

The Secret to Matrimony
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With the ever increasing divorce rates and the societal misunderstandings of the true nature of matrimony, couples entering into this profound mystery today are exposed to a great risk of future separation. From a strict sociological perspective, divorce is the norm today and fidelity to the marriage vow, "Until death do us part," is becoming increasingly infrequent. Confronted with this sad reality, the couple preparing for marriage must accept the fact that the odds of success seem to be against them.

Couples today must approach this sacrament very seriously, eager to know what keeps a marriage together, and what tears it apart. They should ask themselves such questions as: "How will we be different? What are we going to do to make our marriage last the rest of our lives?" If this attitude is adopted, the next move will be to seek the answers, "To whom shall we go, Lord!" (Jn 6:68). There is no time here for lies, false teachings or deception; marriage is just too precious and delicate to expose to the forever changing and dangerous realm of subjective opinion. If it was Christ who raised this union to the dignity of a sacrament, ("...therefore what God has joined together..." Mt 19:6) then it is to Christ we must go for the answer. Jesus said, "I am the truth" (Jn 14:6). We can be certain, therefore, that His answer will be free of error. The truth of Christ is presented today through the Holy Roman Catholic Church which he founded ("...you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church..." Mt 16: 18) and gave the spirit of truth ("But when He comes, the Spirit of truth, He will guide you to all truth," Jn 16:13). The Church is the very bride of Christ (Eph 5:25-32) and apart from her we walk in darkness.

What, then, is the secret to matrimony? We must take as our basic premise that this sacrament is the total, absolute, unreserved giving-of-self to the other, sealed by God in the exchange of vows. Essential to this union are the two equal ends of procreative (life-giving, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth..." Gen 1:28) and unitive love (uniting of self to the other physically, mentally and spiritually, "...and the two of them become one body" Gen 2:24; Mk 10:8).

Without its procreative and unitive ends, a marriage is simply not Christian. With them, Christian marriage reaches perfection ("...be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect." Mt 5:48). The secret, then, is to see that these two ends are allowed to reach their full potential. This is the challenge before our couples today. The following three areas; Communication, Practice of the Faith and Natural Family Planning, will help them to meet this challenge. Although not a complete treatise on marriage, these principles will help a couple place their marriage on a firm foundation from which to build a happy and holy life together. "Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on a rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. But it did not collapse; it had been set solidly on rock" (Mt 7: 24-26).

COMMUNICATION

Christ teaches us that "the two shall be as one" (Mk 10:8). The giving-of-self to the other is to be complete so that it results in fetal union. The couple mutually give themselves to each other as a gift: the husband becomes the greatest possession of his wife; the wife of her husband. Each treasures the other. Communication is simply the living out of this gift

by the sharing of one's heart, life and mind. It means being able to reveal freely one's thoughts to the other without fear of rejection, trusting completely in their vow of fidelity. It means the couple has an on-going dialogue. They speak to each other and can have a deep conversation as easily as a light one. There is certainly time for silence in marriage, but those who claim to be the silent type, to the detriment of the relationship, probably should not get married until they learn to express themselves. Conversation in marriage should, after all, be a delight not a burden. Marriage is communication. It is important to express this in dialogue because far too often silence can be interpreted negatively.

Actions speak louder than words and communication involves affection as well. The goodbye kiss in the morning, the hello kiss at night, the celebration of anniversaries, birthdays, graduations, the occasional surprise dinner or flowers, the night out at the show (money spent on a baby-sitter is always money well spent), taking quality time to make love, all these should be present in a marriage. If they are not, then flares should go up and the couple needs to do some serious reflection.

The importance of financial communication should not be overlooked. The couple must realize that the family becomes like a small business. They should know how much money is coming in and going out. Detail here is important. It is tragic that the sole reason for many divorces is failure to have had this financial awareness.

PRACTICE OF THE FAITH

Our Lord's teaching on the sacrament of matrimony can be summed up in His quote from Mark's Gospel: "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate" (Mk 10:7-9). In communication we stressed verses seven and eight; here we stress verse nine. God Himself seals this union on the day of the Sacrament and continues to seal it every day of the couple's married life. He is part of the marriage. It is therefore God who calls, allows and enables the husband and wife to give themselves to each other. This is marriage as a vocation. It would be a grave error for the couple to think that Divine Providence was absent from their meeting. From all eternity, then, God has planned for them to meet, fall in love, marry and raise a family for His Kingdom. The call to marriage is itself a gift from God. Would it not be a grave offense, then, to neglect the Giver!

