

FIRST CHAPTER SAMPLE

# BEING SPOUSES

*from celibate observation*



Stephen Joseph Wolf

## *Being Spouses*

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Stephen Joseph Wolf

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Songs are in the public domain and previously appeared in *Hinge Hour Singer*, idjc press, 2011.

Stephen Joseph Wolf is a parish priest in Nashville who spends most Mondays in silence and solitude writing for faith-sharing groups and spiritual direction.

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dedicated  
to married folk  
in the sacrament

## How to use *Being Spouses*

### ① an Individual Seeker

wanting to ponder marriage:

Wherever you find yourself drawn,  
linger for pondering, perhaps breathing  
with a particular word or phrase,  
but keep it simple.

### ② Two Spouses

reflecting on how God is at work in your vocation:

Take the time to go slowly, and keep it simple;  
the opening prayers are especially for you.

### ③ a Faith Sharing Group

perhaps meeting over six weeks:

Be sure to include singles, widows, and divorced  
who often have much to add about marriage.

Use what is helpful and ignore the rest;  
keep it simple.

If someone in the group knows the song,  
you have a song leader.

Group members can take turns being the *Leader*  
week to week, but it works best if there is only  
one *Leader* of each session.

Within each session, group members can take  
turns being the *Reader*, though no one should  
be compelled to be a *Reader*.

But keep it simple.

# BEING SPOUSES

## *from celibate observation*

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Melody: *The Church's One Foundation*

**Our Fa-ther, all cre-a-ting,**

Whose wis-dom, love, and pow'r  
 First bound two lives to-geth-er  
 In E-den's pri-mal hour,  
 To all this day in marr-iage  
 Those ear-ly gifts re-new:  
 In homes by you made hap-py  
 In love by you kept true.

Lord, as with wine at Ca-na,  
 The wed-ding feast you blessed,  
 Let spouses know the pres-ence  
 Of you, their dear-est guest.  
 Their store of earth-ly glad-ness  
 Trans-form to heav'n-ly wine,  
 And teach them in their trust-ing  
 To know the gift div-ine.

O Spir-it of the Fa-ther  
 And Son, give them your breath,  
 And strength of heart in pa-tience,  
 Your ten-der love their wealth,  
 That guard-ed by your pres-ence  
 And kept from strife with-in  
 Their hearts may sense your guid-ance  
 And know you dwell with them.

Text: John Ellerton, 1826-1893, altered significantly  
 Music: 76 76 D, AURELIA, Samuel S. Wesley, 1864;

# 1

## MARRIAGE SACRAMENTALITY

*from celibate observation*

SONG (from page 6), all together

A member of the group reads **Jeremiah 31:31-34**  
while others read along in their Bibles.

A member of the group reads **Hebrews 13:1-6**  
while others read along in their Bibles.

A member of the group reads **John 2:1-11**  
while others read along in their Bibles.

Then group members take turns reading the following:

If you want a theology or an *everything-there-is-to-know* about the Sacrament of Marriage, this is not that. If you already know what your brain can hold about marriage, this will be a waste of time. If you are hunting up ammunition for arguments about marriage, this won't help. And if you want tips from an insider-expert, I am not.

What I am is a celibate observer from the outside. One of my seven brothers will roll his eyes and heave big sighs if he suspects I might even be thinking about entering a conversation about marriage. When I dare cross the line, Pat Wolf grunts a long slow, "You can't know."

Why then is the preparation of couples for marriage so much a part of my vocation? Why do I have to help people suffering in the divorce-aftermath work through the labyrinth of a declaration of nullity? And why does so much of my time in pastoral counseling and spiritual direction go to relationships of couples? They all come with being a parish priest.

A parish priest is a witness to the entering into the sacrament of many couples. When a family is blessed with children, a parish priest might welcome them into the Church by conferring the sacrament of baptism. And it may be a parish priest who is called when a spouse is sick or dies.

Pat is correct; there is so much that I cannot know. So why am I writing about marriage? Because there are a few things I have been blessed to learn, some of which might need an outside observer to be noticed. Lacking interest in getting married myself might be just the ticket for



a helpful view. If not, my apologies, and thanks anyway for reading so far.

### SACRAMENTALITY

What do Catholics mean by sacramentality? By *Sacrament* we mean the *real presence* of Christ Alive, a way that Jesus Christ the Risen Lord is actually “really” present to us. Hang on.

