

Preparing for and Celebrating Life in Community Within the Body of Christ

*This text is taken from the booklet of the same name used in preparing couples for their covenant,
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One Sunday morning last August, Sue and Jan stood before the Altar at the Prayers of the People, offered their vows of life-in-community, and asked the congregation's prayers that they grow in faithfulness. This was a joyful, world-transforming experience for the congregation. I took off my stole after observing that the institutional canons do not yet authorize me to celebrate such vows as representative of the Church. In essence, the stole was placed upon the people -- the priesthood whom priests represent -- and they were given the opportunity to fulfill the commandment that we pray for each other. I stood among them not as ordained but as another member of the community. Sue and Jan were the representative priests, making the offering.

The next heterosexual couple to be married in our parish requested significant changes in some parts of the liturgy offered by the BCP, so as better to reflect the nature of this sacrament and of their offering to God. I decided then that I would no longer be able to use the apologia for marriage in the BCP prolegomenon to the liturgy of the Word, as it is poor biblical exegesis, and theologically misleading.

For years, both heterosexual and homosexual couples who wished their life in community to be a sacramental sign of Christ's reconciling presence in the world have worked with me through the same process of understanding the classic Christian community vows: poverty (no private property but all for the common good), chastity (working out our faithfulness to God in disciplined faithfulness to each other), and obedience (to Christ in each other and as head of our community). But with the prayerful help of friends, I've come to some interesting decisions about how to celebrate this commitment.

1) The Church's current teaching about the sacrament of marriage has confused the nature of the offering. It's not a pairing of reproductive parts, or what we do in the bedroom, that is the offering. It's life in community. This is where the sacrifices are made. Yes, life in community includes sexuality, but it's heterosexual marriage, not homosexual couples, which has made Christian marriage teaching hardly distinguishable from fertility religion, as if it were all about sex and reproduction.

What God ordained in creation (Genesis 1) was not maximization of our reproductive capacity, but life in community. What Adonai sought (in Genesis 2) for the earth creature adam was not heterosexuality but another human to be an equal partner. (The animals were cute, but they just didn't meet the standard for the level of intimacy desired.) And because the Church has focused its teaching on sexuality, we miss the point that every sacramental offering is blessed and given back to us for the working out of our salvation, the building of the Church, and the redemption of the world.

The strain of containing the meaning of heterosexual marriages to, and even defining them by, what happens in the bedroom causes half of them to bum out. We really need

a new theological approach to this sacrament. Bringing the gay/lesbian couples out of the Church's closet and blessing them allows the straight couples a chance at a larger creative role in the universe than can fit into their bedrooms. Sex is interesting, but as W. Willimon says, "It's not infinitely interesting." Nor of ultimate concern.

2) I will not flout the canons of the Episcopal Church. (Of course I'll continue to work and pray for their inevitable improvement.) But refusing to do what we are barred from doing for some couples has led me to find something better to do, that can hardly be prohibited. How can we stop faithful Christians who stand during the prayers to name their intentions to God? We've always encouraged this. How can we order the congregation not to pray for someone who wants to be faithful to God? I will take off my stole if need be, lest anyone think I'm using "my" authority illegally to bless someone. The couple will have to their benefit no priestly pronouncement, but only the witness and prayers of the congregation. They'll have to live with what they receive from their sisters and brothers in the community prayers.

3) I will no longer act as an agent of the State in pronouncing marriages. Any couple who wishes to make permanent community vows as a sacramental offering to God will prepare for the meaning of this offering, and will fulfill whatever measures the State allows them -- whether a marriage contract executed by the Justice of the Peace, or rewriting their wills, insurance policies and powers of attorney to manifest their commitment. These having been done, they may offer their vows to God at the Altar and ask the prayers of the faithful, that their life in community may represent --to the Church and to the world-- the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Obviously, a prerequisite for any couple's participation in such an offering is that they manifest a true commitment to life in Christ and in the Church.

Preparing for Permanent Community Vows

I.

Please prepare for our next session by answering the following questions. There are no specific "right" answers; these questions can be answered only by you. The reason for this exercise is to help you both begin to explore the meaning of your faith together, as individuals, and as a couple who seek to represent the life of the Church.

