

On the Marriage Ceremony III

Once the couple has arrived at the edge of the sanctuary, they declare their consent to the marriage. Consent (from the Latin *consentire*, to think and to feel with) means here that the couple give their word that they have freely and deliberately chosen to bind themselves to one another in a contract. Marriage is essentially a contract, but for Christians this contract can also be understood as a covenant (the word used by the 1983 Code of Canon Law).

A “covenant” goes back to the language which was used in ancient treaties between kings, where they needed to make a contract to prevent things like war. It had three elements:

1. Setting the terms. This might have been as simple as agreeing to not cross a river without permission of the other side.
2. Making a promise. This was done publicly, with witnesses, where each party in the treaty would swear allegiance to the treaty.
3. Cutting the covenant. The covenant was not complete until a bull had been cut in half, and each king would walk through the blood, signifying that if they ever broke their word, then may what happened to the bull happen to them. They took this potential curse seriously, though there were failures in their fidelity.

Once a covenant was cut (assuming all three elements were present), then it could not be broken for any reason, except death. If one of the parties who contracted the covenant died, then another covenant could be cut between the original king say, and the son of the king who had died. But only death ended the covenant.

Notice that when God wanted to communicate to the Hebrews the importance of living in a covenant with Him (or a contract with the Law); He used the same language of symbolism that was common all over the ancient world.

1. The terms were set on Mt. Sinai, written in fire by an angel on two stone tablets, and given to Moses.
2. The promise was made at the foot of Mt. Sinai, after days of fasting (“I will be your God, and you will be my people...”).
3. A bull was cut, and Moses dipped a branch of Hyssop (a bush which grew in the area), and instead of God walking through the half of the bull, and the Hebrews after Him, Moses sprinkled the blood over the heads of the Hebrews, making them Jews.

Once this covenant was cut, it could not be broken, not even by death, since God cannot die, and He promised that Israel would live forever. Christ fulfilled the old covenant (the word for covenant in Latin is *testamentum*) with the New Testament (or covenant), but He did not come to destroy it.

Marriage has these same elements:

1. The terms are set in the period of instructions, where the couple delves into the meaning of the vows, which express consent.
2. The promise is made publicly.
3. The covenant is cut in nuptial consummation.

Once this covenant is complete, it cannot be broken except by the death of one of the spouses.

Notice too that this same approach was used to cut the New Covenant:

1. The terms are set – “You have heard Moses say...but I say to you love one another as I have loved you.”
2. The promise made (in different ways, such as “I will be with you always.”).
3. The covenant cut on the cross, not with the blood of animals.

This is unbreakable, since like the Old Covenant, God cannot die, and even the gates of hell cannot prevail against the Church, the People of God.

To enter the New Covenant, the same language and symbolism is used:

1. The terms are set in instructions to the adult catechumen, or to the parents of the child to be baptized.
2. The promise is made publicly (in different ways, such as, “Do you renounce Satan?”).
3. Water is poured over the skin – as opposed to the blood of an animal – and once that is done, this entrance into the New Covenant cannot be broken, but only fulfilled. We renew our entrance into the New Covenant every Sabbath, when the Asperges (or Vidi Aquam) is sung before the principal Mass of the parish.

It is essential that the couple be in a state of grace to contract matrimony, since to do so conscious of mortal sin would result in a sacrilege. It is necessary to be in a good state also because the first gift which a husband and wife give each other, is sanctifying grace (presuming the couple has been baptized). When asked about this, most couples think that the first gift they give as man and wife is the ring, but it is grace, since they are the ministers of the sacrament, and not the priest, who functions at the wedding as an official witness of the Church, to ensure that the laws which protect the sacrament remain intact. But if the couple is not in a state of grace, they cannot give each other this gift.

Once mutual consent has been witnessed, then the couple exchanges vows. In the next insert we will look at the vows themselves, and the prayers which follow.