Through the first thousand years of Christianity, the Church discerned seven of what we can call the big “S” Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation-Penance-Confession, Anointing of the Sick, Marriage, and Holy Orders.

This is not to say that these big seven are the only ways God is present to us. The ways are infinite and humanly uncountable. Sometimes we recognize the presence of God, and sometimes sense the possibility of the presence, and God can be present to us without our awareness. When we are blessed to be aware, we can certainly see that as a little “s” sacrament.

Some will call the presence only “spiritual,” or mystical, or of prayer or imagination. Well, God is real and so we call when and where God is present the “real presence.”

This is an incomplete description of what we mean by “sacrament.” It is not my intention to give here a complete theology of Sacraments, or even of the one Sacrament of Marriage. It may be helpful to look here at the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC):

The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament. They bear fruit in those who receive them with the required disposition.

CCC 1131

The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament. CCC 1601, Code of Canon Law, canon 1055.1

These definitions of sacrament and marriage are helpful to many. I intentionally leave these wise words to others, and choose instead to write the way one parish priest speaks of the sacrament.

This we can say: A Sacrament looks like something. It is recognizable ritual, with words and action and material, with matter and form. Ready yet for a definition of the Sacrament of Marriage from celibate observation? Here's one:

**When a grown-up baptized bride  
and a grown-up baptized groom  
with a good sense of who they are  
reveal themselves to each other  
and then come together in freedom  
and in freedom exchange mutual consent  
to bond in ① permanence, and  
② fidelity, and  
③ openness to children.**

*Grown-up:* Though marriage is often a catalyst for maturity, it is wise to first be mature. Jeanette Wolf's advice to her sons? Let both you and your spouse experience being self-supporting before getting married. There are reasons we have to age for 24 years to rent a car.

*A good sense of who they are:* No one knows himself or herself completely. God is always revealing to us new things about how God has created each of us in God's own image. Perhaps the real question is whether both have reached self-aware maturity.

*Revealed themselves:* No one can reveal everything about oneself to another, for none of us yet knows everything about ourselves. The real question here is whether anything is hidden or intentionally unrevealed.

*Freedom:* No one in the human condition is totally free; all of us are to some extent still enslaved to sin. But are both unmarried, free of other commitments? Do either of them feel any pressure that limits his or her freedom? Shotgun? Pregnancy? Cohabitation? Mingled finances? Is marriage the only way to get out of the parents' house? The freedom question: Have each given the other permission to not show up on the day of the wedding if there is honest and real hesitation?

*Mutual consent:* This can be called the "matter and form" of the sacrament. The consents make the marriage. If either spouse withholds even one of the three consents (*permanence, fidelity, openness to children*), or if either spouse is incapable of giving even one of the three consents, there may still be a civil contract of marriage, but it would not be the Sacrament of Marriage.

Again, for a marriage to be a Sacrament, both spouses give to each other all three of the necessary consents: *permanence, fidelity, and openness to children.*

## THE CONSENTS MAKE THE MARRIAGE.

- ① *Permanence*: indissoluble, unity,  
only death can break the bond;  
this is the glue.
- ② *Fidelity*: exclusive sexual relations;  
at the core, each spouse becomes the one  
with whom the other shares heart-to-heart  
in naked communication.
- ③ *Openness to Children*:  
not essential after child-bearing years;  
if one is unwilling to welcome a child into  
the family, that one may not be ready  
for the sacrament;  
when a couple already knows  
they are not able to have children,  
openness can include  
being open to a miracle,  
perhaps adoption,  
perhaps being a mentor, catechist,  
coach, aunt/uncle, godparent...

*The flip side of this consent:*

Yep; sex is best saved for marriage.

## SOME QUESTIONS FOR PONDERING

*Leader reads all nine questions out loud  
and allows three minutes for silent pondering.  
Then the group may either discuss the ponderings  
(restraining the urge to “fix” anybody)  
or stay in silence until time is up.*

1. Do any of the three consents strike me as particularly challenging?
2. A bride of five months once said, “An engagement ring should come with a warning tag that reads: THIS IS NOT EASY.” Would I add any other warning?
3. A couple gave their wedding guests books of matches with Saint Paul’s admonition, *It is better to marry than to burn.* See 1 Cor. 7:9 What role does a sense of humor play in the sacrament of marriage?
4. Who would be the resident-expert(s) on marriage among my family and friends? What would be a good question to ask him/her/them?
5. The prophet Jeremiah tells us of a covenant based on knowing God. And the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of “mutual love.” How does a covenant differ from a contract?

