

I heard that a couple has to want to have kids in order to get married in the Catholic Church. My fiancé and I don't, why won't the Church let us marry each other?

That is a very good question, and I am glad that you asked.

The first thing we need to clear up is what you mean when you say that you don't want to have kids. Do you mean "never ever", or "not right away"? There is a big difference between the two. If you and your spouse simply want to wait to have children for some serious reason, that doesn't automatically affect the validity of your proposed marriage at all. It does raise some questions like, "If you aren't ready for a kid, do you think that you are really ready for a spouse?" The same kind of self-sacrificing love that it takes to love a child is required for loving a spouse...if you or your fiancé aren't "ready to sacrifice", not only are you not ready for kids, you aren't ready for each other. I don't say that as a judgment, but simply as a minimal criteria to judge one's own readiness for marriage. If you doubt your fiancé's ability to be responsible enough to raise a child, is he really responsible enough to commit to loving you "in good times and in bad"?

Now, if either of you (yes, even just one of you!) enters the marriage consciously intending to never have children, then we have a different issue. That would, in fact, make the marriage "invalid" (e.g. no Sacrament would take place). But why?! Why is the Church so hung up on people having children? Now, I know that this may sound weird, but the Church actually believes that being open to children is an essential part of what marriage *is*. It isn't an "add-on", it is part of the essence. Basically, if a couple makes a positive act of the will to never have children, they are making a positive act of the will not to have a marriage.

Someone could easily ask, "But where do you get such a crazy idea?" Two sources: nature and God's revelation. First, the most obvious and basic: nature. If an outside observer were to arrive on planet Earth and monitor our behavior, this observer would notice that, objectively speaking, this very particular relationship called marriage seems to have two purposes automatically built into it. The good of the spouses and the procreation and education of children. I think that all of us can see that. The marriage relationship is ordered toward the good of the spouses. Sometimes that doesn't appear to be the case...sometimes it isn't the case. And we would surely say that, if a person entered into marriage for the enslavement or for the ill of the other, this would render the marriage bond null. Whatever kind of relationship they entered, it was not a marriage.

In a similar way, if a person consciously intended to have as many children as possible, but not provide for them once they were born, again this would be some kind of relationship, but not a marriage relationship. Along these same lines, to enter marriage while consciously intending not to have an intrinsic aspect of marriage...is not to enter a marriage.

As Catholics, we also have God's revelation of Himself to guide our behavior. The Church has consistently taught, and the late Pope John Paul II

explicitly stated, that marriage is much more than a contract between two people who “really like each other”. In fact, John Paul clearly taught that marriage makes visible the hidden truth about God. I don’t think we realize this.

What is marriage? Marriage is an image of the Trinity. What does that mean? Among other things, it means that if we get marriage wrong, we get God wrong. How we treat marriage not only has ramifications on our relationships with each other, but also dramatically changes our perception of God.

So, who is God? We know through revelation that God is an eternal exchange of love (Father, Son, Holy Spirit). God’s love has four qualities: it is free, total, faithful, and fruitful. If marriage is meant to be an icon of this inner life of God, marriage must have these qualities as well. If I work directly against any of these qualities, I distort marriage and disfigure the image of God in this world. For the most part, we all agree on this (for example, we recognize that no one can be “forced” into a marriage...they must freely enter into it). But when it comes to the quality of “fruitfulness”, we seem to stop thinking like Christians. Instead, we think like the world, which divorces marriage from children because it doesn’t understand who God is.

All this being said, if a couple makes the positive act of the will to achieve a “child-free” marriage, they are not entering into the relationship that images the Trinity...and therefore are not entering into a marriage.

Last thing. “What if a couple cannot have children? Does that mean they are not married? I mean, there is no “fruitfulness”, right?” Wrong. Remember, it is not the having or not having children that images the Trinity, but the “positive act of the will”. If a couple is open to children, even if they cannot physically have children, their choice (their positive act of the will) is to be an image of the Trinity. They are placing themselves in God’s providential care. As such, they are a profound witness to the world of the self-emptying love of God. Having made no choice to act against the marriage covenant, they participate in the fruitfulness of Christ’s Cross.