Marriage is also a symbol of the Holy Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit): God, husband, wife and children. This is the theological view, but if we consider the practical, we see the inverse.

Matrimony is based on God and cannot survive without Him. As a couple's relationship is with God, so will their relationship be with each other. To distance themselves from God through neglect of the practice of the Faith would be to distance themselves from each other and from their children. "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing." (Jn 15:5). "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" (Mt 18:6).

But the couple who keeps the Faith will rapidly reach the depths of matrimony; "...but whoever drinks the water I shall give shall never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (Jn 4: 14). The burdens and trials of this life

will seem light to them. They will handle difficulties with ease and their marriage will be truly happy, their love deep. For it is Christ who will teach them how to love, as He Himself is loved and loves the Father who is Love ("...for God is love" (Jn 4:8) and gives love ("For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son..." Jn 3:16). Their love, then, transcends the love of the world and they enter into the mystery of Infinite Love. This is the love that grows stronger year after year and binds a family together. So powerful is this love, that a couple could live to be a thousand years old, their love would still continue to grow stronger and stronger. The generous gift of God is that the couple, through Christ, through whom all things are possible, can reach the depth of a thousand years of love in this short life span on earth. As a prelude to eternal life, the couple receives a foretaste of the communion of saints in the glory of Heaven where we will all be one with Christ (Mt 22:23-33; Jn 17:20-24; 1 Thes 4:13-18).

In practice, this basically means frequent reception of the sacraments and prayer. Sunday Mass must be given its proper importance, as well as confession. The family that prays together stays together. The rosary should be a part of family prayer. A decade can be prayed together after dinner, or perhaps the whole rosary daily or once a week. Short Scripture passages can be read and explained to the children before they go to bed. Parents can also bless their children by making the Sign of the Cross on their foreheads as they did at their Baptism. This is usually done at bedtime and is a great tradition that will be remembered into adult life. Sacred images (statues, holy pictures, crucifixes) and holy water should be in the home. Couples should subscribe to some solid periodical or magazine on Christian marriage and family life so as to keep up on the Church, the Faith and the vocation of matrimony. Husband and wife should make some time to pray together every day invoking God for His protection, blessings and continued guidance. "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8).

NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING (NFP)

"'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, no human being shall separate" (Mk 10: 7-9). Here we consider the passage of Our Lord in its entirety. When a married couple engage in sexual intercourse they participate in the greatest expression of matrimonial love. As in the end of marriage itself, so too in this ultimate expression, there exists the essential ends of unitive and procreative love. Unitive, because in sexual union a couple engage in the most intimate expression possible. So close is this intimacy that Scripture teaches that after this union, one "knows" the other (Lk 1:34). God unites the couple with this knowledge. He is the binding force who sustains and confirms their love. Procreative, because it is here that new life begins. God joins the couple together each time they enter into the sexual union. It is here and here alone that God, who is the Giver of Life, allows mankind to share in His creative power. They will work together with the couple to share in the creation of the body. God to infuse the eternal soul entrusted to their care and guidance.

Thus we see the exalted dignity inherent to the sexual union. It is truly a supernatural bond, a sacred act. All the more reason why we must approach it with reverence and respect. Far from having an antiquated view of sexuality, the Church has the true understanding of this great mystery. It is the world that falls short and suffers because it

seeks to reduce this union to something that was not intended by God. How is it reduced! Simply by removing one or both of the ends. Prostitution is a reduction. There is no procreative or unitive dimension there, or at least none intended. Homosexuality, rape, pre-marital sex, masturbation, oral sex, all are reductions because they lack the unitive and procreative ends. Conjugal love between a husband and wife is a sacred action, an expression of their love covenant with each other, and any reduction is sacrilegious and therefore sinful.

