

THE MARRIAGE COVENANT, LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

From the Catechism of the Catholic Church on the Sacrament of Marriage:

1601 "The **matrimonial covenant**, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this **covenant** between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament."

Marriage – A Covenant Bond

God as our Father loves us (His children) unconditionally. He desires to enter into a relationship with us. This relationship is entered into and expressed by the sacred family bond called "Covenant". It is Sacred because God is involved as a participant.

A Covenant differs from a contract, in a contract there is an exchange of property (this is mine, this is yours). In a Covenant there is an exchange of persons. (I am yours, you are mine, you are part of my family).

There are many images used to describe God's covenant relationship with His people throughout salvation history:

Vine and Branch – "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

Shepherd and Sheep – "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God." (Ezekiel 34:15)

Bridegroom and Bride – "For as a young man marries a virgin, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you." (Isaiah 62:5)

"And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast." Mark (2:19)

The marital covenant of the bridegroom and bride is the primary covenant revealed in the New Testament by Jesus and is manifested by establishing a blood covenant.

In the Bread of Life discourse Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and **drink his blood**, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and **drinks my blood** has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and **drinks my blood** abides in me, and I in him." (John 6:53-56)

At the last supper Jesus said to them, "And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "**Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant**, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:27-28)

Jesus clearly establishes a blood covenant that binds together God and the Church. This blood covenant is best expressed by the marital bond between God as the Bridegroom and the people of God (the Church) as the bride.

What is a blood covenant and how does it relate to the marriage covenant?

The Blood Covenant

From the mindset of the Eastern (Semitic) understanding from which the Old Testament Scripture was originally written, an agreement made with the shedding and mingling of blood between the makers is the union of two parties in which all assets, debts, liabilities, talents, etc. are held mutually together and this agreement can only be broken by the death of one of the primary makers of this agreement. (*All assets and liabilities are held mutually together, no pre-nuptial agreements, till death do us part*)

This binding relationship is worked out in very carefully defined promises and pledges that each makes to the other. The key word is **Union**. A blood covenant is a **Union of two People or Parties** into one new person (a new creation if you will), in which everything is shared together in common. It is truly an **Exchanged Life**. (*Vows are taken*)

The blood covenant is the most binding covenant any two people or groups of people can enter into. Once committed to the only way out of it is by the death of one or both of the covenant makers. It is something that is never entered into lightly. (*Free consent of the will, till death do us part*)

These are the steps that are normally involved in cutting the covenant:

There is an exchange of coats

The coat signifies the identity and authority of the person, group, or tribe entering this covenant. The coats are exchanged with each participant in this ceremony. This exchange is saying "Everything I am, everything I represent, now belongs to you. All my possessions, all that I am, my very self, I give to you. I am no longer my own, I now belong to you."

The exchange of weapon belts

On these belts are the bow, knife, sword, or any other weapons. This exchange signifies that all my strength now belongs to you. Your enemies are now my enemies and my enemies are now your enemies. Your friends are now my friends and my friends are now your friends. I will serve you if you ever need me and you will serve me if I ever need you.

The exchange of vows in the walk of blood

An animal is now sacrificed by splitting it down the backbone. It is usually a bull, a goat, or a lamb. The halves are laid open with a pool of blood between them. The covenant parties walk in a figure 8 between the halves and meet in the middle in the pool of blood. The figure 8 is significant because it represents "infinity" or a never-ending relationship. We meet face to face and there pronounce the blessings and the curses of the covenant. The curses are usually pronounced against anyone who would break this covenant. It was usually said like this, "the one who breaks this covenant will die just like this animal has died". A pledge was also given that went like this, "Just as this animal gave its life so I will give my life if necessary."

The accounting of all belongings for exchange if and when needed. While standing in the blood, we give an accounting of all of our possessions and declare that they become available to our covenant partner if they ever have need of them.

The exchange of names

Each participant takes the others name to himself. The person's name represents his individuality. This exchange of names demonstrates a death to being an "individual". Remember that covenant is the union of two individuals or of two groups. In a covenant you are no longer concerned only with yourself, your concern now includes your blood covenant brother. You care for your blood brother the same as you care for yourself because the two of you are now one. (*In the marital covenant a wife will take the surname of her husband*)

The exchange of blood in the cutting of the covenant

While still standing in the blood face-to-face a knife is used to make an incision in either the palms or the wrists of each participant. This was done to allow the blood to flow freely. Sacred Scripture teaches us that life is in the blood. The two participants now either shake hands or put their bleeding wrists together so that the blood intermingles.

This act symbolizes the two bloods, or two lives, have been joined into one blood or one life. In some cultures, the blood from both participants is drizzled into a cup of wine and stirred together and then the two participants drink from the common cup so that each one's blood enters into the other. This mingling of blood creating this new union of "oneness" is why this is called a "blood covenant". It is the strong bond of relationship known to humanity. It is the way that God has chosen to interact with all humanity.