6. *Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.* Matt. 18:20  
What might this saying of Jesus teach about marriage and friendship?
7. Rumpole of the Baily secretly referred to his wife Hilda as *She Who Must Be Obeyed*.  
Jesus' mother Mary told the servants in Cana, *Do whatever he tells you.* John 2:5  
What role does obedience play in the best marriages?
8. What is there about marriage that I consider myself to be particularly wise?
9. What understanding about the word "sacrament" has been most helpful to me?

*When time is up:*                      Are there any intercessions  
from the group?

Our Father

*... and a stanza from the song on page 6 or 16?*

One of the more helpful ministries in the Church is something called *Retrouvaille*, a French word meaning something like *to rediscover* or *to take another look*. My most common experiences with *Retrouvaille* and marriages in trouble have looked like miracles. *Retrouvaille* identifies four stages in a mature marriage:

- ① Romance
- ② Disillusionment
- ③ Misery
- ④ Awakening

Next time you are on the internet, check out their description of these stages.

Another model that I often use in pastoral counseling and with engaged couples is from the days at Mundelein Seminary, from Dr. Geraldine Flynn.

- ① Honeymoon
- ② Disenchantment
- ③ Power Struggle
- ④ Honest Awareness
- ⑤ Real Acceptance
- ⑥ Commitment/Recommitment

Give a good gander to the chart on the next two pages. Be not afraid. Linger to ponder.



## STAGES OF A RELATIONSHIP

(one model)

### HONEYMOON

- ♥ two weeks to two years
- ♥ highly romanticized, falling in love
- ♥ wonderful idealization
- ♥ some hiding of the real self, maintaining image
- ♥ conflict glossed over or avoided

### DISENCHANTMENT

- ☹ can be a very long stage
- ☹ beginning to see spouse as he or she is
- ☹ irritations become more pronounced, more deeply felt
- ☹ falling out of love
- ☹ reality hits

The road from romantic love to a more mature love always goes by way of disenchantment/disillusionment.

### POWER STRUGGLE

- ☠ ten, fifteen, twenty years
- ☠ the core: trying to get one's spouse to be who one needs or wants him/her to be
- ☠ desperate attempt to change a spouse
- ☠ based on the illusion that we can change the other
- ☠ continues until the spouse lets go of the illusion and sees, accepts the other for who he or she is

## HONEST AWARENESS

Either ♠♦ gap too wide, too diverse . . .  
 or ♣♥ real acceptance, and relationship deepens

The background music of a vocation discernment  
 is commitments already made in fidelity.

## REAL ACCEPTANCE

- Lessons:
- ⚙ I cannot control or change another person.
  - ⚙ Love cannot be demanded,  
it has to be freely given.
  - ⚙ We can survive pain and disappointment.
  - ⚙ We are two separate unique individuals.
  - ⚙ I can accept the differences  
rather than fight over them.

## COMMITMENT / RECOMMITMENT

- ⊞ the calm after the storm
- ⊞ greater capacity to tolerate
- ⊞ growing ability to look inward  
for the source of conflict
- ⊞ greater ability to use conflicts as  
opportunities to learn about ourselves
- ⊞ seeing how the partner in fact  
contributes to the marriage
- ⊞ begin to hold spouse's well-being as equally important
- ⊞ movement to love that is chosen
- ⊞ the fruit of married love, not its initial seed

From Dr. Geraldine Flynn, formerly of Mundelein Seminary

### **Note on Appendices A and B**

It is not uncommon in our diverse culture for spouses to be of different faiths (interfaith) or of different Christian denominations (ecumenical). Some couples decide that it is very important for both to be of the same faith tradition. Many good couples give witness that it is not essential.

My experience has been that one's religion is such a personal call that there ought be a "no pressure" rule. The word "catholic" means "universal" or "all-embracing." Indeed many Catholic parishes are claimed by non-Catholics as their church of attendance, and there experience the presence of the Risen Christ. The two fragments on the next four pages from the Second Vatican Council have been helpful to many who find themselves in ecumenical or interfaith marriages. I offer them with one pastoral comment.

## CHURCH: THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Vatican Council II: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church  
(*Lumen Gentium*) 1964. From paragraphs 13–16.

