

## Christian Marriage and Catholic Teaching on Sex

1. Human beings are made “in the image of God”. Only human beings, among all creatures, have the power to think, to reason, to know God and to worship Him. Only human beings have a spiritual nature; only human beings have the possibility of spending eternal life with God. Christians know that Jesus Christ tells us the whole truth about God, and when they are baptised (or when they later accept the responsibilities of their infant baptism), they take on the responsibility of telling the whole world about Jesus through their words and their way of life.
2. When two baptised Christians marry one another, they make a lifelong commitment to be faithful to each other and to welcome any children which are born. Making that commitment, in the form of solemn vows, is what actually makes the couple married. Because both partners are baptised into the life of Christ, their family life becomes a sign of the love that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have for one another. You are not only being joined with the person you love most in the world (which is what is on most couples’ minds when they get married) – you are also making a public sign of God’s love and faithfulness. To be as faithful as God to one another needs as God’s help – fortunately marriage is a sacrament, which means some measure of help is guaranteed.
3. The promise to “love” one another is not a promise to always have warm feelings: we can’t make ourselves feel anything if it doesn’t happen spontaneously. Rather, it is a promise to always work for the well-being of your spouse and put their welfare before your own – and having a right to expect them to do the same for you.
4. If two baptised Christians make a mature decision to enter marriage, which is a lifelong commitment to be faithful to their spouse and to welcome any children which are born, this is irrevocable. Marriage lasts in the eyes of God until one spouse dies. Even if your spouse is unfaithful and obtains a civil divorce, you are still bound by your promise to be faithful to them – just as Jesus is faithful to us even when we sin. Only if you can prove that at the time of getting married you were too immature to make that commitment, you didn’t really want children, you didn’t really intend to make a lifelong commitment, or were not actually free to get married, can the Church courts (the “tribunal”) declare that you weren’t actually married in the first place. This is called an annulment. But if your spouse is violent or cruel, it may be necessary for you to live apart from one another for your own physical or mental safety.
5. Because human beings are so special – indeed, the holiest beings after God Himself – the act which has the power to create a new human being is of immense significance; because human beings are made in God’s image, the Church is interested in their creation and has something to say about it. For this reason, sexual intercourse and the conception of a new human life are subject to special moral rules which don’t apply to other ways we use and treat our bodies. (If we say “grace” – a prayer of thanks to God – before meals, why not before marital sex? For an example in the Bible, see Tobit chapter 8.)

6. Because sexual intercourse is such a holy act, it must take place in a dignified situation. It is, in a way, sacrilegious to interfere with it! The only fitting context, the Church teaches us, is where a man and a woman have already made a lifelong commitment to share their lives with one another in unselfish love, and welcome into that family whatever children might be the fruit of the act. Thus pre-marital sex, adultery, homosexual acts and bestiality are all unworthy of the holiness of the sexual act.
7. Another aspect of the sanctity of sexual intercourse is that we may not use technology to conceive a human life apart from the intercourse of the spouses. Even in the “hard case” where the husband and wife would want to provide their own egg and sperm to make a test-tube baby, and avoid creating any spare embryos, the Church says that this is an unworthy way of creating a human life. It is hard for the couple who desperately want to become pregnant, but their sorrow is part of that commitment “for better, for worse” made in Christian marriage. Medical techniques which assist fertility before conception (e.g. drugs to promote egg production) or after sexual intercourse (e.g. helping an embryo to implant in the right place) are permitted.
8. The Church has always forbidden the use of artificial contraception – whether in the form of pills or barrier methods. Again, this is a sacrilege against the holiness of the sexual act. Some forms of contraception may cause the death of a newly-conceived embryo, in which case the sin of the destruction of human life is added to the violation of the sexual act.
9. “Natural Family Planning”, on the other hand, is permitted by the Church. This does not change the nature of sexual intercourse, only the timing of when to enjoy it – whether based on counting days, or by encouraging both spouses to become aware of the signs in the wife’s body that indicate when she is in the fertile period of her cycle. This calls for self-sacrifice, especially on the part of the husband. But perhaps this is appropriate: there is a real danger that, because of the immense pleasure that comes from sexual act, spouses can become “selfish” in their attitude to sex, and start concentrating on their own enjoyment rather than their spouse’s well-being. Each act of sexual intercourse should be a moment of total acceptance where each spouse lives and gives oneself to the other as they are at that moment. Knowing whether the wife is fertile or not at that moment is part of that total acceptance, just as knowing whether or not she has a headache at the time! (But using natural family planning over a prolonged period to avoid children should make you question whether you really meant that marital commitment to openness to having children.)
10. Husbands and wives need to be aware that their spouses have different emotional needs. Men tend to focus more on physical intimacy, women place a lot of importance on conversation and emotional relationships as well as physical sex. Only by talking to your spouse and understanding and accommodating their needs, can a healthy balanced relationship be maintained.

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