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Touchstones for Preaching Transcript of Special Touchstone: Weddings

presented by
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“Touchstones for Preaching” is a resource of the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, produced in partnership with The Church in the 21st Century Center.

Overview of Theology of Marriage

To get a sense of the theology of marriage I think a good place to go is the introduction to the Rite of Marriage. There’s some overview material right at the very front that explains some things about what it is that we do, and it’s really quite good. I think these are some points that emerge from those paragraphs, and those are the ones that I’d like to zero in on. Of course another way to see the theology of marriage is through the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. I just chose to give you a few points here from the introduction to the Rite of Marriage.

One of the main themes is the covenant. Marriage is building upon the concept of covenant that was revealed to us through the Scriptures. In a covenant, God establishes a relationship with the chosen people. God chooses someone and it’s not really an equal match. The people who are chosen cannot do back for God what God is doing for them. So it’s not a this-for-that kind of an arrangement, but one that is built on love and is meant to endure forever. It’s that idea of love in the covenant relationship that serves as one of the foundations for our understanding of marriage. A man and a woman are to establish a lifelong bond with each other. The consent that they give is irrevocable. It will remain forever, and the bond that they form is therefore unbreakable. They are expected to remain faithful within that bond. So it’s permanent and unbreakable. It’s given out of pure love, expecting nothing but love in return. That’s the nature of the covenant of marriage. And notice that even though this is set within the framework of covenant theology from the Old Testament, this is just good human sense. This is how marriage works from two people. The nature of human love doesn’t really expect a certain ratio in return.

Creation

Another theme that comes out quite dramatically from the introduction is the theme of creation. It is the source of the force and the strength of marriage. Marriage comes directly out of the creative work that God has done in history. Because of that, marriage is subject to God-established laws. There are certain ways that this will evolve. The openness to children, the protection of children within that relationship, is one of those goods that comes out of marriage. So it is part of the Creation that God has established. Again I would just point out you don’t need to be a Christian to adopt that. This is just, you know, somebody who just accepts the nature of the law around us, of natural law, would see the role of marriage here. And then, the introduction also points out the nature of the Sacrament of Marriage, and here, of course, is where the Christian ideals come into play in full force. Marriage establishes a higher dignity for Christians.

Jesus himself emphasizes the permanence of marriage. When you think of all the different things Jesus could have said about marriage, it seems like the one he keeps coming back to is that this is for life, that two shall become as one, and what God has established no one should separate. This is a theme in Jesus’ preaching about marriage. He could have talked about a hundred other things regarding married life, but this was an issue for him. Kind of makes you wonder, what was it like in

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that culture. And were there some problems with marriages enduring in his own day that were troublesome to him, that he felt this particular theme really needed to be addressed. St. Paul points out the image of the Paschal Mystery that husband and wife love each other as Christ loves the Church. So to enter into marriage for Christians is to enter into a deeper appreciation of what Christ's love for us is all about.

The Holy Spirit

The introduction also mentions the role of the Holy Spirit throughout married life. The Holy Spirit is our guide to help us follow the example of Christ. This is what Christian marriage promises for those who do it. Some of you may be aware (and I'll mention this again a little bit later on), but there is a second edition of the Rite of Marriage that has not yet been made available in English.

One of the changes that came out in that second edition was in the Nuptial Blessing. The three examples of the Nuptial Blessings have been amplified with an *epiclesis*, with a calling down of the Holy Spirit upon the engaged couple, or upon (now) the married couple. This was in some way a nod to the Eastern Rites because they see that prayer of blessing, that Nuptial Blessing, with its *epiclesis* as the sacramental binding moment for the marriage, whereas we would say it's the consent of the couple that is their sacramental binding moment. Our Nuptial Blessings didn't even have an *epiclesis* in them. So that has been fixed, if you will, with the new translations, and they are trying to go into all that.

We won't see the second edition of the Rite of Marriage until the translation is complete for the whole Missal because the two fit together. There are certain parts where the ritual overlaps, so they want to be sure that they've got the finished Missal translation completed, and then the Marriage Rite will go through its new translation as well. It's nearly done, but they just need to get a few more things fixed. That second edition has been out in Latin over 10 years, 10 or 15 years, I think. It's been awhile, and attempts have been made to get it translated; but it's still waiting now until the Missal is done.

