



DIOCESE of TYLER

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

September 19, 2023

My Dear Sons and Daughters in Christ:

I write to you today to discuss more fully the third basic truth that I spoke of in my first pastoral letter issued on August 22, 2023: “The sacrament of Matrimony is instituted by God. Through Natural Law, God has established marriage as between one man and one woman faithful to each other for life and open to children. (CCC 1601). Humanity has no right or true ability to redefine marriage.”

In addition to the sacrament of Matrimony, I will also discuss the sacrament of Holy Orders in this letter, as both Matrimony and Holy Orders are vocations and are, therefore, calls from Our Lord to share our lives with others in special ways. Both Matrimony and Holy Orders confer a special grace that is primarily directed not towards the salvation of the one who receives the sacrament, but in particular towards the salvation of those who are served by the one married or ordained. Thus, both are properly understood as sacraments of service. In both cases the fundamental aspect, as intended by God, is a self-sacrificial love that wills the sanctification of the beloved.

Matrimony: According to the Catechism of the Council of Trent, “marriage is a conjugal union between a man and a woman, both in legal status, in which they establish a perpetual and indissoluble union of lives. There are two goals in this union—procreation and education of the offspring, and the mutual support of the spouses.” This definition is applicable to both marriage between two non-baptized people, and marriage between two baptized people. In the first, the marriage is contracted according to Natural Law, and in the second, the marriage is contracted according to the Church and is fortified by sacramental graces.

Let us look specifically at three major building blocks of marriage. First, let us look at the definition of marriage as being between one man and one woman. We can turn to the initial chapters of the book of Genesis for the clear revelation that marriage between one man and one woman is ordained by God for the proper ordering of humanity. “The Lord God said: ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suited to him.’” (Gen 2:18). And then, “So the Lord God cast a deep sleep on the man, and while he was asleep, he took out one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. The Lord God then built the rib that he had taken from the man into a woman. When he brought her to the man, the man said: ‘This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; This one shall be called woman, for out of man this one has been taken.’” (Gen 2:21-23)

Because marriage was divinely instituted by God as between one man and one woman, there is simply no right given to humanity to depart from this foundational truth of marriage. I will reemphasize this point: marriage can only be between one man and one woman. Our global society has entered gravely dangerous territory as it promotes various distortions of intimate human relationships and attempts to label them as “marriage.” These models are not rooted in the truth which God has revealed to us in Sacred Scripture and which is woven into Natural Law, and we are seeing the sad fruits of these denials of God’s divine blueprint for marriage.

The second building block of marriage is that it is meant to be a lifetime commitment—a perpetual and indissoluble union of two lives united together in a life-long covenant. Marriages that end in divorce and thus fail to fulfill the call of an enduring bond cause havoc not only in the lives of each member of the broken family, but also in society. Compassion compels us to pray for those who have experienced broken marriages that God’s grace may bring healing, forgiveness, and wholeness; but we recognize that the pain and upheaval brought about from the breakdown of the marriage testify to the necessity of marriage as a permanent and unbreakable covenant. If one or both of the parties enter a marriage lacking this firm resolution for permanence, it can spell disaster for this union, and it also calls into question whether a true marriage has taken place because an essential element was missing from the beginning.

Finally, we turn to the third building block of marriage, that it is to be open to children. The Church in her wisdom, guided by Sacred Tradition, does not claim that a childless marriage is not a true marriage. The point which the Church insists on, however, is that there must be an openness to children in the marriage. The prevalent use of contraception even among believing Catholics undermines this third essential building block of marriage in devastating ways. It is crucial that we address this issue with the gravity that it demands.

In these current times, the Catholic Church seems to stand virtually alone in opposing contraception because the Church has always recognized that contraception runs contrary to God’s plan for human life, and that cannot and will not change. Prior to 1930, virtually every other Christian community also stood in opposition to the use of contraception as a gravely sinful act. In 1930 at the Lambeth Conference, the Anglican Communion declared that married couples, for serious reasons, could use artificial contraception. It was not long after this that numerous other Protestant denominations also approved the use of contraception. However, the Catholic Church held firm that artificial contraception was, is, and forever will be gravely sinful.

On New Year’s Eve 1930, the Church officially responded to those who argued in favor of contraception by the release of Pope Pius XI’s encyclical on marriage, *Casti Connubii*. This encyclical clearly reiterated that the use of any “artificial” means of birth control was prohibited because it interfered with God’s design for human life, and therefore was a mortal sin. “Since, therefore, openly departing from the uninterrupted Christian tradition some recently have judged it possible solemnly to declare another doctrine regarding this question, the Catholic Church, to whom God has entrusted the defense of the integrity and purity of morals, standing erect in the midst of the moral ruin which surrounds her, in order that she may preserve the chastity of the nuptial union from being defiled by this foul stain, raises her voice in token of her divine ambassadorship and through Our mouth proclaims anew: any use whatsoever of matrimony exercised in such a way that the act is deliberately frustrated in its natural power to generate life is an offense against the law of God and of nature, and those who indulge in such are branded with the guilt of a grave sin.” (*Casti Connubii*, para. 56).