The "mark" of the covenant

While still in this position and blood is dripping from the wounds some dark substance such as charcoal would be rubbed into the wound on each arm so that when the wound was healed a dark scar would be clearly visible to everyone who saw it. By doing this, everywhere these blood covenant partners went they would clearly be identified as being in covenant with someone else. (*The sign of the marital covenant are the wedding rings*)

The Covenant Meal

The exchange signified by the covenant meal which usually consisted of bread and wine is that the covenant partners have become one. We break one loaf of bread and we each place a piece of that bread into our covenant partner's mouth. When we do that we are demonstrating that a part of each of us has gone into the other. "You are eating me." Then they would drink from the same cup and say, We then drink wine from a common cup indicating that our blood has gone into each other. "You are drinking me." Since life is in the blood, we are demonstrating that we have taken each other's life into ourselves. (*This is signified by the feeding of cake (bread) to each other at the reception*)

Covenant Friendship

At the end of the blood covenant ceremony the two covenant heads, or primary participants, are now called "friends". And there has now been a new relationship formed that is a union called covenant.

"No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you." (John 15:15)

So the Marital bond is a Covenant bond that unites the husband and wife into "One Flesh". This bond is "till death do us part" and if lived properly should manifest itself in a deep enduring love and friendship between spouses.

Marriage under the Regime of Sin

From the Catechism of the Catholic Church on the Sacrament of Marriage:

1606 ***Every man experiences evil around him and within himself. This experience makes itself felt in the relationships between man and woman. Their union has always been threatened by discord, a spirit of domination, infidelity, jealousy, and conflicts that can escalate into hatred and separation. This disorder*** can manifest itself more or less acutely, and can be more or less overcome according to the circumstances of cultures, eras, and individuals, but it ***does seem to have a universal character.***

1607 According to faith ***the disorder 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. ***Their relations*** were distorted by mutual recriminations; their mutual attraction, ***the Creator's own gift, changed into a relationship of domination and lust;*** and the beautiful vocation of man and woman to be fruitful, multiply, and subdue the earth was burdened by the pain of childbirth and the toil of work.

The Marriage Covenant under Attack from Sin and the Destruction of Marital Friendship

Friendship between spouses is based on the ability to Trust. Trust is something that is earned or lost based on the actions of another. Mutual respect between spouses is essential to foster trust.

Respect is a virtue that flows from the Cardinal virtue of Justice. Justice is giving the other person his/her due. Recognizing the dignity and value of all persons and in a special way our spouse is the foundational principle by which respect flows forth.

The antithesis of respect for one's spouse is the domination and manipulation that comes from a misuse of Power and Control. This type of behavior negates the true dignity and value of one's spouse, is disrespectful and destroys marital friendship by driving a wedge between the spouses.

One of the easiest ways to destroy a marriage is for one to attempt to control his/her spouse – or for both partners to try to control each other. Yet, the problem of power and control is one of the hidden issues that affect a great number of relationships. Forms of control often exist without the couple even becoming aware of what is happening. This is because control takes many subtle forms.

Furthermore, most people have little insight regarding their propensity to be a controller. Unfortunately, there are several attitudes and behaviors adopted by many that are aimed at controlling their spouse – whether they realize it or not.

Strategies used to control others

A number of strategies are used to control one's spouse and others. Does your spouse or others try to control you?

Through –

Anger	Emotional life by overly indulging/spoiling others
The emotional life by attacking confidence	Religion to make a person feel guilty
The victim/sick role	By making a person feel totally dependent
Finances	Sex
Social life by cutting one off from family or friends	

Anger and the Ego

There are two basic types of anger in marital relationships -one healthy (appropriate anger) and one damaging (inappropriate or misdirected anger). For the health of the marriage, it is essential that the excessive anger be eliminated.

The process of distinguishing appropriate and misdirected anger requires a deep understanding of oneself and one's spouse as well as patience and wisdom and may entail help from close friends. It is important to look for the truth in what a spouse is saying.

Misdirected anger flows forth from an incorrect sense of self (ego). The ego is selfish and puts "me" first. It posits that reality will conform and serve my needs and expectations. When things or people don't conform, frustration commences and is expressed by angry reactions (misdirected anger).

Spouses, who regularly overreact or misdirect their anger, tend to blame their spouse for the painful feelings they experience. Overreacting spouses usually are unwilling to examine how they themselves contribute to the marital difficulties.

Some seem to take a certain pleasure in criticizing their spouses and have difficulty making an apology. They do not admit that they overreact and there can be a stubborn refusal to consider that they, too, may have unresolved family of origin or other conflicts.