Grow In the Spiritual Life

And then, also, just a final comment here on the Sacrament of Marriage. It calls the couple to progress in the spiritual life—not just to do this on their own or do this to kind of provide home for themselves and physically manage what they need to do. But they also need to manage their lives spiritually as well. So, these would be some points, anyway, that come out of the theology of marriage from the introduction to the Rite.

Preparation: Conversation with the Couple

I've lifted these questions from the book that they've been showing you here, *Preparing the Wedding Homily*. My idea behind the book is that the first pages give you questions you might use with the couple to unpack for them something of their spiritual journey, and what the homily might shape up; and you do that first before you even look at any Scripture readings. Then once you have some idea of where God has been in their lives and in the lives of the people coming to this wedding, then maybe look at the Lectionary and see where these readings might be especially good for this celebration. So that's the design of the book, but other people are just using the book in other ways. You can use it as a little Scripture commentary for the wedding lectionary as well.

But these are some questions I put in the front part about the bride and the groom on their own personal spiritual journey. So these are questions that could go to *each* of them, not to both of them, but just each of them to reflect on this in their lives:

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- What are your principal religious beliefs?
- What do you think about the Catholic Church, whether you're a Catholic or not?
A lot of times I'll ask the non-Catholic partner, what have you heard about the Catholic Church, or what's been your experience with the Catholic Church? Sometimes there's some baggage that needs to come out. Other times there's really no problem.
- What people have influenced your faith?
This can be interesting to hear from them about who helped them form their beliefs.
- Do you pray? On what occasions do you pray?

Sometimes they'll say, "I'm a believer." I'll even have non-baptized people tell me that they're Christian. I'm sure you've had this, too. I'll ask them, "Do you call yourself a Christian? They'll say, "Yes," they just never presented themselves for Baptism, but they are strong believers. I had one guy who was a construction worker on a project where one of his co-workers died in an accident at the site, and that was how he responded to this part of our conversation. When I asked him about praying, it was the first thing that came back to his mind. When that accident happened, it drove him into prayer. This was not a Catholic. I'm trying to remember if he was even baptized, but it was one of the more spiritual encounters that he had had.

- What religious experiences have you had? What would you describe that way?

I think those questions could go to them independently, just as individuals, to learn a little more about their background.

[Visual]

Questions to Each Individual

1. What are your principal beliefs?
2. What do you think of the Catholic Church?
3. What people have influenced your faith?
4. Do you pray?
5. What religious experiences have you had?

Then, as a couple, just the two of them together, how would they reflect on these:

- Has God been part of your relationship?
- What religious activities have you done together?
I like to ask that in the past tense, not the future. What are you planning to do? What's your track record now? What have you done together as a couple?
- Was the marriage proposal a religious experience in any way?
One couple told me immediately after he proposed to her, her first words were, "We have to call Father Paul." That was the first thing after he gave her the ring. Not every couple is thinking about the priest right away, but once in a while they do, and they're just so moved by this and they kind of see the spiritual significance of it right away.
- Do you believe God has something in mind by giving you this partner?
I'll sometimes ask them: Did you dream or pray about getting a particular kind of partner? Was that prayer answered? What did you have in mind? What does God have in mind with this person?

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Questions For the Couple About Their Spiritual Life

1. Has God been part of your relationship?
2. What religious activities have you done together?
3. Was the proposal a religious experience?
4. Do you believe God has something in mind in giving you this kind of partner?

- Why would you like a church wedding?
- What do you hope to experience *in* the wedding, just *in* the ceremony?
- Do they have any hopes about the wedding itself?

A lot of times they'll just say, "Well, I just hope I don't mess up, I hope I don't forget things, I hope I don't embarrass myself, I just want to get it over with," or something like that. But, the wedding is going to be a religious ritual. If they've had some experience in ritual that was good, can we build on that? Do you have some hopes for that here? Again, you'll find couples all across the spectrum, but you're going to occasionally find couples who've been active in music ministry or something with the liturgy, and they really want to make this a meaningful experience for everybody. So those would be some questions I think could go to the couple.

And then I'll ask them, too, about the assembly of people who are coming to the wedding:

- Who's going to be there?
- What family and friends are you expecting?
- What other groups will be represented?
- Will there be co-workers there, or buddies from some place in the past?
- Who will not be able to attend?

