

essentially opposed to God's plan for marriage and proper human development."

On same-sex unions the bishops teach: "The legal recognition of same-sex unions poses a multifaceted threat to the very fabric of society, striking at the source from which society and culture come and which they are meant to serve. Such recognition affects all people, married and non-married: not only at the fundamental levels of the good of the spouses, the good of children, the intrinsic dignity of every human person and the common good, but also at the levels of education, cultural imagination and influence, and religious freedom."

On cohabitation the bishops teach: "Social science research finds that cohabitation has no positive effects on a marriage. In some cases, cohabitation can in fact harm a couple's chances for a stable marriage. More importantly, though, cohabitation involves the serious sin of fornication. It does not conform to God's plan for marriage and is always wrong and objectively sinful."

The bishops' letter then turns to "Marriage in the order of the new creation." Here it discusses marriage as a sacrament, as a reflection of the life of the Blessed Trinity, as the foundation of the domestic church (which is the family), and as a vocation in which spouses are called to grow in chastity and gratitude.

The American bishops help us to retrieve a clear picture of God's plan for the beauty of marriage and spousal love and family. They point to the many helps and tools we can use to strengthen our marriages, and how we can encourage other couples experiencing problems with their marriage. I encourage you to read the pastoral letter "*Marriage: Love and Life in God's Plan*." Meditate upon it!

When Jesus appeared on Earth, and began teaching and performing his great miracles, he went to the wedding feast at Cana. Here he

elevated marriage, from simply a natural institution to the dignity of a divine sacrament. A sacrament is an outpouring of divine life and grace. Why is the Church so confident that all married couples can measure up to the standards of God's plan for their marriage and spousal love? Because with God's grace everything is possible; nothing is impossible. If a couple will draw upon the grace of their sacrament, and cooperate with it, they can overcome any difficulty, any disappointment, and any hurt feelings.

May the healing of our marriages begin!
May Jesus, the divine Bridegroom, help us to revitalize our marriages, spousal love and families.

For additional information go to:
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Pamphlet 616

God's Plan for Marriage and Spousal Love

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Early on in Jesus public ministry he went with his mother and his disciples to a wedding in Cana. Here we see that Jesus is blessing marriage, and reinforcing it with his presence at the wedding of Cana. It is here that he performs his first miracle. He changed (you could say "transubstantiated") six containers of water, each holding twenty or thirty gallons, into choice wine. 120 gallons of choice wine! That is a lot of spirit! The wedding reception must have been a lively one!

God designed marriage and spousal love. He has a definite plan for marriage and spousal love. Since marriage is so important to each one of us, and to the human race, we need to reflect upon it. When God created the human race, he designed us to be bodied persons, male and female. The first man, Adam, isolated and left to himself, was incomplete. Adam yearned for a soul mate, a person who could fulfill his yearnings for companionship, love and intimacy. Then God created the first woman, Eve, to be the perfect complement to Adam. "Male and female He created them in His own image and likeness." *As persons, both Adam and Eve had the ability to make the total, personal gift of self to the other.* That is the distinctive quality of a human person: the ability to make the total, unconditional, without any reservations, total self surrender to another.

Genesis teaches "male and female He made them, in His own image and likeness" (Gen 1:27). A man and a woman reflect God, image God, by their ability to make the total personal gift of self to the other, just as the three persons of God totally give of themselves in the Blessed

Trinity. In Isaiah 62 we read: “For the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be called married ... And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you” (Is 62:5). Here we see that God uses the image of marriage to express his great love for us.

This total and personal gift of self is most clearly seen in the marital act, the great spousal act. “For this reason a man shall leave his parents and cleave to his wife, the two shall become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). *Our God is a God of both love and life.* When He designed marriage, He made it to be an intimate communion of love and life between a husband and wife. And when God designed the marital act, He designed it to have two inseparable dimensions: a unitive, or love-giving dimension, and a procreative, or life-giving dimension. Love and life: they always go together. All love is life giving. Real love is never intentionally made sterile. Sterilized love is completely unnatural and dehumanizing.

Marriage, in God’s plan, has still other dimensions. It is *free, total, faithful and open to life.* Love, and married love, cannot be forced. It must be *freely given.* Married love is the *total, unreserved gift* of self. As God designed it, marriage vows endure until the death of one of the spouses. It is “until death do us part.” It calls for *absolute fidelity.* And marriage is *always open to the goodness of life:* a happy, healthy family is the fulfillment of a marriage.

Sadly, we have strayed a long way from God’s plan for marriage, spousal love and family. *The situation of today makes a mockery of God’s plan.* Today we find that one out of two marriages end up in a divorce. This includes Catholics. Today we live in a fault free divorce society, where either one of the spouses can initiate a divorce, and the law will accept that, regardless of the wishes of the other spouse who wants to save the marriage. Today the

prevailing attitude is: “If major problems appear, we split.”

Think of what this attitude does to any sense of commitment to marriage vows and permanency. Consider the pain and damage done to the children of a divorce. Perhaps this is why so many young couples put off marriage and simply cohabit. Today, nationwide, there is an 80% cohabitation rate among young Catholic couples. Easy divorce and lack of commitment has led to many single parent families, usually with single moms. It should be easy to see the devastation that contraception and sterilization are wrecking upon our marriages today.

New research reports that the percentage of United States’ adults who are married has dropped from 78% in 1970 to 57% in 2008, according to the recently released report, “The Marriage Index.” Even more concerning, 40% of all American children today are born out-of-wedlock and 71% of African American children are born without married parents. Research also shows that single mothers have only one-third the financial assets as married mothers. Children not brought up by both a mother and father have lower graduation rates, higher incidence of incarceration, and lower performance in school.

Jesus does not bless this state of marriage. Jesus does not give his approval to this abandonment of God’s plan for marriage and spousal love. Jesus wants his plan for marriage and spousal love to be taught from the pulpits, and shouted from the rooftops. He wants it to be part of the new evangelization for the 21st century. He wants people to understand the beauty and goodness of mature spousal love and a total commitment to marriage. He wants us to understand that it takes a lifetime to live and develop a spousal relationship. You can’t do this in ten or fifteen years. Jesus wants us to

understand that the child is the greatest gift God can send to married couples. Children are their greatest treasure.

This is why we must all return to God’s plan for marriage, spousal love and family. Whenever I meet couples celebrating their 50th golden anniversaries, I always ask them: “What is the secret to your staying married?” Their answer is always the same. They say, “Well don’t think that we didn’t have our share of problems. We had just as many problems as anyone else. But we made the decision to face our problems together and work them out. Our problems did not break us. Rather, working with our problems in the marriage and family helped us to mature and discover what real love is.” Then they add, “And we are still working at it.”

In November 2009, the American Bishops released their pastoral letter, “*Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan.*” It is very readable, and very good teaching. I encourage you to read it. Just go to your computer and type on your search engine “*Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan.*” Our bishops understand the seriousness of the present state of marriage.

Following closely the teaching of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the pastoral letter first discusses marriage as a natural institution essentially linked to male-female complementarity and ordered to the good of the spouses and the procreation of children. The letter views marriage as an institution facing “fundamental challenges” from contraception, homosexual unions, divorce and cohabitation.

On contraception the bishops teach: “Deliberately intervening, by the use of contraceptive practices, to close off an act of intercourse to the possibility of procreation is a way of separating the unitive meaning of marriage from the procreative meaning. This is objectively wrong in and of itself and is