In the 1960’s, the invention of the birth control pill gave rise to the so-called “sexual revolution.” The majority of women who wanted to thwart their natural fertility now turned to the birth control pill. However, most women, then as now, were not aware that birth control pills have an abortifacient component—meaning these pills can and do cause the termination of a fertilized ovum, a conceived child, as one of their functions. The connection between birth control and abortion was intentionally downplayed by birth control advocates in order to bring less scrutiny of hormonal contraceptives. However, we as Catholics must understand that the use of such drugs could actually cause a conceived child to be aborted before a woman even knew she was carrying a child. As children of God made in His image and likeness, we are called to honor and respect each human being

from conception until natural death. Contraception stands in the way of this, and therefore Catholics must reject the use of hormonal contraceptives as gravely sinful.

Regarding abortion, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, “Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable. Direct abortion, that is to say, abortion willed either as an end or a means, is gravely contrary to the moral law.” (CCC 2271). Modern science has not changed the Church’s teaching against abortion, but instead has confirmed that the life of each individual begins with the earliest zygote and embryo. Because each and every human life has inherent dignity, each life must be treated with respect.

I would like to focus now on the importance of marriage as a sacrament, a sign of God’s grace at work in the world. A marriage is sacramental when it is validly celebrated between a baptized man and a baptized woman. Matrimony is the one sacrament that the participants confer on one another. This sacramental reality encompasses all the elements of a natural marriage and adds to it the beauty of a vocation lived out before God, with His grace given to the husband and wife to live out that vocation. Just as natural marriage is foundational for human civilization, sacramental marriage is essential for the life of the Church. The grace that flows into the lives of a man and a woman in a sacramental marriage also flows out from their union as a blessing for their family and their community. Sacramental marriage reaps the blessing from graces which allow the man and woman, along with any children they are blessed to nurture, to form a domestic Church and to live out their unique call to holiness in their family as directed by God. For the Church to accomplish her mission of bringing Christ to the world, holy sacramental marriages are essential.

As we approach the upcoming Synod on Synodality, we must continue to hold fast to Sacred Scripture, the Sacred Traditions of the Church, and the unchangeable Deposit of Faith which illumine and guide our faith regarding Matrimony. We must be aware of and reject any call for a change in the unchangeable reality of marriage, and we must also reject any call for recognition or blessings on relationships which attempt to simulate or redefine the sacrament of Matrimony. Any relationship that is not a true marriage but attempts to portray itself as a true marriage is a deception that would inevitably lead souls away from Christ and into the hands of the deceiver. As your spiritual father, I must caution you in the strongest terms—do not accept this deception.

In conclusion of our discussion regarding matrimony, we must recognize just how far modern society has slipped from the covenantal, life-giving concept of Holy Matrimony as given by God. As homosexual relationships are more and more recognized throughout the world as “marriages”; as marriages in many cases are believed to be “disposable” through the widespread presence of divorce; as contraception is now widely used, even by Catholics; and as abortion is not only permitted, but celebrated throughout our country and our world; the very fabric of marriage is being ripped apart at the seams.

From Pope Pius XI: “Yet not only do We, looking with paternal eye on the universal world from this Apostolic See as from a watchtower, but you, also, Venerable Brethren, see, and seeing deeply grieve with Us that a great number of men, forgetful of the divine work of redemption, either entirely ignore or shamelessly deny the great sanctity of Christian wedlock, or relying on the false principles of a new and utterly perverse morality, too often trample it under foot. And since these most pernicious errors and depraved morals have begun to spread even amongst the faithful and are gradually gaining ground, in Our office as Christ’s Vicar upon earth and Supreme

Shepherd and Teacher, We consider it our duty to raise Our voice to keep the flock committed to Our care from poisoned pastures and, as far as in Us lies, to preserve it from harm” (Casti Connubii, para. 3).

Holy Orders: “No one has a right to receive the sacrament of Holy Orders. Indeed no one claims this office for himself; he is called to it by God.” (CCC 1578). “Holy Orders is the sacrament through which the mission entrusted by Christ to his apostles continues to be exercised in the Church until the end of time: thus it is the sacrament of apostolic ministry. It includes three degrees: episcopate, presbyterate, and diaconate.” (CCC 1536).