Ask them these questions just to get them imagining the assembly for the wedding, who these people are—just imagine them all in the room now together at one time. Then when you think about them, mentally scanning your eyes around the room:

- What do these people believe in, the participants who are coming for this?
- What do they hope for?
- What have they experienced of love?
Chances are you'll get a range of responses from that. Some people just are not church-goers at all, but they're expecting others have really been very influential in terms of love.
- So when you think about that group, what message should the homily speak to them, to everybody in the church?
- What do you hope people will experience *in* the wedding, *in* the liturgy, while they're there for that hour?
- When they walk out after that ceremony, what are you hoping they will have experienced in the time that they are together?

So these are questions, I think, that can get the couple talking a little about the spiritual life. As I say, some of them just can't. They really don't have the vocabulary, the personal experience to do this, but these are some ways that you can help them to learn a little bit more.

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Questions For the Couple About a Church Wedding

1. Why do you want a church wedding?
2. What do you hope to experience in the wedding?
3. What do the assembled believe in?
4. What do you hope they experience?

Let me ask you this, just on these points, about a couple's spiritual journey:

- What else have you noticed about the spiritual life of engaged couples?
- What needs to be affirmed?
- What needs to be challenged?
- What strategies have you found to be effective?

Choices and Selections of Scripture Readings

Scriptures readings from the Lectionary, the lure of **1 Corinthians 13**—virtually, every couple, you give them all of the options for the Scripture readings that they want—they will zero in on this particular one. You know which one I mean: "Love is patient, love is kind," St. Paul's famous hymn to love. There's something about it that just resonates with virtually every couple. They find that Paul's poetic description about love, 2,000 years ago, still speaks to their hearts. All I can say is, thank God Paul put that in the Bible, because if he didn't, I don't know where they would turn, what else they would be looking for for their choice for Scripture readings. This one is very popular.

You'll see in one of the homily samples I'm going to give to you, how I preached about this at one time. But my reflection on this is generally this: St. Paul, himself, would be very surprised to find out that chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians was being used to describe married love, or the love of engaged couples. I think he would be very surprised about it, not that those people shouldn't be experiencing love like this. But what love was Paul describing? Christian love. He was describing the love that you and I have to have for each other, that everybody in your parish has to have for everybody else sitting in the pew attending church with them. "Love is patient, love is kind, love is not jealous." That's the love Paul is describing. It's a common love, not a private love.

So, if you've got this private love and this describes the love that you have for your partner, well, that's nice, but that's only the beginning, folks. St. Paul is really calling you to something bigger than this. I don't think couples get *that* message. It's like Jesus, a week or two ago saying, "Love one another." And that's fine. We could do that. But then he goes on and says, "As I have loved you." It's like, oh, well, I'm not sure we want to do that, or we're prepared for that kind of self-giving love. But that's what this love is all about. It's not just the feeling that I have, but a command to carry out for everybody. So anyway, it's there. I don't think we're ever going to turn the tide away from it, but we can open up some other options for couples so they know what else is in there.

I want to make some comments on the Old Testament Lectionary because I think it's particularly varied, and in some cases difficult. A lot of couples just would have a hard time getting into it. They would read through one or two of these passages and just kind of say, "Oh well, that's just not doing it, that's just not singing to me." But I think it may be helpful to think of them in some of these categories. For example, The Songs of Songs, as you know, chapter 2 and chapter 8. They're two different examples in the wedding Lectionary. Both are eloquent, poetic expressions of love, but you

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got to have kind of a poetic soul to get into them. Otherwise the language just seems really bizarre. But if you've got people familiar with that kind of expression who are charmed by poetry, then this could be very lovely. One partner writes love sonnets to the other. I don't know how often this goes on any more, or even if they have a favorite song... For crying out loud, they are engaging in love poetry at some level.

Genesis, chapters 1 and 2 sound this theme of creation, how God has created man and woman from the very beginning and set creation in motion for all of them. If that is something that is appealing to them—nature, rebirth, their role in God's creation—Genesis 1 and 2 are hard to beat. If prayer is important to them, this chapter from the Book of Tobit will be very good as well.

