

Seven Sacraments
Our Encounter with Christ
Matrimony and Holy Orders: Sacraments of Vocation

For the past several weeks I have been writing about the seven sacraments. I began with three sacraments we call “Sacraments of Initiation” (Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist). I then considered two sacraments that we call Sacraments of Healing (Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick). Today, I conclude this series by considering two sacraments that define two different ways in which we live our life within the community of the Church.

The first is the way the vast majority of believers live their Christian life: the Sacrament of Matrimony. The second is the way a smaller number live their Christian life: the Sacrament of Holy Orders. At the outset, it should be clear that these two sacraments, as important as they are, do not embrace the whole of the Christian life since there are people who live their Christian commitment as single, unmarried believers, or as professed and consecrated religious believers.

The marriage of two baptized believers is a sacramental marriage. It is a sign that points to a deeper reality: the covenant relationship between Christ and his Church. Just as Christ takes the Church as his spouse, loving and nourishing her, so husband and wife embrace each other in a covenant relationship so close and intimate that it reflects the covenant relationship between Christ and the Church.

The marriage between two baptized believers points to a deeper reality: the intimate relationship between Christ and the Church. Christian spouses proclaim the gospel of God’s love to the world by the selfless love they exhibit for each other in their marriage. Their marriage covenant is a proclamation of the gospel.

Holy Orders is a different kind of sacrament. By this sacrament a man is conformed to Christ in ordination for the purpose of serving the internal life of the Church. This sacrament challenges those who receive it to follow Christ more closely so that they can serve Christ’s faithful more faithfully. As the name of the sacrament implies, “Holy Orders,” those who receive this sacrament enter a particular “order” within the Church, such as the diaconate, priesthood, or episcopacy for the expressed purpose of serving the internal life of the community.

As important as these sacraments are, they do not embrace the whole of the Christian life. There are many faithful believers who never marry or enter Holy Orders. Some lead a single life in the world. Others enter a professed or consecrated life that we call religious life, as sisters, brothers, and monks. These believers provide yet another kind of witness to the church when they live their lives within the context of the baptismal promises.

These are challenging times for the community of faith. There are fewer people who receive the Sacrament of Matrimony these days, and still fewer who receive the Sacrament of Holy Orders. While this can be discouraging, we should not be dispirited. The Spirit of God moves in ways we do not always understand. As we wait for the Spirit to work within the

community of the church and bring about a deeper renewal of faith, let us pray for and support those who have entered into the sacraments of Matrimony and Holy Order that the example of their selfless love will inspire others to follow them. *Father Matera*