

# for REFLECTION

## Marital Spirituality

by Joann Heaney-Hunter, PhD

Marriage is a sign of Christ's unbreakable love for his people.

"Spirituality" is a way to live out one's religious beliefs. A spirituality of marriage, therefore, is a way to help husbands and wives live out the vocation of marriage in light of faith. Catholic marriage has a distinctive spirituality that is sacramental, communitarian, and missionary.

Marriage is sacramental because it is a sign of Christ's unbreakable love for his people. It is communitarian because it creates and deepens a permanent partnership of life and love. It is missionary because in Catholic marriage couples are called to share with others the good news of their relationship in Christ. A spirituality of marriage helps couples shape their attitude toward life and provides a framework for living one's marriage in the light of faith.

In the Catholic tradition, a "sacrament" is a concrete expression of Christ in the world. The Eucharist, for example, is a sacrament. Within the Eucharistic liturgy, through the words and actions of the priest, the physical signs of bread and wine become Christ really present. Likewise, the Church believes that marriage is a sacrament. In marriage, the couple's life, love, and witness can make Christ visible to others. All sacramentally married couples are invited to reveal Christ's loving presence and generous action in the world.

Just as God is a Trinity of persons—a community—marriage also is communitarian. *Gaudium et Spes*, a document of the Second Vatican Council, states that couples form a permanent, life-giving community. We've already described this relationship as sacramental, a sign of Christ's love in the world. Sacramental couples live as communities that reveal God's blessings, reach out to heal the brokenness of the family and the world, and share their gifts with those around them.

Couples live as communities when they experience the blessings that come from making a total

commitment to another person. Making permanent commitments is becoming rare; sacramental couples demonstrate that it is possible. Another blessing of marriage is children. A couple's willingness to be open to the gift of children and to demonstrate the generosity and sacrifice necessary to raise them according to gospel values is a real blessing.

Couples also live as communities when they recognize and heal the brokenness in their individual lives and in their life together. Brokenness is a part of everyone's life; a spouse is in a unique position to heal the pain that inevitably arises in relationship. Couples create sacramental communities when they build a life of sharing—with each other, with their families, with local communities, with the Church. As couples grow in their love for each other, their communities of life and love enrich the larger communities in their lives.

Finally, sacramental marriages are missionary. Part of the joy of a faith-filled marriage is showing others what it means to be in a loving, Christ-centered relationship and making known to others the gift of faithful married life and love. Couples have the potential to show others what it means to embody the life of the Holy Spirit within them. Married couples, while never perfect, are missionary through the witness of their lives and love in the midst of the world. They are characterized by openness to the life of the Spirit within them, by loving service to their neighbors, and by sharing their talents and blessings with and for local and global communities. As missionaries, married couples can witness gospel values in their daily lives.

A spirituality of marriage shows how couples reveal Christ, build community, and reach out to others in love. It is a powerful way to describe how Catholic couples live out their vocation of married life.

*Joann Heaney-Hunter, PhD, is associate professor of theology at St. John's University (NY).*