

Dear Apologist, Why is it necessary to get married in a Church building?

Maybe a comparison will help: Do we find it odd that nuns and monks make their vows in a church setting? Does it seem burdensome that a priest receives Holy Orders in a cathedral? Probably not. We understand that those are explicitly religious vocations in which a person enters into a new relationship with the Church and with God.

Our society tends to reduce marriage to a mere social contract recognizing the commitment two people have for one another. Not so, says the Church. Marriage is as much a religious vocation as becoming a priest, nun, or monk. The Catechism states: "The Sacrament of Matrimony signifies the union of Christ and the Church. It gives spouses the grace to love each other with the love with which Christ has loved his Church; the grace of the sacrament thus perfects the human love of the spouses, strengthens their indissoluble unity, and sanctifies them on the way to eternal life." "It is therefore fitting that the spouses should seal their consent to give themselves to each other by uniting it to the offering of Christ for his Church, made present in the Eucharistic sacrifice." [CCC 1661, 1621]

There is nothing intrinsic to marriage that demands that a wedding be celebrated in a church building. But the Church wants us to understand that marriage is foremost the sacrament which joins spouses to God. For that reason, Canon Law stipulates that weddings will be celebrated in the parish church: "A marriage between Catholics or between a Catholic party and a non-Catholic baptized party is to be celebrated in a parish church. It can be celebrated in another church or oratory with the permission of the local ordinary or pastor." [Canon 1118]

Dear Apologist, how do I explain to a relative why Catholics need to be married in the Church?

Begin with the example of ordinations to the priesthood. Is your relative confused about why those always take place in a church? Likely not. This is obviously appropriate because Holy Orders is a sacrament in which one makes public vows to God and the Church. Plus, the priesthood is a religious vocation which is ordered to the growth and strengthening of the body of Christ. So of course it takes place in a church setting.

Here is the key. All of the descriptions mentioned above regarding Holy Orders is equally true of the Sacrament of Matrimony. In fact, the Catechism describes matrimony as entering the spouses into a religious order [CCC1631]. The Church teaches marriage has the natural

purposes [CCC 1601], but it also has supernatural purposes which are oriented toward God. Namely, matrimony gives witness to the dignity and holiness of human sexuality, creates new Christians through the baptizing of children, and images the fidelity of Christ to His Church. Thus, just as it is entirely appropriate for Catholic priests to be ordained in a church, it is likewise reasonable for Catholic lay people to be required to do the same.

Now, modern secular culture tends to inculcate the idea that a wedding is a purely romantic event which takes place in a church for aesthetic reasons. So it is understandable why many Catholics are not aware of the requirement or see its purpose. A Catholic who is civilly married outside the Church without permission from the Bishop needs to undergo what is called a “convalidation”. This amounts to retaking the marriage vows with one’s spouse in front of one’s pastor or deacon. For more, see paragraphs 1601-1658 in the Catechism.

Dear Apologist, I was told Jesus allowed divorce in the case of adultery. Is that true?

Mark and Matthew both record an incident where Jesus was asked about divorce. Jesus clearly says in Mark’s Gospel that the bonds of matrimony are unbreakable, even if a legal separation takes place. However, Matthew’s Gospel contains a phrase which many believe is an exception: “Whoever divorces his wife, except for (πορνεία) and remarries commits adultery” [Matt 19:8-9]. The meaning of this phrase hinges on the translation of the Greek word. It is pronounced “pornea” and most closely means “sexual unlawfulness”. Deciphering its meaning in this context has challenged many translators, but many settle on “adultery”. That makes sense at first glance because adultery is a grave sexual sin which frequently leads to divorce.

Nevertheless, translating it as “adultery” cannot work. First, Jesus says humans cannot break the marital bond. This exception would create a straightforward way to break it. Also, if that’s what Matthew had intended to say, he would have used the actual Greek word for adultery. Most importantly, it would make Jesus’ law completely self-defeating. The effect of divorcing and remarrying for an illegitimate reason would be the sin of adultery... which would then create a legitimate reason to divorce and remarry.