You are asked to reflect on your past, on your present experience, and on your expectations for the future. Your thoughtful discussion together as a couple, and then with your priest, will help to guide us as we work toward the most upbuilding, nurturing, meaningful relationship we can find between you as a couple and the community of faith to which you are committed.

Please take plenty of time with each question, both alone and together. I look forward to the opportunity to get better acquainted with you, and to hear from you both on your own life of faith.

1. What was your earliest understanding, experience of, and belief about God? Jesus? the Church? the Sacraments?

2. How have these understandings, experiences, and beliefs changed for you since early childhood? Do you sense steady progress (how do you notice it), "ups and downs" in your faith, or stages of development? What do you expect next, in your relationship to God, Jesus, the Church, the Sacraments?

3. Please recall and share a significant moment or experience from your life that made you especially aware of your need for God or Christ, for the Church or its Sacraments. Have you ever felt especially close to or touched by God? especially far from, or disappointed by, God or the Church?

4. In what ways do you believe the Church can strengthen and affirm your lives as person? as a Christian household? In what ways do you expect the Church to challenge and "stretch" you as persons? as a couple?

II. The Christian Community Vow of Poverty

Luke 12: 13-34

On making permanent vows to a communal rather than a solitary life, members of the community give up private property. They bring into the community whatever they have: wealth, ability, energy. Everything they have to invest will now be invested in the future and good of the community. The vow of poverty is based not on asceticism as a value in itself, but on a biblical understanding of stewardship. Nothing we hold can ultimately be our own possession; every good gift comes from and belongs to God, and is allowed to pass through our hands only for the common good of God's children. We are stewards, not owners, of whatever we temporarily hold. In a Christian marriage, the spouses work out their salvation together through the vow of poverty understood as community of property for the common good.

What do each of you bring into this marriage in tangible and intangible assets?

How do you make the transition from private to community property in relation to your goods and abilities?

What are your priorities in the stewardship of possessions?

Do you have differing views or approaches to making a household budget?

How will your household stewardship express the relationship of your marriage to the larger community of the Church and of the world around you?

What difference might retirement, unemployment, sudden disability, or significantly changed family needs make to your present consensus about money and possessions?

Common wisdom among marriage counselors has it that the number one cause of marital failure is disagreement over money. How do you disagree about money and property?

Imagine some ways in which your present differences in relation to wealth and stewardship might be allowed to intensify to the point of damaging the love and trust you share now. What steps can you incorporate into your relationship now, in order to deal with these differences in a loving and trusting way?

III. The Christian Community Vow of Chastity

Exodus 20: 1-21

The vow of faithfulness in marriage -- "keeping yourself for him/her alone"--is sometimes misunderstood as the expression of an anti-sexual asceticism which has characterized Christianity in some eras more than others. In this view, the mind or spirit is a separate and nobler reality than the body which is inherently inferior or even sinful. Despite its popularity, this view is neither biblical nor Christian. The expectation of sexual chastity in the Christian community is actually grounded in a holistic view of human nature and salvation: the mind and spirit are not separate in their commitments from the body. We live as embodied intentions toward one another and God. The community of marriage is one which we enter with body, mind, and spirit in a permanent and ever-growing expression of fidelity. Having chosen this relationship in which to work out our salvation, we give ourselves to it unreservedly. We believe that God has given us this unique relationship in which to learn faithfulness -- with all its pain and denial of self as well as its joy and integration of self. Only in this way can we begin to understand the depth of God's faithfulness to us, and learn to be faithful to God.

On making the vow of chastity and entering this community-- though recognizing that I cannot anticipate fully how I will feel, what I will believe, and the events which will impact the growth and evolution of my character in the years or decades ahead -- I choose in advance to be the person I will become in relation to this partner, and not any other possible expression of myself. I take the same risk in relationship, not controlling my spouse or the marriage itself, that God takes in relationship with all of us. And uniquely in this relationship, I make that commitment with my whole self. This is not one of many other intersecting communities through which I may pass. It is the opportunity and the test of complete faithfulness which informs every other relationship.

