

Homily based on the readings from August 16, 2024 (Ezekiel 16.1-15, 60, 63; Matthew 19.3-12)

Broadly speaking, the Catholic Church recognizes three categories of rituals: sacraments, sacramentals, and popular devotions. Much of the confusion we see today about the Church's life and mission – both among Catholics and non-Catholics – comes from a misunderstanding of these categories.

As the name suggests, *popular devotions* originate with the *people* – with all of *us*, clergy and laity alike. Although there are too many examples to cite, the two most familiar are probably the Rosary and the Stations of the Cross. The Magisterium of the Church has a role in fostering and purifying these forms of devotion, but fundamentally they arise from the community of believers. Even though there are standard practices and guidelines, with which most of us are familiar, there is not really a *correct* way to pray the Rosary or the Stations. At a basic level, they are spontaneous expressions of the faith of the *people*.

*Sacramentals*, which we need to distinguish clearly from *sacraments*, are more firmly regulated than popular devotions. According to the Second Vatican Council:

[Sacramentals] are sacred signs which bear a resemblance to the sacraments: they signify effects, particularly of a spiritual kind, which are obtained through the Church's intercession. By them men are disposed to receive the chief effect of the sacraments, and various occasions in life are rendered holy. (*SC 60*)

These practices are instituted by the *Church* – not by the people as a whole, but also not directly by Christ himself. There are numerous examples, but most pertain to some form of *blessing* – particularly blessings “of persons, meals, objects, and places” (CCC 1671). The familiar practices relating to holy water, blessed palms, and ashes all fall into this category. Since sacramentals are established by the Church, the Church has the authority to modify, innovate, or even eliminate them – in response to the needs of the modern world.

Finally, we come to the *sacraments* – exactly seven of them – all of which were instituted by Christ himself. Unlike sacramentals and popular devotions, we have absolutely no power to alter *any* of them in *any* substantial way. No matter what society is pressuring us to do, we simply do not have the ability to redefine marriage or to change the nature of ordained ministry. We also cannot *undo* a sacrament. Once a Eucharistic host has been transformed into the Body of Christ, it can never become *bread* again. A person who has been baptized can *never* be unbaptized. Likewise, a valid sacramental marriage can never be dissolved – regardless of the actions or the desires of the married couple. It is God himself, not the husband and the wife, who caused the marriage to come into being: “what *God* has joined together, man must not separate.”

In this day and age, it is easy to think of marriage exclusively in human terms. The simple fact, though, is that matrimony – just like the other six sacraments – is *not* a human institution. It is a gift from God to help

us to grow in his love and to share that love with the rest of humanity.

Any of us who *are* married – or who may *choose* to get married in the future – need to remember that marriage is not just a commitment to society, or to our children, or even to our spouses – but to Jesus Christ himself, who is the *author* of all the sacraments, and their ultimate *fulfillment*.