

Second Vatican Council's Teaching on Marriage (Gaudium et Spes)

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Introduction

The document, Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, in Latin *Guadium et Spes*, is one of the sixteen documents of the Second Vatican Council. The Council was convoked by Pope St John XXIII on Oct 11, 1962 and closed by Pope Paul VI on Dec 8 1965. *Guadium et Spes* expresses the relation of the Church to the world. It is made up of two parts. In the first part, the Church gives a pastoral teaching on man and his relation to the world and to his fellow man. In the second part, she gives teaching on the various aspects of modern life and human society. It is in this part that marriage is discussed under the heading, “Fostering the Nobility of Marriage and the Family.”

VATICAN II'S TEACHING ON MARRIAGE

The council considers marriage and family as the foundation of the society. For the council, marriage and family occupy an essential place in the Church and the society. In paragraphs 48 and 49, we find the key points of the Church's doctrine on marriage. The teaching in par. 48 will be discussed under the following points. 1. The meaning and nature of marriage, 2. the purpose of marriage, 3. Marriage as covenant. Paragraph 49 gives a teaching on married love.

The Meaning and Nature of Marriage

Marriage is considered by the council as **the intimate partnership of life and conjugal love** (*intima communitas vitae et amoris coniugal*) **founded by the creator and structured by its own law.** It is rooted in the irrevocable personal consent and has its foundation in God. Marriage is a divine institution. Thus, God is at the centre of marriage.

The term “**intimate partnership**” (*intima communitas*) used by the council to describe marriage refers to sexual relation which is a constitutive part of marriage. It is not something added to marriage but essential to it and does not have the sole purpose of generation. It must be noted here that sexual relation is a human act. This means that it involves **freedom and will in those who perform it**. It is different from the act of man which refers to those actions carried out by a physiological human such as reflex actions.

The Purpose of Marriage

The sacred bond of marriage is ordered to the good of the spouses and also to the good of the children and the society. The council says the following with regards to the purpose of marriage:

“By their very nature, the institution of matrimony itself and conjugal love are ordained for the procreation and education of children, and find in them their ultimate crown. Thus a man and a woman, who by their compact of conjugal love "are no longer two, but one flesh" (Matt. 19:ff), render mutual help and service to each other through an intimate union of their persons and of their actions. Through this union they experience the meaning of their oneness and attain to it with growing perfection day by day. As a mutual gift of two persons, this intimate union and the good of the children impose total fidelity on the spouses and argue for an unbreakable oneness between them” (48).

Par. 50 says, “Marriage to be sure is not instituted solely for procreation; rather, its very nature as an unbreakable compact between persons, and the welfare of the children, both demand that the mutual love of the spouses be embodied in a rightly ordered manner, that it grow and ripen.” It must be noted that the Second Vatican Council does not put a gradation on the ends of marriage. There is no longer the distinction of the primary ends and the secondary ends as presented by St Thomas, and Pope Pius XI in *Casti Connubii*. The twofold purpose of marriage - procreation and education of the children and the good of the spouses are not to be separated.

Marriage as a Covenant

Another innovation of the conciliar teaching on marriage is the introduction of the term “**covenant**” in relation to marriage. **The council notes that marriage is a reflection of the loving covenant between Christ and the Church and a participation in this covenant.** B. Harring in one of his commentaries on the council teaching on marriage in ***Guadium et Spes*** asserts that the council understood marriage as a covenant modelled on the covenant between Christ and the Church. He noted that in the past centuries the Church used the term “contract” to describe marriage because in the patriarchal family, marriage was a contract by families. The head of the family decided to enter into matrimonial contract which was more economical and social.

According to Maurizio Aliotta, The idea of contract in reference to marriage does not make clear the covenant of love between the husband and the wife. The conciliar commission rejected the term “contract” because in the modern understanding of the term, the content of contract can be decided by the parties involved in the contract and their mutual agreement can regulate the rights and duties flowing from it. On the contrary, in *Guadium et Spes* the use of the term “covenant” embraces the relation between man and woman as persons sustained by their relation to God. The present code of canon Law preserves the use of both covenant and contract

The council says that marriage requires “**total fidelity on the spouses**” and **also unbreakable oneness between the spouses**. This is in line with St Augustine’s goods of marriage. According to St Augustine, there are three goods of marriage, namely: Bonum prolis, Bonum Fidei and Bonum Sacramentum. Marriage does not admit infidelity and it should not be broken. It is a partnership of the whole life (*consortium totius vitae*).

Married Love

The council fathers in par. 49 of the document gives the following teaching on married love:

“This love is an eminently human one since it is directed from one person to another through an affection of the will; it involves the good of the whole person, and therefore can enrich the expressions of body and mind with a unique dignity, ennobling these expressions as special ingredients and signs of the friendship distinctive of marriage. This love God has judged worthy of special gifts, healing, perfecting and exalting gifts of grace and of charity. Such love, merging the human with the divine, leads the spouses to a free and mutual gift of themselves, a gift providing itself by gentle affection and by deed, such love pervades the whole of their lives: indeed by its busy generosity it grows better and grows greater. Therefore it far excels mere erotic inclination, which, selfishly pursued, soon enough fades wretchedly away” (49).

It is significant to mention that *Guadium et Spes* is the first document that exalts married love. Unlike St Augustine, it does not consider the sexual dimension of human love as an obstacle for the spiritual life. The council fathers note that conjugal love embraces the totality of the human person, body and soul and does not constitute an obstacle for the spiritual life. The spiritual life itself does not diminish as a result of sexual relation engaged in by couples.

Pope St John Paul II elaborates this in *Familiaris consortio* 11, as follows: “...sexuality, by means of which man and woman give themselves to one another through the acts which are proper and exclusive to spouses, is by no means something purely biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person as such.” The council fathers in par. 49 note that the sexual relation which characterises marriage should not be understood only as an exchange of bodies but also as exchange of selves. **It should be honest, worthy and done in a human way. The council also teaches that sexual relation must be opened to life.** Thus, forms of contraceptives are rejected by the council.