

Bulletin Article Series on the Family - Week 4: Marriage and the Authority of the Church

So far, we have considered the fundamentals of marriage, as designed by God from the beginning of creation, which are specifically affirmed by Jesus in the New Testament. Today, we will begin to consider how this teaching is to be lived out in the Church—the Body and Bride of Christ.

Given our founding history, it can be challenging sometimes for Americans to accept authority, and that even includes the authority that the Lord has given His Church. For this reason, we need to recall that Jesus did not call His disciples to be lone rangers. Jesus intentionally called a community that began with 12 apostles and grew exponentially. And He specifically designated one man from among the 12 to be the leader of this community: Simon. Jesus says to Simon in Matthew 16:18-19, *“I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”* From this, we can conclude that Jesus intended to build a “church,” meaning a “congregation” or “assembly,” just as God chose to call together the People of Israel to be uniquely His own in the Old Testament. And just as God used Moses as the instrument of unity in the Old Covenant, this New Covenant Church will be built upon Peter. But in order for this to occur, Jesus also had to bestow upon Peter (the first Pope, and upon the other apostles and their successors, the Bishops) an enormous degree of authority: the ability to *binding decisions*, especially regarding how to hold this people together as an ordered society, as a community of believers, as a Church.

Another Scripture passage that is very helpful here comes from St. Paul’s Letter to the Colossians, chapter 1:18, which says that Jesus Christ is *“head of the body, the church.”* St. Paul makes it abundantly clear elsewhere that this “body” *is* the Body of Christ. And so Catholics believe that *you cannot be fully united to Christ if you are separated from His Body, which is the Church.* And that is very hard, because human beings, even followers of Christ, do not always get along. Even more, Church leaders, and Church members, make mistakes and are sinners. But for us, there is no other way. Christ has wedded us, the Church, to Himself, and He will always remain faithful to us. He will never separate Himself from us, even if we try to separate ourselves from Him (cf. Ephesians 5:25-32, 2 Timothy 2:13). To apply all of this to our reflections on marriage, we can say that because the Church is the Body of Christ, a Catholic follower of Christ cannot enter into a valid marriage (that is, *as designed by God*) if they intentionally exclude Christ’s Church. To do so is to cement a structure in their life (i.e., an invalid marriage) that causes great damage to one’s unity/communion with the Church, which is the Body and Bride of Christ. Such a decision has serious consequences, as we will discuss next week.