Generally, the temptation to violate this vow is an issue not of libido but of ego needs. Someone else offers me the illusion that I'm a greater, more whole, more beautiful, more powerful person than I experience myself to be in relation to my spouse. I like the self projected in that relationship more than the reality I know in my marriage; and I choose the attractive image over the known and more complex truth. (It's interesting that a Rabbinic tradition of the two stone tablets of the law puts the commandment against adultery next to the prohibition against worshipping graven images.)

Separately, look at what you know of your own self-images. What insecurities or unrealized aspirations might make you vulnerable to the temptation of a falsely-projected self in an unreal relationship?

Share with each other your responses to the question above, and consider the following: Are there real desires and aspirations which either or both of you should

begin to address in this new community you are forming together? What do you need from each other, in order to become the persons you feel called to be without relying on illusions?

What tangible steps can you commit yourselves to, in order to make faithfulness achievable together?

If you have ended another marriage or long-term commitment in the past, spend sometime alone and then together with these questions:

What was your part in the breakdown of the old relationship? Even the most uneven of partnerships involves some shared responsibility, denial of which only increases the probability that the same scenes will be repeated. As honestly as you can, have you owned your responsibility?

What have you learned about yourself from examining the commitment you could not sustain?

What is needed to begin this marriage with a clean slate? (The new marriage does not make a clean slate for you, but only becomes the scene for the old issues and conflicts to re-emerge if you haven't already dealt with them in yourself.)

Have you moved away from the old patterns which you contributed to the past failure in relationship? How have you changed? What further change may be needed?

Only those who have been able to accept their own responsibility and the shadow within their own persons are able fully to accept the grace of forgiveness for themselves and to begin a new life. How have you experienced this grace?

If you are struggling--either to see the need for any change, or to accept forgiveness and a new life--are you willing to ask for help? Those assured of their own self-righteousness tend to become rigid, judgmental, and unforgiving toward anyone whose actions they do not understand. They are easily threatened, as intimate relationships threaten to disclose their hidden imperfections. And they are most vulnerable to great lapses and falls from grace. (That's the reason behind all these difficult questions!) On the other hand, some people are willing to face their negative characteristics and behavior, are sorry about the pain to which they have contributed, and willing to change (continually, not just from back then). These so appreciate the freedom to begin again that they find it fairly easy to forgive others and allow them the same freedom to grow and change.

It takes a good deal of letting go to get to this point, especially when it involves forgiving an ex-spouse or partner for their part in past grief. But without this kind of healing and forgiveness, the new marriage is very likely to become poisoned by bitterness left from the old one.

Do you feel that you are moving toward such letting go? What help do you need in resolving this, or in beginning the path toward resolution?

IV. The Christian Community Vow of Obedience Ephesians 5:15 - 6:9

Look carefully then, how you walk, not as the unwise but as wise ones, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be senseless, but rather understand what is the will of the Lord. And do not get drunk with wine, in which is dissipation, but rather be filled with spirit, addressing each other with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and playing (the harp] with your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father, submitting yourselves to one another in fear of Christ-- the women to their own men ("women" = "wives", "men" = "husbands"] as to the Lord; for a husband is head of the wife as also Christ is head of the church, himself savior of the body. But rather, as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives to the husbands in everything.

Husbands, love the wives just as also Christ loved the church, and himself handed over for it, that he might make it holy, purifying in the washing of water with word, that he might set before himself the church, resplendent, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but rather that it be holy and unblemished. Thus owe the husbands also to love their own wives as their own bodies. The one who loves his own wife, himself also loves, for no one ever hates his own flesh, but rather provides for and cares for it, just as Christ for the church; for members are we of his body. "For this reason a person will leave the father and the mother and cling to his wife, and they will be, the two, one flesh." This mystery is great-- and I speak with reference to Christ and the church. Still, though, each one of you individually, must love his own wife just as himself, and the wife should fear the husband,

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is just. "Honor your father and mother (this is the first command with a promise) that goodwill may come to you and you will be long-lived upon the earth." And fathers, do not exasperate your children, but rather provide for them in education and discipline of the Lord,

Slaves, obey the masters according to flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart as to the Lord, not with eye-service, as people-pleasers, but rather as slaves of Christ doing the will of God from the heart, with good will serving as it were toward the Lord and not people, knowing that any good thing one does, one will receive it back from the Lord, whether a slave or free. Also masters, the same thing do to them, giving up threats, knowing that the Lord of both them and you is in heaven, and partiality is not with him.