But there are a couple of them that I think are more difficult. These engagement passages would rank top, and the list for me is...although, the one under "roles" will be as well. These passages I think are a hard sell to an engaged couple:

Genesis 24 - Abraham, who is 136 years old, lost his wife Sarah at the age of 127. On that occasion he decided it was time for his 36-year-old son, Isaac, to get married. So he dispatches a servant to go to his homeland in Canaan and look for a bride. The servant goes with camels and all kinds of possessions and goes out here and finds a well, a place where there's water. The servant prays to God, 'I need a sign that the woman that you send me is to be the bride of Isaac. So, this is the sign that I want you to give me, God. I'm going to see a woman carrying a jar to this place of water. I'm going to ask her for a drink, and she will say to me, of course, 'Would your camels like a drink, too?'" That's his prayer alright, and sure enough, it happens. This woman comes along with a jar. He says, "I'd like a drink." She says, how about your camels? He says, have I got a deal for you! You are to be the bride of my master's son. Congratulations! So, she takes him to her parents. He explains the whole thing. They say, "Sounds good to us." He puts a ring in her nose, bracelets on her hands, and leads her back to Isaac. The two of them meet. Isaac takes her into the tent. He makes love to her. They are married, and the Book of Genesis says, "Isaac was comforted on the loss of his mother." Now, I mean most people are not getting engaged this way. And we would never promote it. But I think there might be an occasion when this becomes appropriate. If families were involved with somebody getting married, or you met your fiancé on a blind date or something went on, or you were praying to God, "I just need some kind of sign here to find out who I'm supposed to marry," or whatever. You went through great lengths to find your partner, or whatever it might be. There could be some interesting parallels to draw between the two.

Tobit, chapter 7—his engagement to Sarah...A similar story that's just kind of odd, but you remember the angel, Raphael, has accompanied Tobiah, unknown to him that this is the angel. They're on this journey to find a cure for Tobit's blindness, and while they're out there, try to get a spouse. So they meet Sarah, and the angel is convinced that this is the match that was made in heaven. Tobiah falls in love with her. She falls in love with him. She's beautiful. She comes from a good family. She's got great character, everything going for her—except that she has been married seven times already, and every husband on the night of the wedding died. Other than that flaw, she is really a catch. So they're, like, the ones that she wants to have. So Tobiah is into it. He's fine, and they get married. And that night before going to bed he prays, as well he should. But the angel comes to the rescue, and the demon is driven away, and they all live happily ever after. They find the cure, the fish gall that goes back and cures his father's blindness, and everything gets tied up rather nicely at the end. But anyway, these are very odd engagement stories. They appear in the Lectionary because they have to do with engagement and marriage, but they have to be tweaked somehow if you're going to actually preach on these things and make them appropriate.

More commonly, you'll find that the descriptions of the ideal wife in **Proverbs 31** and **Sirach 26** are going to set the bride especially on edge. Occasionally I find a bride who wants this. This is exactly

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who she wants to be in this marriage and wants this passage read with all of its meaning. You don't have to tweak it at all. This is kind of what she wants. At the same time, I think that these are passages that can be meaningfully expressed. It's just that we need to get underneath them and find out what goes to make the ideal wife, but maybe at the same time say some things about what might make an ideal groom. So, there could be ways of making this work.

Jeremiah 31, the new covenant, I think is another beautiful passage, but a lot of people just don't get it. When they read through it they don't know why this would be appropriate, but with some catechesis on the text a couple might be drawn to it.

I think we're at a stage right now where couples kind of expect that they're going to be drawn into the process of choosing the readings for the wedding. There's nothing that says they have to be. You may occasionally find a couple that really don't want to do this or say, "Well, we'll just trust you to find good readings." Then you actually might find, with a freer hand, you could make some choices that you think would be especially appropriate here, and then help with the homily. But I think especially if you've had conversation with them ahead of time that has prepared for this, when you go into these readings you know what you're looking for, or what types of passages to zero in on.

There are some additional readings that are not in the Rite of Marriage. These are new to the second edition of the Rite of Marriage, and you will find them in the Lectionary for Mass, volume four. But if you compare the Rite of Marriage—you know what I mean, the red book Rite of Marriage, has a selection of Scripture readings in the back—if you compare that collection of readings to Lectionary for Mass, volume 4, you're going to find four more readings in the Lectionary that are not in the Rite of Marriage because these are now part of the second edition. For whatever reason, there is a fifth reading that was added to the second edition for the Rite of Marriage and it does not appear in the revised Lectionary. I'm assuming that was an oversight. I don't know how this happened or what the sequence of events was, but **Ephesians, chapter 4, 1-6** is not in volume 4 of the Lectionary for Mass. According to the revised Rite you're allowed to use it as one of the readings for marriage, but it's not there. You can find it in the Lectionary for Mass, number 110, Year B. So you've got it in there, but it's in a separate volume. I don't know that it's going to be the most popular reading. I put all of these in here. I had to convince them in Washington that my book had to include that passage because they came back and said, "Well, that's not in the Lectionary for Mass." I said, "Well, it should have been." Just so you know which passage we're talking about here: "Brothers and sisters: I a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace, one body and one Spirit. As you are also called to the one hope of your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." You could see where that could make a nice passage on unity especially perhaps at a marriage between Christians of two different church backgrounds. It's one of the options that is permitted.