The expression of anger between husband and wife also hurts them and their marriage in the following ways:

Damages the safe feeling/trust	Wounds the sense of being a gifted person and a gift to one's spouse
Makes one fearful of self-giving and of receiving love	Weakens self-giving to children
Introduces a fear of being hurt	Increases sexual temptations
Results in a spouse being distant	Contributes to drinking, gambling and other compulsive behaviors.
Leads to sadness, loneliness and anxiety	

Verbal and Emotional Abuse

Treating your spouse with disrespect by humiliating them in front of others. Sharing private discussions or events that diminish your spouse in front of others. Cutting in on conversations, failing to respect your spouse's opinions. Making them feel inferior and un-affirmed.

Making signs or certain facial expressions that demean your spouse. Rolling your eyes, sighing etc. Criticizing your spouse openly in front of others.

Denying your spouse the affection, intimacy, closeness, and kindness they are entitled to in the covenantal marriage bond. This is a particularly destructive. Affection is a genuine need that we have as human beings. When it is withheld this can put extreme pressure on a person to conform to the wishes of the controlling spouse.

On the other hand and equally destructive is the flirtatious behavior of a spouse. Flirting violates the conjugal rights given to each spouse as part of the covenantal marriage bond. Flirting is a game usually played by those who have never cultivated any real emotional depth. The flirt looks not only to gain for the ego some kind of recognition but also seeks to incite jealousy as a means of controlling and emotionally preying on one's spouse.

Blaming your spouse for everything that goes wrong. Making them feel guilty. Playing the victim and the martyr. Always recounting how much one has sacrificed, given, been taken for granted, hurt, or otherwise suffered for the sake of the relationship. This is generally greatly exaggerated in an effort to evoke sympathy or shame. Playing the victim is merely a selfish attempt to get one's own way.

The Controlling & Mistrustful Spouse

Men and women experience great happiness and joy when they find someone to whom they can entrust themselves. This happiness can last in some couples for a lifetime. However, most couples experience conflicts which can temporarily weaken their safe feeling or ability to trust. When trust diminishes, emotional walls unconsciously go up which then limit giving and receiving love.

Subsequently, spouses feel less happy and may experience loneliness and irritability toward their spouse. This type of stress also can lead to transitory tendencies to control or to withdraw.

Fortunately, damage to trust can be resolved if promptly addressed through a process of understanding, forgiving, seeing the good in one's spouse, and re-committing to trust and to love again. In contrast to these transitory stresses on marital trust are the serious difficulties which arise when a spouse manifests ongoing controlling and disrespectful behaviors.

The ability to trust, that is, to feel safe and secure with one's spouse, is the foundation for giving love as well as for receiving love. Without a strong foundation in trust or without attending to and maintaining trust, a rift can develop in marriages and families. Therefore, trust needs be protected and strengthened at every stage of married life.

Responses to the Controlling Spouse

When this conflict is present in a marriage, it should be discussed in a calm and charitable manner which is not easy. First, it is essential to try to understand why a spouse has this weakness. Next it is important to work on forgiving the controlling spouse daily. This forgiveness will decrease anger and diminish the likelihood of overreacting in anger. Spiritual forgiveness, in which one gives up anger to God, can be the most effective way to diminish this resentment in some marriages.

The offended spouse can consider relating that being treated in a controlling manner is disrespectful and harmful to the marriage and to the children. Then, whenever the tendency to control is manifested, the other spouse can respond, "Please treat me with more respect" or "I don't deserve to be treated in a disrespectful manner."

From the Catechism of the Catholic Church on the Sacrament of Marriage:

1608 Nevertheless, the order of creation persists, though seriously disturbed. ***To heal the wounds of sin, man and woman need the help of the grace that God in his infinite mercy never refuses them. Without his help man and woman cannot achieve the union of their lives for which God created them "in the beginning."***

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Strengthening Catholic Sacramental Marriages

The mission of the Institute for Marital Healing is to strengthen Catholic marriages and families by educating spouses, marital therapists and clergy about common causes of conflicts in marital self-giving and effective approaches to alleviating such conflicts.

Through a combination of online resources, educational programs and publications, the Institute employs a time-tested approach to marital therapy that recognizes the importance of both science and faith in the process of marital healing.

We believe that in order to have a strong marriage spouses need to have healthy personalities. The major way in which one can develop a healthy personality is through self-knowledge, which most spouses lack, and through the hard work of growing in virtues.

After identifying major weaknesses in self-giving love, we regularly recommend the growth in a number of virtues which can diminish such conflicts.

In addition to cognitive-behavioral therapy, we work in the new area in mental health field of positive psychology which focuses on the role of virtues in addressing cognitive, emotional and behavioral conflicts.

The Role of Virtues

A daily commitment to grow in the following virtues can help to diminish the need to control in marriage:

Trust	Gentleness
Respect	Gratitude/thankfulness
Generosity	Meekness and humility (to face family weaknesses)
Forgiveness (of those who have damaged trust)	Faith and prayer (meditating on feeling safe and protected at every life stage).
Fortitude	