

# GRIST

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## THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE

from } “Sacrilige and Sacrament” by Roger Scruton  
[www.catholiceducation.org/articles/marriage/mf0081.htm](http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/marriage/mf0081.htm)

Marriage is one of those institutions that we spontaneously see from outside, in terms of its social function, and from inside, in terms of the moral and spiritual condition that it creates. No honest anthropologist can fail to acknowledge the functional importance of marriage. In all observed societies some form of marriage exists, as the means whereby the work of one generation is dedicated to the well-being of the next. Marriage does not merely protect and nurture children; it is a shield against sexual jealousy and a unique form of social and economic cooperation, with a mutually supportive division of roles that more than doubles the effectiveness of each partner in their shared security. Marriage fulfills this complex function because it is something more than a contract of mutual cooperation, and something more than an agreement to live together. Hence marriage enjoys – or has until recently enjoyed – a distinct social aura.

A wedding is a rite of passage, in which a couple pass from one social condition to another. The ceremony is not the concern of the couple only, but of the entire community that includes them. For this is the way that children are made – made, that is, as new members of society, who will, in their turn, take on the task of social reproduction. Society has a profound interest in marriage, and changes to that institution may alter not merely relations among the living, but also the expectations of those unborn and the legacy of those who predecease them.

Wedding guests therefore symbolize the social endorsement of the union that they have assembled to witness, and the marriage is a kind of legitimization of the potentially subversive desire between the partners. Society blesses the union, but only at a price. And the price has been, in traditional Christian societies, a heavy one: sexual fidelity “till death do us part” and a responsibility for the socializing and educating of the children. As people become more and more reluctant to pay that price, weddings become more and more provisional, and the distinction between the socially endorsed union and the merely private arrangement becomes less and less absolute and less and less secure. As sociologists are beginning to observe, however, this gain in freedom for one generation implies a loss for the next.

Children born within a marriage are far more likely to be socialized, outgoing, and able to form permanent relationships of their own, than children born out of wedlock. For their parents have made a commitment in which the children are included and of which society approves. This fact is part of the deep phenomenology of

the marital home. Children of married parents find a place in society already prepared for them, furnished by a regime of parental sacrifice, and protected by social norms. Take away marriage and you expose children to the risk of coming into the world as strangers, a condition in which they may remain for the rest of their lives.

Marriage is regarded, in most simple societies, as a religious condition. Rites of passage are conducted in the presence of the ancestors, and the ancestors are presided over by the gods. Religion is one way in which the long-term interests of society may animate the short-term decisions of its present members.

Hence it is natural that marriage should be seen from within as something divinely ordained, with a sacred aura that reinforces the undertaken duties and elicits the support of the tribe. You don’t have to be a religious believer to observe this or to see its point. You need only be aware of what is at stake when people bring children into the world and claim those children as their own.

Traditional Catholic teaching holds marriage to be an irreversible change of status, not merely within the community but also before God. Hence a marriage cannot be undone, but only annulled. An annulment does not grant release from an existing marriage but declares that the marriage never was.

We have experienced a steady de-sacralization of the marriage tie. It is not merely that marriage is governed now by a secular law – that has been the case since antiquity. It is that this law is constantly amended, not in order to perpetuate the idea of an existential commitment, but on the contrary to make it possible for commitments to be evaded, and agreements rescinded, by rewriting them as the terms of a contract.

From the external perspective this development must be seen as radical. What was once a socially endorsed change of status has become a private and reversible deal. The social constraints that tied husband and wife to each other through all troubles and disharmonies have been one by one removed, to the point where marriage is hardly distinct from a short-term agreement for cohabitation. This has been made more or less explicit in the American case by the prenuptial agreement, which specifies a division of property in the event of divorce. Partners now enter marriage with an escape route already mapped out.

Divorce has been unlike annulment in recognizing that a marriage once existed and is now being undone. But it has been like annulment in recognizing that the spirit of a marriage survives its material death. There could be no

return from the state of marriage, but only a transition to another state beyond marriage, in which as many of the marital obligations as possible would be salvaged from the ruin and reinstated as lifetime burdens on the parties. Typically the divorced husband would be charged with the maintenance of his ex-wife, the education and protection of their children, and such other liabilities as could be imposed upon a man now faced with a self-made enemy.