They've also introduced asterisks which did not exist before. So you'll find—when the day comes that this second edition of the Rite of Marriage comes out, which will be in our lifetime I'm sure—there will be asterisks by some of the readings, because in the Lectionary some of the readings deal more directly with marriage than others do. The one I just read for you does not carry an asterisk. It just has to do with some of the basic principles on love and unity, but the wedding at Cana does, so it's just more specific to the task. So you have to choose at least one reading with an asterisk that gives an explicit reference to marriage. That's one of the new rules that will be coming out in the second edition.

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How about some discussion on the Lectionary:

- What suggestions do you have for using the Lectionary for Mass?
- What challenges do you have with the Lectionary?
- Do you use other sources from the ritual for homilies?
What I mean by that is, do you preach on other things, like the rings or the vows, or something like that, that isn't necessarily Lectionary-based?
- When you think about the readings, what comments do you have?

John: I hate to mention the competition, but for 39 years I've been using now the late Joe Champlin's book.

Father Paul: Oh yeah, yeah. It's very good.

John: *Together for Life*, with couples.

Father Paul: Sure.

John: But, in recent years I've been excited by inviting the couples—inviting is probably an understatement—challenging them when they've picked out their two readings or three readings, then I said next time I meet with you I'm going to ask you why...

Father Paul: Very good.

John: And you're going to tell me because you like it. And I'll say, "Why did you like it?" And they're going to tell me, "We liked it because it sounds nice." Why does it sound nice? And I tell them, "I want you to be able to tell me in our next session what you think God is saying to you about your lives together, not about the history of it or anything like that, but what it's really saying to you." Well, of course, some come in with nothing, but quite a few come in with amazing insights, and I tell them, "You're helping me prepare the homily; so it won't be my homily, it's going to be yours and mine to these people." Some of them come up with very good spiritual insights. I also try to invite them... as they do that they're creating what I like to tell them is a spiritual backbone for their marriage. They're going to have some spiritual muscle that can be very helpful to them in the challenges that lie ahead.

Father Paul: Yeah. That's excellent, John. Thank you. Yeah, definitely discuss with the couple why these passages are good. Champlin's book is fine. It's excellent. He does much more than I do. I'm just dealing with the Scripture readings. He looks at the whole ceremony. What I'm trying to do is to get the couple thinking about maybe what they need to hear in that homily, or what kind of specific support they're looking for. Then, can we find Scripture passages that will address that need. Thanks for that.

Michael: Two challenges that have come up in my career working with engaged couples...One is—you've alluded to it—the perceived misogyny in many of the readings. A lot of, especially brides, feel put off by that and it doesn't resonate with them at all. A second challenge: I've, on a couple of occasions, been asked to consider using other readings besides Scripture, and I know that's not liturgically allowed, but if you've ever been asked that, I'd be very interested to know how you've dealt with that.

Father Paul: Thanks. No, I would not do another kind of reading. That really needs to be biblical time. If they had something that was very important to them, I would discuss some other options with them on how they might use them. For example, if they're printing up a program, would they like to have a quote from that on the back of the program? Or if they really wanted to have it read to the group, perhaps at a different point in the ceremony before the dismissal, it could be done. Or

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even as part of the prayer over the meal the night before, or for the reception before getting underway. There might be other places where this would really be appropriate.

Crafting the Homily

Other Homiletic Material

Both in the general instruction of the Roman Missal and the introduction to the Lectionary for Mass—I think it's in both places—when it describes the homily, it mentions the readings as what you talk about, but not exclusively. It says you may also preach on any of the—I forget how they describe it, but—the elements of the Mass, which I think could be texts and gestures. Those could also be leaping off points for homiletic reflection. In the Rite of Marriage it seems to say the readings. It talks about the Lectionary more than you find the reference to the other thing. But I think because of those other references, it would carry over into the marriage ceremony as well. So yeah, the Preface can be a subject for the homily. The Opening Prayer can be, the Nuptial Blessing—as you say, any of those things can be points to bolster the direction of the homily.