"Be subject to one another as unto the Lord."

This text from the Epistle to the Ephesians has often been overlooked in the misappropriation of the passage which follows. Many Christian teachers to this day argue that the writer of the epistle is commanding for Christian marriages a hierarchical relationship in which the husband is the leader, and the wife obeys. Yet the writer makes it very clear that 'I am not speaking about marriage but rather about Christ and the Church.' Given the legal and social norms of the day about the marriage

relationship, the writer redefines authority or leadership and submission or following-- and spends most of the time in the marriage analogy demonstrating that (even in that patriarchal world) the husband's unquestioned authority is hereafter to be transformed into self-giving and even subjection to the other! This not because anywhere else in society was mutuality a norm, but only because Christ gave himself up for the Church and the Church gives its loyalty to him. Within the Church, all are subject to one another in obedience to Christ.

This holds true also within the Christian marriage, whatever the prevailing norms of the day may be about roles of husband and wife in the distribution of power. Thus, it is no more sufficient for the Christian marriage to say "We are equals and our power is in mutuality," than it is to say "the husband is the head of the house." Both of these statements set up a norm for authority--whether derived from society or invented by the couple--independent of the authority of Christ in the Church. A Christian marriage is in the Church and under Christ; and thus its authority is that of Christ in the Church. So the question, "who is the head of the house?" has only one sufficient answer in the covenant of marriage within the Church: "Christ is our head, and in obedience to him we are subject to one another."

Within every communal expression of Christian life this must be the norm for authority and obedience. Historical development, location, and the contributions of community members--including social convention and evolving Church polity--are factors in how communities work out the practice of Christ's authority and their mutual submission. In some religious communities, obedience is undertaken toward the members' elected or appointed superior, in some toward the Bishop; in some the authority is vested in representative members who serve short terms so that all are likely to represent the community's authority at some time.

In some marriages, the partners divide areas of responsibility in which one person's word or the other's is the final decision. In others, the partners choose a consensual model of decision-making; and in some, the power relationship is clearly defined by social convention. None of these models is inherently Christian. Any of them may serve as a vehicle of saving grace if it is transformed by the love of Christ and offered through the Church for the salvation not only of those who live in the marriage but also as a sign to the world of Christ's reconciling life.

Politics is the distribution of power in relationships. All relationships are political. Authority is the ability to make sound decisions in a way that empowers others to act effectively. Within communities, authority is a function of the common good, not just the interest of the decision-maker.

Authority is always derived--it comes from consensus, from law, from God, from attraction of the community to a charismatic gift, etc. Authority is also distributed; if it is self-derived and self-contained it cannot last.

The question for the covenant-community of marriage is: How will the politics of your life together witness with authority in the Church and in the world, to the reconciling love of Christ? It is for this witness that your marriage is offered at the Altar of the

Church, received and lifted up in the sight of the Church for the blessing of God, and given to you as a Sacrament of the Church for the world's salvation and your own.

How will the politics of your life together witness with authority in the Church and in the world, to the reconciling love of Christ?

Who is Christ for you? How and where do you find him?

What place does Christ take in your lives up to this time?

What place does Christ have in your relationship now, and how will this be true of your marriage?

How is the authority of Christ visible in your marriage, to the rest of the Church, and in the rest of the world?

How have you handled conflict in other important relationships?

How will you deal with conflict in decision-making in your marriage?

In what situations are you willing to defer to the needs of your partner? Are there limits to this possibility?

In what situations can you accept the deference of your partner? Are there limits to this possibility?

How do you expect to determine when the needs of one partner actually supercede the expectations or preferences of the other? In other words, in a conflict, what is the ultimate criterion or authority in your marriage?

How do you remain centered in that authority?

Congregational Witness of Vows for Life in Community

Declarations of Consent

A representative of the community addresses those who have gathered.