With the prenuptial agreement, however, divorce takes on a new meaning. It becomes in a sense the fulfillment of the marriage contract, which henceforth loses its force. Spouses no longer enter a marriage but, as it were, stand outside it, fully equipped to move on. Hence marriage has ceased to be what Hegel called a “substantial tie,” and has become one of a lifelong series of handshakes. Among the wealthy and the sexy, serial polygamy is now the norm. But the word “polygamy” already begs the most important question – which is whether such an arrangement is really a marriage.

Rescindable civil unions cannot conceivably have the function of marriage as traditionally conceived. They cannot guarantee security to children, nor can they summon the willing endorsement of society, by showing the partners’ preparedness to make a sacrifice on the future’s behalf. The new kind of civil union exists merely to amplify the self-confidence of the partners. Children, neighbors, community, the world – all such others are strangers to the deal. Not surprisingly, when marriage is no more than an official rubber stamp affixed to a purely private contract, people cease to see the point of it. Why bother with the stamp? Whose business is it anyway?

Official policy is therefore already recognizing the effect of official policy, which is to downgrade and ultimately abolish the marriage tie.

The contrast between marriage and the new kind of civil union is yet more striking from the internal perspective – the perspective of the partners themselves. For it is a contrast between two quite different moral positions. The traditional marriage, seen from the external perspective as a rite of passage to another social condition, is seen from within as a vow. This vow may be preceded by a promise. But it is something more than a promise.

[Today, we are witnessing] a retreat from the world of vows and “substantial ties” to a world of contracts, promises and negotiated deals. The world of vows is a world of sacred things, in which holy and indefeasible obligations stand athwart our lives and command us along certain paths, whether we will or not. It is this experience that the Church has always tried to safeguard, and it is one that has been jeopardized by the state, in its efforts to refashion marriage for a secular age.

When the Church first declared marriage to be a sacrament, to be administered before the altar in the presence of God, it was attempting to give institutional form to a vow. From the inner perspective, however, this vow

preceded the Church’s endorsement. And the theory of marriage as a sacrament captures a prior sense that something similar is true of erotic love.

At the heart of the love-vow and of the marital practices that it has been used to authorize, is the peculiar intentionality of human sexual emotion. Sexual desire is not a desire for sensations. It is a desire for a person: and I mean a *person*, not his or her body, conceived as an object in the physical world, but the person conceived as an incarnate subject, in whom the light of self-consciousness shines and who confronts me eye to eye, and I to I. True desire is also a kind of petition: it demands reciprocity, mutuality, and a shared surrender. It is therefore compromising, and also threatening. No pursuit of a mere sensation could be compromising or threatening in this way.

The view of marriage as a sacrament is an accurate, if theologically loaded, account of how marriage has been experienced, of why it is wanted, and of what it inwardly does to those who enter it. Marriage is not a contract of cohabitation, but a vow of togetherness. Its foundation is erotic, not in the sense that all marriages begin in or exist through desire, but in the sense that, without desire, the institution would rest on nothing in the human condition. At the same time, looked at from outside, with the eye of the anthropologist, marriage has a function, which is to ensure social reproduction, the socializing of children and the passing on of social capital. Without marriage it is doubtful that those processes would occur, but when they occur they provide both a fulfillment of sexual union and a way to transcend its scant imperatives, into a realm of duty, love, and pride. The inner, sacramental, character of marriage is therefore reinforced by its external function. Together they endow marriage with its distinctive character, as an institution that is normal and sublime in equal measure.

When the state usurped the rite of matrimony, and reshaped what had once been holy law, it was inevitable that it should loosen the marital tie. For the state does not represent the Eternal, nor does it have so much regard for future generations that it can disregard the whims of the merely living. The state is always and inevitably the instrument of its current members; it will respond to their pressures and try to satisfy their demands. It has therefore found it expedient to undo the sacrament, to permit easy divorce, to reduce marriage from a vow to a contract, and – in the most recent act of liberalization – to permit marriage between people of the same sex.

Marriage has ceased to be a rite of passage into another and higher life and become a bureaucratic stamp with which to endorse our temporary choices. Of course, we are still free to dedicate our lives to each other, to our home and to our children. But this act is rendered the more difficult, the less society recognizes the uniqueness, the value, and the sacrificial character of what we do.

Societies endure only when they are devoted to future generations, and they collapse when the pleasures and fancies of the living usurp the inheritance of those unborn.