Associated Questions – Societal Issue: Choosing To Marry

Beyond the Rite of Marriage though, society has some expectations about marriage, and marriage in turn makes some expectations about society. People especially in pastoral ministry, we can get very sarcastic about weddings. I hear many priests say it, “I’d rather do a funeral than a wedding.” I’ll hear that comment a lot. We’re not the only ones. Organists will say it. I just think—I understand the frustrations we all go through—but, I think it’s a scandalous thing to say. Marriage is one of our Sacraments. We are called on to be ministers here at a moment when the Holy Spirit is particularly active, to bind people together. It should be a privileged moment for us. I know that there are practical obstacles, societal obstacles that get in the way, but at the same time I think we need to kind of seize this opportunity with all the good that the Church has to offer to a couple and lift them up, kind of tap into the joy of this experience for them and let this be a part of the good that’s happening.

I think that for a couple to make this decision to have their marriage in our churches is already giving them some points. First, they’re deciding to marry, and anymore, a lot of couples just are not. They are living together and maybe they’ll get married somewhere down the line, but it is not really a value for them. So when the couple says, “No, marriage really is a value,” I think it’s time for us to affirm that and kind of help pull out from them why this is important now. Why are you choosing to marry? Why not live together? They will have some further reflections, some ability to expound on that. But, the very decision to marry is becoming a countercultural decision for this couple to make, a spiritual decision for that couple to make.

For them to choose a sacred location and a minister to witness their marriage is another statement of faith at some level, even if it’s a very minimal level. They recognize some value in the sacredness of the ritual, the place, and the minister. It’s another point that I think we can engage in conversation and learn more from them. What is the spiritual nature of this? Why should the Church be involved in this, and help them pull this out? A lot of couples are not very reflective on points. I don’t mean to corner them as much as to help them reflect, help them see why this is important, how these issues came to the fore.

Another thing I will hear from almost every couple—I’d say every couple—they will tell me they intend that this marriage will last forever. They are aware of the challenges that others have faced, even that their own parents or siblings have faced, but they see their own situation as different. By getting married they are saying we intend this to be permanent. Somehow they’re making that connection. So I know we’ve got people coming to us who we don’t see a whole lot of otherwise in our churches,

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but something's going on in there. If they are coming to us, something spiritual is moving them, and that's where we can build. We can build on that. Those who don't have anything spiritual moving them, they're not coming to us. They're either not getting married or getting married some other way, and they just don't care. There's another whole category of engaged couples out there. But I think we can do a lot to help build on the spiritual experience that is happening. To that extent, I like to visit with the couple a little bit about their own spiritual lives, their family, and their friends. I'll take you through some of these questions to let you see how this could happen. I make the presumption that they have a spiritual life, that somehow this is fitting into it in a very significant way; that their family and friends who are coming to this wedding also have spiritual lives, and we need to talk a little about what this event is going to be like once we get inside the church. We'll look at those questions in a little bit. I think these are all different societal issues in which we play a part. It's not like the society is completely extraneous to this. Once they come to us, then we do have something to contribute to the conversation.

Associated Questions – Society's Expectation: Giving the Bride Away

The other thing—I hate to admit that this is a part of it, but it really is. The wedding is about the bride. All of our theology is it's not about the bride. It's about the bride and the groom. It's about the Church. It's about Christ. It's about God. It's about love. But it's about the bride. You can tell from the way she dresses, to the focus of attention that is given her, the expectations that are placed on her family to pay for certain elements of the ceremony. So much of the direction and the preparation is focused on her. Almost every engaged couple I talk to, when I ask them how are the preparations coming, it's usually the bride who responds because she's doing most of the preparations. Your typical groom is like, you know, whatever, I just want to make her happy. So, they kind of unfold this way.

Once in a while I'll have a bride ask me about the question, "Who gives the bride away?" I'll tell her that's really not part of the Catholic ritual. We don't formally ask that question. Some of them are really surprised by that because it seems like this is what they should do. But when you think of it, I think there are good reasons why we *don't* ask that question. We are expecting the wedding is going to be valid because of the mutual consent of the two partners. So if somebody is giving the bride away, it raises the question of her freedom to participate in this action. She needs to make her response freely. She's not just being given.

I did a wedding about a year and a half ago for a Catholic groom and a Christian bride, and from her tradition this question was really important. She wanted that question to be asked at part of her ceremony. I just found that the whole idea was distasteful to me. I had to confess to her that I had problems asking that question. It just seemed to diminish her role, not lift it up, but to diminish it. They were okay with maybe that the response would be, "Her mother and I." They thought maybe the father of the bride could answer not just for himself but at least for the parents, "Her mother and I." So they said, "Is there any other question you could ask that we could answer, "Her mother and I"? So I said, "Yeah, how about, 'Who's paying for this wedding?'"