So what does the word mean? In Lev 18:6-18 you’ll see a list of romantic unions which were considered unlawful under the Mosaic Law, such as ones between close relatives. These situations would never be considered actual marriages. Paul mentions such a situation in 1Cor 5:1, and he used the word “pornea” to describe it. Jesus’ phrase makes sense with that understanding of the word: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, except for situations which weren’t real marriages, commits adultery.” This clause doesn’t create a loophole for divorce, but demonstrates the principle behind annulment.

Dear Apologist, if marriage is indissoluble – and divorce in the eyes of God is impossible – what options does the Church give a person in an abusive marriage?

The teaching of the New Testament regarding marriage comes from passages like Mark 10:9, Romans 7:2, and 1 Corinthians 7:10. Reflecting on these texts, the Church teaches that the bond of Christian marriage, once formed, can only be dissolved by death. Even if one spouse becomes intolerable or dangerous, the marriage continues. The radical nature of this teaching prompts many to repeat the words of the Apostles: "If that is the case, better not to marry!" [Matt 19:10]

The indissoluble nature of the marital bond is sometimes misunderstood as meaning the Church expects folks to continue living with an abusive spouse. This is not the case. The Catechism acknowledges there may be cases where legal separation is necessary: "The separation of spouses while maintaining the marriage bond can be legitimate in certain cases provided for by canon law. If civil divorce remains the only possible way of ensuring certain legal rights or the care of the children, it can be tolerated and does not constitute a moral offense" [CCC 2383]. Likewise the Code of Canon Law states: "If either of the spouses causes grave mental or physical danger to the other spouse or to the offspring, that spouse gives the other a legitimate cause for leaving." [CCL 1153]

Therefore, the Church says an abused spouse can seek whatever protections are available in civil law – including civil divorce. One just needs to keep in mind that the dissolution of a marriage in civil law does nothing to the bond in the eyes of God. If a Christian is truly married, it is for better or worse as long as they both shall live.

Dear Apologist, Why can't divorced Catholics receive communion?

Actually, they can. A legal divorce does not by itself create an impediment for a receiving communion. In fact, the Catechism says legal divorce can be necessary and justified in some situations: "The separation of spouses while maintaining the marriage bond can be legitimate in certain cases provided for by canon law. If civil divorce remains the only possible way of ensuring certain legal rights, the care of the children, or the protection of inheritance, it can be tolerated and does not constitute a moral offense." [CCC 2383]

The issue arises when a person who is legally divorced gets remarried outside the Church. While a divorce may break the financial and legal ties between two people, the Church teaches that it does not dissolve a valid Christian marriage. We are bound by Christ's difficult words from Luke 16:18: "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and the one who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery." Thus, a Christian who is legally divorced and remarried is still bound to the first spouse. And the situation with the second spouse is problematic.

Why does this prevent a person from receiving Communion? In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he gave instructions on the proper reception of the Eucharist. He said, "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord" [1Cor 11:27]. This indicates that a person who receives the Eucharist in a state of grave sin is placing himself in further danger. So while this is undoubtedly a painful situation, it is important to remember that the impediment exists not as a punishment, but for the person's protection.

Dear Apologist, what is the difference between divorce and annulment?

When Jesus was asked about the possibility of divorce, He said, "What God has joined together, no man may separate. Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery" [Mark 10:9-12]. Note that He did not merely say divorce between Christians is a regrettable thing, He said it is impossible. Thus, Jesus teaches that Christian marriage is a bond that is indissoluble until death. However, it is possible for two people to come together in what is reckoned as a marriage, but upon investigation turns out not to be. Suppose one of the spouses says the marital vows, but does not truly mean them. Or perhaps one spouse is not freely offering his consent, but is being forced. Or the marriage is clandestine and in violation of Canon Law. Or the spouses were long-lost siblings! In such cases no marriage would have come into existence in the sight of God.