Dear friends, in the church, a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward, spiritual gift from God: more than a sign, it is a means of God's grace to our lives. The sacrament is built on an offering in faith, a receiving in hope, and a sharing in love. In the Lord's Supper or Mass, we offer bread and wine, we receive the Body and Blood of Christ, we break bread together and become a manifestation of Christ in the world. In marriage, we offer our vows of life in community, we receive the grace to work out our salvation together, and we become a sign of Christ's reconciling love to the world.

In this worshipping community, we are blessed with visible reminders of the sacramental grace in Christian households. We uphold them in our prayers of thanks, and in our intercessions. We are here today to witness the vows of N. and N. to God, as they deliberately, mindfully, and prayerfully enter a covenant to embody the reconciling love of Christ in their household.

They undertake the classic vows of Christian life in community: poverty --no private claims, but all for the common good; chastity --disciplined faithfulness to each other as a working out of faithfulness to God; obedience --to Christ in each other, and as leader of the community.

These questions are addressed to those who will offer their vows.

Do you, N., and do you, N., accept the responsibility of your vocation to life in community, as an expression of the community of the Holy Spirit?

I do.

Do you voluntarily stand, not simply together, but together in the midst of the Church and in view of the world, as a manifestation of the love of God?

I do.

Do you ask God's blessing of your offering, not as an entitlement for yourselves, but as a gift for working out your salvation, building up the Body of Christ, and redeeming the world?

I do.

These questions are addressed to the community of faith.

Will all of you gathered here today stand in solidarity to affirm the sacramental reality of the offering we are about to witness?

We will.

Will you pray for God's blessing of this offering of vows?

We will.

Will you support the realization of that blessing as a healing and liberating force in the world?

We will.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us pray.

O God, you have shown yourself to be the source of life and goodness, overflowing in love. As holy and undivided Trinity, you reveal yourself to be one in substance and purpose, yet in persons equal and distinct. We rejoice that you have formed us in your own image, out of your love and for the joy of your communion. Grant that these friends, who stand before you today, may find the fulfillment of their vows to life in community with each other and with you; and that the witness of their life together in the company of your people may bring others into the reconciling communion of your Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

Liturgy of the Word

The propers of the Day for any Sunday or Major Feast, or on other occasions, Lessons chosen by the couple as defining of their commitment.

Homily

Prayers of the People

Any authorized form may be used, either preceded by or concluding with the Offering of Vows.

Offering of Vows

The vows are offered by the couple to God; the congregation witnesses. It is appropriate for the couple to prepare and state their own commitment to life in community as an expression of their life in Christ. Two examples are given, as offered by two different couples.

1.

God has been at the center of our relationship from the beginning. We vow to do all within our power to keep God forever at the Center. *We ask the congregation to pray that each of us may always help the other to grow daily closer to God.*

In the past we have separately tried to live our lives in obedience to God. For the future, we vow obedience to God and to each other. *We ask the congregation to pray that God will always help its in our quest for obedience!*

Each of us brings not only material wealth, but all of the gifts God has given us, to be held jointly in this relationship. *We ask the congregation to pray that God will always guide us in the responsible stewardship of the gifts He has given to us*

Each of us brings our whole self --body, mind, and spirit-- to a commitment of faithfulness to God and to each other. *We ask the congregation to pray that God will keep our minds open, our communications two-way, and our hearts honest, that this relationship, built on a foundation of Truth, will always remain so.*

II.

We vow that the gifts that God has granted us, material, physical and spiritual, will be shared in our common life and used for the building up of God's kingdom on earth.

We vow that God's faithfulness to us will be embodied in our faithfulness to each other.

We vow to recognize Christ as the source of authority in our community and to honor that authority in each other.

The Peace

Holy Communion

Eucharistic Prayer

Preface of Baptism

The Lord's Prayer

Breaking of Bread and Communion

It is appropriate for the couple to assist at the Altar.

Concluding Blessing over the People

May Christ, who emptied himself as a servant to raise us up as joint-heirs of God's Reign, give you grace to live generously toward all creation. Amen.

May God, who for love called us forth into life, teach you the depth and height and length and breadth of love. Amen.

May the Holy Spirit, who binds all creation in communion with God, breathe life and spirit into the communion we share. Amen.

And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with us all forever. Amen.