But the point is that it just seems out of whack, and if you're going to ask that question of the bride's parents, why are you not asking that question of the groom's parents? Why is it more important for one than it is for the other? The whole idea here is the mutual freedom of the couple. But we're coming out of a long history in which marriages were prearranged and we still ritualize that. In fact, there are places in the world where marriages are prearranged today, so it's not an uncommon thing.

I was talking with somebody from a tribunal office in India a year ago and they were asking him, "Do you find that you have more marriage cases dealing with divorces after the arranged marriages?" He said, "Not especially. Yes, there are divorces from those, but there are divorces from the ones where

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the two partners decide this on their own.” So, he wasn’t really picking up anything. It just kind of depends on where you are in society.

As strongly as I feel that the question is inappropriate—“Who’s giving the bride away?”—I have to confess that we ritualize it with almost every wedding. In a typical wedding the groom is up there already, or he comes in with the groomsmen from some place and the bride comes up the aisle by herself or with her father. And then ritually, they act out the business of the father giving the bride to the groom. He’ll give her one last kiss, hand her over to the groom, and go to his place. We all do this in the ritual. No formal question is asked, but we’re playing it out in the ritual that this is what’s happening. The father has agreed to give the daughter to this other man, and he will now be responsible for her. We don’t say the words, but we act it out with almost every wedding.

The Rite of Marriage incidentally, I think it’s paragraphs 19 and 20, describe the procession into the church. We’re not going to go through the Rite here, we’re just focusing on the homily, but, if you want to look it up sometime. It always gives me a chuckle to see how the rubrics describe [how] the wedding procession should happen when you think about what actually does happen. The first line is, “At the appointed time.” That does not always happen.

The image it has is that the priest visits with the bride and the groom in the back of the church, kind of welcomes them at the door of the church, and tells them both that the Church is sharing their joy. Again, that’s not happening for many reasons. The priest usually isn’t feeling too joyful, and it’s kind of hard for him to express that to them at the time, and the bride and the groom aren’t seeing each other in a lot of cases. There’s that old tradition that they won’t see each other. Even if they’ve been living together, they’re not going to see each other the morning of the wedding. That’s not what they should do. But the Rite envisions that there will be a little conversation there; then the ministers come down the aisle.

So just as you would start a Sunday Mass procession, servers, lector, deacon, priest would all come down the aisle, and then the bride and the groom who may be escorted by at least their attendants and perhaps the parents (in the plural). So the vision is that after the priest walks in, you might have the best man and maid-of-honor come in, the parents of the couple come in, and then the bride and the groom come in. This just isn’t happening. But you can see where the theology of marriage, I think, is expressed more honestly with a procession like that than it is with our current one of passing the bride over. So anyway, all of this is to say we’ve got these issues going on in the culture that we need to speak to at some level. If the father is giving the bride away, we just need to keep emphasizing here the mutual consent of both partners as we go along.

Those are some of my ideas of the big picture. I’d like to hear some things from you:

- What have I missed?
- What would you add here to the big picture of what we’re doing with weddings?
- What other issues need our attention in this milieu?
- What’s the purpose of the wedding homily? Where does it fit with the whole complex of things going on here with the ceremony?

[Pause]

I guess I’m seeing it as people who have not reflected very deeply. I don’t think many of them are belligerent or combative. It’s not that they don’t want to answer these questions. I think they just don’t know how. The place where I will get a little pointed with them is, if they are living together I will ask them some questions about their sexual morality. “Describe right and wrong for me. When is it right for two people to have sex?” Again, they haven’t really thought about this, most of them. They’re just doing it. But, I’ll press them to try to come up with a moral platform for what they’re

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doing, and then give the Church's teaching in conversation with that. But I want to hear from them first. I'm probably a little more pointed with that conversation than around these. I'll do that one early on, first meeting if we can, just to deal with it right up top.