That is the principle distinction between divorce and annulment. In divorce, an existing marriage is said to be undone by some human authority. In an annulment, a putatively married person asks his diocese to investigate whether his union was ever a true marriage. All marriages are presumed valid until proven otherwise, so the tribunal would be looking for some defect that would prevent a valid marriage from being formed on the wedding day. No action committed after the wedding day can dissolve a marriage, but such actions can be evidence of some deficiency on the day of the wedding. When efforts to save a marriage are unsuccessful, people

who choose to undergo an annulment investigation should be supported and accompanied by the community through this often difficult process.

Dear Apologist, what makes a marriage valid?

We've previously talked about the nature of annulments. An annulment is when a Church tribunal looks at the circumstances of a purported marriage and judges whether a "valid marriage" ever existed. And by "valid marriage", we're referring to a marriage which is recognized by the Church and by God. So what constitutes a true marriage and how does one enter into one?

You might think the answer can be found in the Bible, but it isn't. The Bible spells out certain truths about marriage, but never tells you how to enter into one. This actually presents a problem to our Protestant friends who adhere to the doctrine of Sola Scriptura. If it were true that all Christian practices are supposed to be found in the Bible, Christians would be stuck with no way of getting married.

Some will turn to 1Corinthians 6:16 in an attempt to find an explanation of getting married. Namely, Paul describes how the conjugal act makes a person "one flesh" with his/her partner. But Paul brings this up in the context of condemning prostitution. He's not saying a person gets married to a prostitute when employing his/her services. Quite the opposite! In fact, if one examines the passage Paul is drawing upon, Genesis 2:24, the passage presumes that the husband and wife are married BEFORE they become one flesh.

So how does marriage happen? The Catechism says a marriage occurs when a man and woman freely take vows with the intention of forming a lifelong union ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation of offspring [CCC 1602]. This also must take place in a certain context. First, the two must not already be married to someone else. Also, if they are Catholics they need to get married in the Church. But the core truth is that the vows are what makes the marriage.

Dear Apologist, If I receive an annulment, does that mean the children born in that union were illegitimate?

Before answering that question, let's review the difference between divorce and annulment. A divorce purports to take a true, valid marriage and dissolve it by some human authority. Thus, there was a marriage – now there isn't. An annulment, sometimes called a decree of nullity, occurs when a person asks the Church to investigate whether he or she was ever legitimately married at all. If a decree of nullity is issued, the Church is saying there was never a valid marriage to begin with. Thus, many people will reason, "If I was never married, then my children were born out of wedlock, and are illegitimate."

This is a false inference, however, and people should be assured that their children are not considered "illegitimate". Regarding the legitimacy of children, the Code of Canon Law states: "The children conceived or born of a valid or putative marriage are legitimate" [CCL 1137]. And what is a "putative marriage"? The Code of Canon Law says, "An invalid marriage is called putative if at least one party celebrated it in good faith, until both parties become certain of its nullity." [CCL 1061.3] So as long as the annulled union was entered into in good faith by either spouse, and presumed valid by either spouse when the children were conceived, the children born in that union are considered "legitimate". So the answer is no, the children born in annulled unions are not "illegitimate".

That said, all of this is purely academic. There is almost no sector of civil or ecclesial life where "legitimacy" ever matters. The status is a holdover from days long gone by when it factored into the succession of royal offices and inheritances. So rest easy.

Dear Apologist, Are Catholics allowed to marry non-Christians?