Ordination is a sacramental act in which a man is integrated into the order of bishops, presbyters (priests), or deacons, and it confers the gift of the Holy Spirit that permits the exercise of a “sacred power” which comes from Christ Himself. In ordination, the bishop lays hands on the one being ordained and offers a prayer of consecration. These are the visible signs of the sacrament. In the sacrament of Baptism, all the faithful share in the common priesthood of Christ. However, in the sacrament of Holy Orders, a priest’s participation in Christ’s ministry differs from the common priesthood of the faithful as it confers the power to serve in the name and in the person of Christ (*in persona Christi*).

Pope Pius XI, in his encyclical *Ad Catholici Sacerdotii*, gives many beautiful explanations of the holiness of a priestly vocation. An essential thread echoes the self-sacrificial character we noted earlier when discussing marriage, but in the case of the priest, it is even more so a complete reliance upon and full abandonment of one’s life to God. As Pius XI beautifully states, “A priest is one who should be totally dedicated to the things of the Lord. Is it not right, then, that he be entirely detached from the things of the world, and have his conversation in Heaven? A priest’s charge is to be solicitous for the eternal salvation of souls, continuing in their regard the work of the Redeemer. Is it not, then, fitting that he keeps himself free from the cares of a family, which would absorb a great part of his energies?” (Ad Catholici Sacerdotii, para. 45). This statement also highlights the reason for priestly celibacy. The priest is called to forego, on the natural level, a human family (i.e., marriage and children) in order to espouse on a supernatural level the Church in his role as “*alter Christus*.” Following the example of Our Lord, the priest is to make of his life a complete sacrifice for the sanctification of souls, up to and including the shedding of his blood—thereby participating in the bringing forth of new life, but on the supernatural level.

The priest never serves on his own behalf. Without priests, the Church would be without the Eucharist. Pope St. John Paul II stated, “There can be no Eucharist without the priesthood, just as there can be no priesthood without the Eucharist.”

The road of the priest is the cross, and he must embrace it fully and lovingly. It is not enough to simply believe in Our Lord, because martyrdom is more than simply the action of one who believes; it is the action of one who loves. From the first priests—the Apostles themselves—to countless examples of extraordinary acts of heroism from seeming ordinary men such as Blessed Fr. Stanley Rother, Blessed Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko, and Servant of God Fr. Emil Kapaun, Our Lord has been abundant in generously gifting His Bride the Church throughout the centuries with priests who answered the ultimate call to love—not through their own power—but through the work of the Holy Spirit within their souls. Yet, for the vast majority of priests, the martyrdom they are presented with may not be as dramatic as the shedding of blood. It may be that they are offered the crown of white martyrdom, of daily picking up their crosses and shepherding their flocks with love through the everyday trials and tribulations that plague fallen humanity. Humility and abandonment of course are paramount; the priest must

make his life a gift to Our Lord to direct as He wills, and the greater the level of abandonment, the greater the gift. That is the nature of love.

It is through the sacrament of Holy Orders that God calls and then equips deacons, priests, and bishops to serve His people, to minister to them, to teach them, and to sanctify them so that His people may have a sure path to holiness and to receiving the salvation that Christ has won for each person. In order to carry out these roles, however, we must remember that it is God who calls His chosen instruments to the sacrament of Holy Orders, and the Church who confirms the call.

As we approach the Synod on Synodality, we must remember that God would never call a person to a role which they were not able to fulfill. As I stated in my pastoral letter from September 5, 2023, Sacred Tradition and the Ordinary Magisterium of the Church have affirmed throughout the ages that the Church has no authority whatsoever to ordain women, as Christ called those who would minister in His Name to image Himself as the bridegroom with the Church as His bride. Because the Church has no authority to ordain women, we recognize that God would never authentically call a woman to the sacrament of Holy Orders. As such, if any were to suggest a change could be made to this sacred and unchangeable doctrine, we must recognize this as a break from the Deposit of Faith and reject the idea as contrary to the faith.

In conclusion I would like to say to you, my dear sons and daughters in Christ, do not despair. It is evident when we look back through salvation history that any time humanity moves away from God, He pours out an abundance of divine grace upon the faithful so that His children may return to Him. God is depending on each of us to help lead humanity back to Himself; let us meet Him in Mass, in the sacraments, in prayer, and in Eucharistic adoration. We are all called to participate in His divine plan of salvation, and so we must proclaim as did St. Joan of Arc, "I am not afraid, for God is with me. I was born for this!"

May the Lord grant us many holy marriages and families, and many holy priests, so that we may receive His abundant grace and be united with Our Lord, now and forever.

Remaining your humble father and servant,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Joseph E. Strickland", with a small cross symbol to the left.

Most Reverend Joseph E. Strickland
Bishop of Tyler, Texas