

Clarifications Regarding Catholic Marriage

1. Why does the Church teach that marriage is a sacrament?

The sacraments make Christ present in our midst. Like the other sacraments, marriage is not just for the good of individuals, or the couple, but for the community as a whole. The Catholic Church teaches that marriage between two baptized persons is a sacrament. The Old Testament prophets saw the marriage of a man and woman as a symbol of the covenant relationship between God and his people. The permanent and exclusive union between husband and wife mirrors the mutual commitment between God and his people. The Letter to the Ephesians says that this union is a symbol of the relationship between Christ and the Church.

2. Do Catholics ever validly enter into non-sacramental marriages?

Yes. Marriages between Catholics and non-Christians, while they may still be valid in the eyes of the Church, are non-sacramental. With permission, a priest or deacon may witness such marriages.

3. What is the difference between a valid and an invalid Catholic marriage?

Just as individual states have certain requirements for civil marriage (e.g., a marriage license, blood tests), the Catholic Church also has requirements before Catholics can be considered validly married in the eyes of the Church. A valid Catholic marriage results from four elements: (1) the spouses are free to marry; (2) they freely exchange their consent; (3) in consenting to marry, they have the intention to marry for life, to be faithful to one another and be open to children; and (4) their consent is given in the presence of two witnesses and before a properly authorized Church minister. Exceptions to the last requirement must be approved by church authority.

4. If a Catholic wants to marry a non-Catholic, how can they assure that the marriage is recognized by the Church?

In addition to meeting the criteria for a valid Catholic marriage (see question #3), the Catholic must seek permission from the local bishop to marry a non-Catholic. If the person is a non-Catholic Christian, this permission is called a “permission to enter into a mixed marriage.” If the person is a non-Christian, the permission is called a “dispensation from disparity of cult.” Those helping to prepare the couple for marriage can assist with the permission process.