Some background first. A marriage is a lifelong union between husband and wife oriented toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring. A "valid" marriage occurs when a man and woman (who are free to marry) exchange marital consent. In the case of non-Christians this would be called a "natural marriage". When a valid marriage is between two baptized Christians, it is a "sacramental marriage". This kind of marriage takes on the character of Christ's marriage to the Church, and for that reason is a source of sacramental grace. [Eph 5:32]

Now for the question at hand. A Catholic cannot ordinarily marry a non-Christian, but permission can be given by the local Bishop. The Catechism states: "An express dispensation from this impediment is required for the validity of the marriage. This permission presupposes that both parties know and do not exclude the essential ends and properties of marriage - and that the Catholic party confirms the obligations of preserving his or her own faith and ensuring the baptism and education of the children in the Catholic Church" [CCC 1635].

That said, the Church also offers strong warnings. First there are the words of Scripture, which say, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers” [2Cor 6:14]. Also, the Catechism warns us about the difficulties of these marriages: “The difficulties of mixed marriages must not be underestimated. Differences about faith and the very notion of marriage, and also different religious mentalities, can become sources of tension in marriage, especially as regards the education of children. The temptation to religious indifference can then arise” [CCC 1634]. Lastly, the marriage will not be a sacramental union until the non-Christian spouse converts and receives baptized – if that occurs.

Dear Apologist, how do I explain why the Church opposed changing the definition of marriage?

Start with a fundamental question: Why is the State interested in officially recognizing romantic relationships at all? It does not care about other types of relationships. Why these?

The reason is that there is a certain type of relationship which naturally tends toward creating new, helpless children. Those children place immediate moral duties upon their parents for care and protection. Likewise, the two parents have a natural claim to both the child AND to one another’s help in raising him/her. These moral obligations and privileges confer natural rights on all parties involved. According to the Declaration of Independence, the government’s main purpose is to protect our natural rights. Thus, it makes sense for the State to have an institution which legally binds men and women to one another and to any children they may create. This institution recognizes the natural bonds of motherhood, fatherhood, and childhood which exist in a family and upholds the rights endowed by those relationships. Until recently, the word for this in English was “marriage”.

The cultural shifts which occurred in the 20th century, however, drastically changed the way we conceive of marriage. It is now seen as a voluntary contract oriented toward the happiness of adults. If that is the case, why shouldn’t two men, two women, or any combination thereof be able to form one? The harm is that when the State legally changes the definition of marriage to be gender-neutral, it can no longer recognize the irreplaceable and complementary value of motherhood and fatherhood – nor can it affirm a child’s right to these relationships. Further, the government likewise compels itself to say that any ideology which affirms the natural importance of these things is a form of bigotry. That would include... the Catholic faith.

Dear Apologist, What do you say to a person who compares opposition to “same-sex marriage” to opposing interracial marriage?

The first thing I would point out is the core difference between the two cases. When considering interracial marriage laws, the court was asked, “Can the State ban marriages based on the disparate ethnicities of the spouses?” Everyone was in agreement that these were real marriages, but racist ideologies refused to tolerate them. However, a more fundamental question was being asked with the recent “same-sex marriage” controversy. The court was asked, “What is marriage anyway? Why is the State involved?”

As Catholics we have a principled answer to these questions. Our understanding of marriage is derived by reflecting on the complementarity of the sexes, the unique roles of motherhood and fatherhood, and the rights of parents and children. This line of thought points us toward a lifelong union between husband and wife, oriented toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring. With that definition in mind, skin color is shown to be irrelevant to the nature of marriage. However, it would also mean the idea of two men (or two women) forming a “marriage” is a logical contradiction – like a round square.

That’s why the people who banned interracial marriage and those who support “same-sex marriage” actually have an important commonality; they both used the State to impose a distortion of the true nature of marriage. The former wanted us to pretend skin color has a crucial part to play, the latter wants us to pretend biology and the rights of children do not. So I would respond by showing the difference between these cases, explaining the natural basis of marriage, and show how the same logic which leads us to oppose “same-sex marriage” would also have us defend interracial marriage.

Dear Apologist, my teenage daughter wants to know what the Bible means when it says wives should submit to their husbands? How do you explain this?