All are called to the catholic unity of the people of God which prefigures and promotes universal peace. And to it belong, or are related in different ways:

- the catholic faithful,
- others who believe in Christ,
- [others who believe in the one God,]
- and all of humankind, called by God's grace to salvation.

### The Catholic Faithful

Relying on scripture and tradition, the Second Vatican Council teaches that this pilgrim church is required for salvation. Present to us in his body which is the church, Christ alone is mediator and the way of salvation. He expressly asserted the necessity of faith and Baptism (see Mark 16:16; John 3:5) and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the church, which people enter through Baptism as through a door. Therefore, those could not be saved who refuse either to enter the church, or to remain in it, while knowing that it was founded by God through Christ as required for salvation.

Fully incorporated into the society of the church are those who, possessing the Spirit of Christ, accept its entire structure and all the means of salvation established within it and who in its visible structures are united with Christ, who rules it through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops, by the bonds of profession of faith, the sacraments, ecclesiastical government, and communion.

A person who does not persevere in charity, however, is not saved, even though incorporated into the church. Such people remain indeed in the bosom of the church, but only "bodily" not "in their hearts" (St. Augustine). All daughters and sons of the church should nevertheless remember that their exalted status is not to be ascribed to their own merits, but to the special grace of Christ.

### **Others Who Believe in Christ**

The Church has many reasons for knowing that it is joined to the baptized who are honored by the name of Christian, but do not profess the faith in its entirety or have not preserved unity of communion under the successor of Peter.

For there are many who hold sacred scripture in honor as a rule of faith and of life, who display a sincere religious zeal, who lovingly believe in God the Father Almighty and in Christ, the Son of God and the Saviour. They are sealed by Baptism which unites them to Christ and they recognize and accept other sacraments in their own churches or ecclesiastical communities.

There is furthermore a communion in prayer and other spiritual benefits. Indeed, there is a true union in the holy Spirit for, by his gifts and graces, his sanctifying power is active in them also and he has strengthened some of them even to the shedding of their blood.

And so the Spirit stirs up desires and actions in all of Christ's disciples in order that all may be peacefully united, as Christ ordained, in one flock under one shepherd. Mother church never ceases to pray, hope and work that this may be achieved, and she exhorts her children to purification and renewal so that the sign of Christ may shine more brightly over the face of the church.

### **Others Who Believe in the One God**

Those who have not yet accepted the Gospel are related to the people of God in various ways.

There is, first, that people (the Jews) to whom the covenants and promises were made, and from whom Christ was born in the flesh (see Romans 9:4-5), a people in virtue of their election beloved for the sake of the fathers, for God never regret his gifts or his call (see Romans 11:28-39).

But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, first among whom are the Moslems: they profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, who will judge humanity on the last day.

### **Others Called by God's Grace to Salvation**

Nor is God remote from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, since he gives to everyone life and breath and all things (see Acts 17:25-28) and since the Savior wills everyone to be saved (see 1 Timothy 2:4).

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience — these too may attain eternal salvation.

Nor will divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life. Whatever of good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the church to be a preparation for the Gospel and given by him who enlightens all men and women that they may at length have life.

### **Missionaries to the Unchurched**

But very often, deceived by the Evil One, people have lost their way in their thinking, have exchanged the truth of God for a lie and served the creature rather than the Creator (see Romans 1:21 and 25). Or else, living and dying in this world without God, they are exposed to ultimate despair. This is why, to procure the glory of God and the salvation of all of these people, the church, mindful of the Lord's command, "preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15), takes great care to encourage the missions.

## THE NATURE OF THE SACRED LITURGY

Vatican Council II: The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy  
(*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) 1963. From paragraph 7.

Christ is always present in his church, especially in liturgical celebrations.

He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass both in the person of his minister, "the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross," and most of all in the eucharistic species.

By his power he is present in the sacraments so that when anybody baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes.

He is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in church.

Lastly, he is present when the church prays and sings, for he has promised "where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20).

**In other words,**

Christ the Risen Lord is present in

- ① the assembly gathered in the name of Christ,
- ② the word of God proclaimed and heard,
- ③ the Eucharistic species of bread and wine, and
- ④ the person of the priest.

That is to say, when believers gather in a place other than a Catholic church, and the word of God is proclaimed and heard, Christ the Risen Lord is present there.

And, even though we are not free to invite someone who is not Catholic to receive holy communion, for anyone who attends a Catholic Mass Christ the Risen Lord is present to them in the gathered assembly, in the word of God proclaimed and heard, and in the person of the priest who leads the prayer of the assembly and offers Christ's blessing at the conclusion of Mass.



