

Pope Francis Intention for June: The Beauty of Marriage

Let us pray for young people who are preparing for marriage with the support of a Christian community: may they grow in love, with generosity, faithfulness and patience.

When Pope Francis speaks of the beauty of marriage, he does not focus on it as an institution with its distinctive rules and practices. That starting point often leads to wearying debate about what kinds of relationship can be described as marriage. He thinks first of people and, in this month's intention, of young people who want to marry as part of a Christian community that will support them and encourage them to grow in their marriage. He invites us to respond to the young couples and to the beauty and the blessing to be found in their relationships to one another, to families and to the community that shape their marriage. This is not to say that other forms of relationship are less beautiful and generous, still less that all marriages between Christians display this distinctive beauty and generosity. But Pope Francis is surely right to celebrate the beauty of Christian marriage when it is fully lived.

This picture of marriage does challenge many of the popular images of a happy marriage in our society. Marriages are often seen as made in heaven, where two individuals make a choice that will be guaranteed to bring happiness. The love between two human beings separates them from their world and is nobody's business but their own. Pope Francis, in contrast, emphasises that marriage is rooted in a Christian community which supports both people in their preparing for marriage and will continue to support them after marriage. Marriage involves a leaving, but it does not mean pulling up roots but putting down new sets of roots within the new family. It does not make the couple more but less alone.

Pope Francis also speaks of the qualities of the marriage that Christians would hope to find and build. They are not found in all marriages, of course, and each person brings their own weaknesses and limitations to their marriage. Among them the indispensable quality is love. It is the engine of marriage, and even if a marriage splutters, is jerky and sometimes turns itself off, it remains alive as long as people still love one another.

The other words in which Pope Francis describes marriage describe the ways in which love will express itself. Where there is love in a marriage and a family, people will be generous to one another. The boundaries between mine and yours will not be rigid, and people will cut each other some slack. When we notice our partner sad or hurt, we shall reach out to them and sacrifice ourselves to help them. We shall also be faithful to one another. This shows itself in complex ways. We shall not betray our partner by speaking negatively about them behind their back, or by encouraging others to think that we are available. In positive ways faithfulness means giving our partners time and a listening ear, and making decisions about our hobbies and work patterns in a shared way.

Because in all relationships we expect that there will be disagreements and times when we annoy one another, marriage also involves patience – refraining from the quick and hurtful comment, and being prepared to wait till the right time comes to talk things through. Finally, the cement of all good relationships, including marriage, is forgiveness. Marriage is not for saints and angels – they are in heaven. It is for human beings who often think, act and speak wrongly. Saying sorry is the medicine that will heal most of our infections.