The New Testament contains three instances where we read the dual command for women to submit to their husbands and for husbands to selflessly love their wives. The most detailed of these is in Ephesians 5. There the Apostle explains that by conforming to this pattern, husbands and wives become images of Christ and the Church, and that in a mysterious way it was God’s intention from the beginning of the world to have men and women form this living icon. There are some who try to explain away the “submission” command by saying it was just a

cultural artifact of ancient times. But it is difficult to imagine that God eternally intended men and women to form an icon of Christ and the Church, only for it to become an outdated cultural artifact. So we're left with the fact that the New Testament teaches a principle of male leadership in marriage.

As for explaining this to people like your daughter, I've found the following to be true: This teaching is terrifying when considered in the abstract. People's imaginations race toward worst-case scenarios, and many are tempted to echo the words of the Apostles: "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry" [Matt 19:10]. Therefore, I'd want to avoid abstract consideration of this Biblical injunction and stay laser-focused on concrete examples. Identify couples who you believe are beautifully living in the way Paul described. Point to married men whom she respects and ask, "Would it be difficult living under the leadership of someone like that?" From there the task before her becomes plain: Find a righteous man of God who is worthy of her trust, and settle for nothing less.

Dear Apologist, I've heard that the Biblical word "submission" means "under the mission". Is that a valid way to understand it?

The New Testament presents us with many teachings which are difficult to accept. Among the most difficult in our era pertain to the relationship between husbands and wives. There are four places [Col 3:18, Eph 5:22, Titus 2:5, 1Pet 3:1-6] where the New Testament states that a wife should be in submission to her husband. Some people attempt to eliminate the difficulty of this teaching by appealing to a pseudo etymology. The word submission is broken into two parts; "sub" and "mission". Then it is said the word means to be "under the mission" of another. In this instance, a husband's mission is to create a Christian family and love his wife. Therefore, a wife's submission to her husband means nothing more than also desiring to build a Christian family and be loved by her husband. Any note of hierarchy and authority is done away with.

There are several problems with that explanation, but let's look at the biggest one. The New Testament was not written in Latin or English, but in Greek. So if we want to know what the author intended to convey with a specific word, we need to look at the Greek. The word used in these instances to describe a wife's relationship to her husband is "hupotasso". It is a combination of "hupo", which means below and "tasso" which is a verb meaning to send or arrange. "Hupotasso" always indicates one thing being made subject to a higher authority. It is the same word we see used to describe how we should relate to religious leaders, governing authorities, and even God [1Pet 5:5, 1Pet 2:13, Heb 12:9]. The explanation of "submission" meaning "under the mission" can be attractive because it is a plausible-sounding way to eliminate the difficulty of the passages which discuss roles in marriage. However, there is a difference between explaining a difficult text and explaining it away.

Dear Apologist, What does “servant leadership” mean?

In the 20th chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus explains to the Apostles a new principle of leadership. He says: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants. It will not be so among you. Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave - just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” Under this principle, those in authority do not seek wealth or to serve their own egos. Instead, they use their position to serve those in their charge. This principle is lived out especially by the church’s pastors and fathers in families.

As it applies to fathers, the New Testament elaborates on this in several different ways. In Colossians 3:19 and 1Peter 3:7, husbands are told to love their wives, honor them, show them consideration, and never be harsh with them. In 1Corinthians 14:35, we see that Paul expects fathers to have the theological expertise needed to answer questions from their families. The passage which sums the servant leader role of a husband is Ephesians 5:25-31. In this passage, Paul explains that the role of a husband is to love his wife with the same love Jesus has for the Church. That means husbands have a special calling to lead their families down the path of discipleship. And they are to do so with the tireless effort which Jesus exhibited throughout His ministry and the self-sacrificial love which He displayed on the cross. So while this position is one of real authority, it is to be used only for the benefit of others. To do otherwise would not only be a sin against one’s wife, but against the Savior whom he is supposed to be imaging.