## SOURCES & FOR MORE

**ETC - Experience, Tradition and Culture** - One way to understand *faith-sharing* is the evangelizing, the telling of the good news, that happens when two or more gather in the name of Christ at intersections of our life experience, faith tradition, and culture of the cosmos. This understanding is from *Theological Reflection*, Joye Gros, O.P.; Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002.

As sacred scripture is part of our faith tradition, all celebrations of Sacraments call for a reading from the word of God. The passages suggested in this book are from the ritual readings for Marriage. Other passages may also be chosen, but scripture is only to be omitted from the celebration of a Sacrament in an urgent circumstance, such as danger of death.

*Pat Wolf grunts a long slow, "Y o u c a n ' t k n o w."*, page 8. An imaginary version of brother Pat usually sits on my shoulder in marriage preparation, couples pastoral counseling, and during wedding homilies.

*...a complete theology...of the one Sacrament of Marriage...*, page 10. Surely the best place to go for the official teaching is the sixteen pages (paragraphs 1601 to 1666) of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition; Washington, D.C., USCCB-Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000. Consider reading together two or three pages at a time, followed by a couple of minutes of silence and sharing about

- ① A seed planted,
- ② A memory provoked,
- ③ A question raised, and
- ④ An action prompted.

For more information on this faith-sharing format, visit [www.idjc.org/etc-faith-group-guide](http://www.idjc.org/etc-faith-group-guide).

*Definition of the Sacrament of Marriage from celibate observation*, page 11. This unofficial definition evolved over years of pastoral ministry. I continue to be amazed at the wisdom of the Church's teaching on *permanence, fidelity and openness to children*. But when you review the sixteen pages on marriage in the *Catechism*, you might compose a better one.

*Freedom*, page 12. Freedom is essential to marriage because every vocation is a yes to a call from God. Saints defined freedom as the capacity to say only yes to God, being un-enslaved by anything else. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote, *It is impossible for a sane human to seriously regret an act that was consciously performed in union with God's will*. 1961, Abbey of Gethsemani, Inc.

*Rumpole of the Baily*, page 15. I heard the father of some friends refer to his wife as *she who must be obeyed* and it was so funny I quoted him anonymously. Before long someone told me its source, the British television series created by John Mortimer, 1975-1992.

## FOR MORE

*The 5 Love Languages*, Gary Chapman has identified these different ways and expectations of how to love:

- ① words of affirmation,
- ② quality time,
- ③ receiving gifts,
- ④ acts of service, and
- ⑤ physical touch;

New edition: Northfield Publishing, 2010. For more visit [www.5lovelanguages.com](http://www.5lovelanguages.com).

*On Living Simply*, Saint John Chrysostom, d. 406, compiled by Robert Van de Weyer; Ligouri, MO: Ligouri/Triumph, 1996.

*The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom*, Henri J.M. Nouwen, 64 short revelations on what it is to be a human being, from an experience of depression; New York: Doubleday, 1996.

*Happy Together: The Catholic Blueprint for a Loving Marriage*, by John Bosio; Twenty-Third Publications, 2008. I watched John and his wife Teri develop a remarkable process of marriage enrichment at Saint Stephen Catholic Community. John's books and *Six Date DVD's* show the same enthusiasm and wisdom, and I recommend them for every parish.

More fine books by John Bosio:

*Blessed Is Marriage: A Guide to the Beatitudes for Catholic Couples*; Twenty-Third Publications, 2012.

*Why Get Married in the Church? The Lifelong Blessing of a Catholic Wedding*; Twenty-Third Publications, 2013.

Check it all out at [www.happy-together.net](http://www.happy-together.net).

May I also suggest these small parish-tested books for couples, faith-sharing groups, and individual seekers:

*Pondering Our Faith*, Revised with the New Creed

*Tree of Life*, Saint Bonaventure on the Christ Story

*Forty Penances for Spiritual Exercise*

*God's Money*

*Anger-Grief the Jesus Way*

*Twelve-Step Spirituality for Christians*

*Planning My Own Funeral?* (4 weeks; others are 6 weeks)

All by Stephen Joseph Wolf.

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**Stephen Joseph Wolf** is a parish priest in Nashville who spends most Mondays in silence and solitude writing for faith-sharing groups and spiritual direction.