. It is this same Holy Spirit that forms the bond that unites spouses in the Sacrament of Marriage.

This is the “profound mystery” in which marriage participates. The Eucharist, then, is the very source of Christian Marriage. “In the Eucharistic gift of charity the Christian family finds the foundation and soul of its ‘communion’ and its ‘mission,’” that is, to love as God loves.

The Marital Embrace

The free exchange of consent properly witnessed by the Church establishes the marriage bond. Sexual union consummates it – seals it, completes it, perfects it. Sexual union, then, is where the words of the wedding vows become flesh. The very “language” that God has inscribed in sexual intercourse is the language of the marriage covenant: the free commitment to a union of love that is indissoluble, faithful, and open to children.

If spouses wilfully contradict any of these goods of marriage in their sexual expressions, marital intimacy becomes less than God intended it to be. In turn, spouses, rather than renewing their vows through intercourse, contradict them. In practical terms, how healthy would a marriage be if spouses were regularly unfaithful to their vows? On the other hand, how healthy would a marriage be if spouses regularly renewed their vows, expressing an ever-increasing commitment to them?

The often disputed sexual moral teachings of the Church become lucid when seen through this lens. Like all sacramental realities, if sexual union (as the consummate expression of the sacrament of marriage) is truly to communicate God’s life and love, then it must accurately symbolize it.

Sexual union that is free, total, faithful, and open to new life (i.e., sexual union that truly expresses wedding vows) symbolizes and participates in the communion of Christ and the Church. Masturbation, fornication, adultery, intentionally sterilized sex, homosexual acts, etc.— none of these accurately symbolize, and thus never bring about the love of Christ for the Church. None of these behaviors are marital. Thus, for sexual union to consummate a marriage it must be performed in a “human manner” and be “per se suitable for the generation of children.”

Marriage and the Rupture Caused by Sin

This sublime vision of marriage often meets with much cynicism and resistance. When Jesus proclaimed the permanent nature of marriage, even his disciples said to him, “If this is the situation for a husband and a wife, it is better not to marry” (Mt 19:10).

Universal experience reveals that marriage is wrought with difficulties. “According to faith, the discord we notice so painfully does not stem from the nature of man and woman, nor from the nature of their relations, but from sin. As a break with God, the first sin had for its first consequence the rupture of the original communion between man and woman.”

History affirms the poignant story in Genesis attesting to the havoc wrought in the sexual relationship as a result of our disobedience to God. Male and female differences, rather than complementing one another and bringing about communion, are often a cause of great tension and division. Sexual attraction itself, originally given by God to be the power to love as he loves, tends to be – because of sin – a desire for self-gratification at the expense of others.

All of this inflicts deep personal wounds on husbands, wives, and their children who, in turn, often grow up to repeat the same fallen patterns of relating. Hence, it becomes easy to lose faith in marriage. Even Moses conceded to human weakness and allowed divorce. Yet, as Jesus says, “For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce.” But then he adds that “from the beginning it was not so” (Mt 19:8).

Christ is able to restore God’s original plan for marriage as the norm because, unlike Moses, Christ is able to remove our “hardness of heart.” His miracle at the wedding in Cana tells the story of marital redemption. If couples have “run out of the wine” needed to live marriage according to God’s original plan, Christ came into the world to “restore the wine” in super abundance (see Jn 2).

A Call to Conversion

If men and women are to experience marriage as God intended it “in the beginning,” they must consciously renounce all that is contrary to God’s plan and continually surrender themselves to the grace of redemption. The cross of Christ, therefore, lies at the center of the Church’s theology of marriage.

Since it was man and woman’s turning away from God that distorted their relationship in the first place, it makes sense that restoring marriage requires a radical return to God. Thus, an authentic theology of marriage is not only informational but, above all, transformational. It calls couples to a life of ongoing personal conversion. Only as spouses renounce themselves and take up their crosses to follow Christ can they experience the true joys of marriage that God ardently wishes to shower upon them.

Marriage and family life find themselves, as Pope John Paul II explains, “at the center of the great struggle between good and evil, between life and death, between love and all that is opposed to love.” Living the truth about marriage, then, is a very difficult struggle, even for those with solid moral formation. This struggle brings us to the heart of the spiritual battle (Eph 6:12) that we must fight as Christians if we are to resist evil (in the world and in ourselves) and love each other as Christ loves his Bride, the Church.

Good News for the World

History tells the tale of entire nations separating from the Church because of disputes over the nature and meaning of marriage. In the face of fierce persecution and resistance, right up to our own day, the Church stands firm in her teaching. Why is the Church so obstinate? Because marriage is the primordial sacrament of God's love. To diminish in any way the nature and meaning of married love is to diminish the nature and meaning of God's love.

The Church's teaching on marriage can seem almost impossible to live. "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Mt 19:26). As we surrender our lives to the grace of redemption, it is truly possible to know the joy and freedom that come from living and loving according to our true dignity as men and women made in the image and likeness of God. It is truly possible for men and women, husbands and wives, to experience restoration of proper balance and mutual self-giving in their relationship.

This is the Good News of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit has been poured into our hearts (Rom 5:5). The Spirit of love makes the cross of Christ fruitful in our lives enabling us to live the full truth about marriage. The Church never ceases to proclaim this Good News for the salvation of every man and woman.

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