But at this point when we're getting ready for the wedding, I really want the wedding to be a happy day for everybody. At this point, if they have trouble talking further about the spiritual life, I'll try to be as precise with questions as possible. "Can you think of somebody whose spiritual life inspired you, or somebody whose faith inspired you? Tell me about a time you went to church that you really had a good experience. Can you give me one example of something like this?" I'll try to pare it down to where they don't have to come up with a big philosophy, but they can just tell me a story. This was some experience I had. This meant something to me. This stuck with me. They'll be able to do that. But sometimes, if you're getting a blank stare, it may be that we haven't asked the question a helpful way. If we can rephrase it, try to come at it in a way that opens a door for them, and do it in a loving way, I think they'll respond. I think they will.

Associated Questions – On Living Together before Marriage

It's one of the questions I'll ask right away. Not, "Hi, what's your name? Are you living together?" But at least in the first conversation, we kind of talk a little bit about life and who they are, what they do, and their families, or whatever seems fine. I go through my checklist of things, and I'll ask them about their Church practice as a Catholic. "Have you been confirmed?" Some of those things we want to know. "Are you planning to have children and raise them in the Catholic faith? Are you planning a lifetime commitment? Are you living together?" I will ask them some of those big questions that we need to know about right away to be sure we're all on the same page. And then I'll say, "If you're living together, I presume that means you're having a sexual relationship together." Then, as I say, I'll go from there to put the monkey on their shoulders. "What did you learn about sexual morality when you were growing up?" "Well, we learned it was wrong," or "I know it's against the Bible, but we're doing it." There's any number of things they'll say, but most of them get kind of sheepish. Only rarely do I find a couple who can articulate a defense, a spiritual defense for their choice. I can think of one or two couples in the last many years who actually took that tack, and quite honestly, I'd rather they would. I'd rather they come up with a spiritual argument for this because most of the spiritual arguments I hear from them is well, "It's a sin, but we're doing it." "Well how does that fit with your morality? What kind of a setup is this for how you're going to be making decisions later on in marriage?"

Almost every couple will say to me in the first breath [in answer to] "Why did you choose to live together?" They'll say to me, "Because it saves money." Do you find this? I just find almost everybody says, and I'm supposed to go, "Oh, of course. Why did I even think this would be a problem? Being thrifty is the single most important value for Christians." I just think they need to be challenged on how finances have become the purveyor of moral value, and you're supposed to get money and save money. So if this is one way living together fits into that paradigm, then you'd do it and that becomes your moral framework for life. I just try to unpack this as best I can to help them see the points.

Associated Questions – Weddings without a Mass

If one partner is not Catholic, I really do discourage Mass for that wedding. If they're not baptized, we're really not supposed to do Mass. They can have Mass if one is not. I think we're supposed to get that straightened out, but it can happen. I just find, anymore, marriage without Mass works very, very well. It kind of puts everybody on a more common platform and the great celebration of unity doesn't fall apart when the Communion Rite gets here. It just seems to be a better prayerful

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experience for everybody who's coming to the ceremony. And it still takes time. You never get in and out of a Catholic wedding quickly. A wedding without Mass takes a while.

Associated Questions – On Length of Homily (5-6 min)

I've been doing this all through my priesthood. This has been the length of talk I started with when I was ordained a deacon, and I discovered early on that I was getting good feedback on brevity and clarity. I thought that those might be gifts I should cling to and develop. So I've done that. I guess one reason too, is that people know when I stand up to speak how long this is going to go. It's about five minutes, five to six minutes, when I talk on Sunday. They know because I'm sure I fall into a pattern. You're going to see patterns in all five of these homilies. Because I fall into a pattern, I think they know what to listen for.

An image that occurred to me early on was I'm going to pitch once. I'm going to pitch the ball once. You've got to catch it or hit it, whatever you're going to do with it. But you can't just zone in and out of the talk because I'm not going to be talking all that long. If you don't like my talk, well, at least it'll be over before very long, and you won't have to worry about that. I just found the more I worked with it, the more it was making me choose words and phrases that packed a punch. It was just a little discipline I imposed on myself. There are some occasions I'll go another paragraph or two. Once in a while I give on Sunday what I would call "a pastor's homily," whether it's because our finances are in such shape, or we're doing a building project, or whatever. There's just so much that really has to be said right now, I will do that. For my dad's funeral, I talked a little more for my father. People are going to have to listen about him. There are times when I expanded, but 99.9 percent of the time this is my length.

Now, spend a few moments reflecting on the questions at the bottom of the page.

[Questions on web page]

- What questions are helpful to you in thinking about engaging the couple in a conversation before the wedding?
- What interactions with the couple can help you plan the homily?
- What theological theme about marriage is most challenging in today's world? Why?