So close are these ends that one cannot exist without the other, or inversely, if one is missing both are missing. And it is possible for them to be lacking even within the context of marriage if each and every act of sexual intercourse is not an act of unitive and procreative love. Artificial birth control is the most popular form of reduction. Consider the pill, for example, which is 98 percent effective. Can a couple honestly say they are open to life when the woman has only a two percent chance of conception? Would not that be like inviting someone into a room when the door can only open a quarter of an inch? Can there be total union if there is reservation with regard to one's fertility? Recall that marriage is the complete giving of self to the other without reservation. And if there is reservation at the greatest expression of marriage then there will be reservation elsewhere. Whether conscious or unconscious, the couple will fail in true union. This reservation, or holding back, fosters selfishness, harming the marriage and setting the course for future separation. It is my opinion that artificial contraception is the main reason for divorce and separation in the world today. Couples become selfish in a deceptive and hidden way, uncertain as to why their marriage did not last, knowing only that things did not work out. Failure to understand the mystery of sexual love, then, can have devastating consequences. Yet, artificial birth control is not really birth control at all. It is fertility elimination, for

that is its end. A couple has every right to regulate the number of children they desire to bring into the world, but they are not free to manipulate the order of fertility as established by the Creator Himself. To do so violates the ends of matrimony (as we saw above) and shows irreverence for God's creation which is always beautiful and proper. Now, it is not part of God's plan that every act of sexual intercourse result in pregnancy, if this was so, God would have made the female 100 percent fertile all the time, as is the male. Therefore, a couple is free to work in harmony with the fertility cycle of the female, as designed by God, to either achieve or delay pregnancy.

The answer is fertility awareness, not elimination. Natural Family Planning (NFP) provides this awareness with a high degree of accuracy, 98 percent effective (this matches the pill). The Church is opposed to artificial birth control, ("fertility elimination"). The Church is open to natural birth control which is really "birth regulation." Nothing is being altered or manipulated in NFP; the couple is simply working in harmony with what is already there. Additionally, NFP has many benefits. This method is free. There are absolutely no harmful side effects. It allows for true marital union. It places the responsibility equally on both the husband and wife. It is easy to learn. It leads to inner peace because the couple knows they are working in harmony with God. Whereas in artificial contraception the couple will have negative consequences in their marriage, the contrary is true here. Since there is no reservation at the highest and most intimate expression of marriage, there won't be reservation elsewhere, only a generous spirit of self-giving and unreserved love.

This method does, however, call for abstinence, but this should not be looked at negatively. Abstinence is good for a marriage. It leads to discipline, self-control and helps to keep romance alive. It fosters trust in the marriage. If there ever need be a separation (i.e. extended business trip, military tour, etc.) each will have confidence in the other's ability to be faithful and abstain because it has been an integral part of their marriage all along. Further, Scripture reminds us that there is an appointed time for everything: a time to embrace as well as a time not to embrace (Ecclesiastes 3:5).

Finally, a couple should reflect on why the Church teaches that artificial contraception is a sin. Her motivation is love. The Church is concerned about her couples and wants only the best for them. When she sees a danger that threatens their survival, she responds. Artificial contraception damages marriage, and that which damages what is sacred is evil. Certainly some couples may have difficulty with this teaching, but why not try NFP! It can't hurt and for some this is the only way they will be able to appreciate it. They should be sure to learn NFP from couples who are practicing it and be patient with it. (Any priest can direct a couple to the classes or to a teaching couple). It is different from the artificial means and so might sound a little strange at the start. But wouldn't the artificial means sound strange to someone who has never heard of them. It is important to realize that the Church's teaching in this area is very sound. Even a non-Catholic, if open to the Word of God and the Spirit of Truth, can grasp it. The problem today is that there exists a tremendous amount of confusion and distortion of this sublime teaching. So, take the time to understand it and see its inherent truth. "if you live according to my teaching, you are truly my disciples; then you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." Here, the truth leads simply to the freedom to love.

CONCLUSION

If a couple is not drawing closer together, they are drifting apart. These principles; Communication, Practice of the Faith and Natural Family Planning, will help them to always draw closer together, but the principles are intrinsically related. It is important to stress this, for without one, the others will fail. With them, a couple towers above the world and witnesses to it. For the world needs to see that marriage can last, and is meant to. It is sad that many couples never reach the depth of union that the Sacrament of Marriage offers them. Largely, this is due to the exposure and influence of the world. Marriage, however, is of God and He, Who's Kingdom is not of this world (Jn 18:36), calls us to a road different from the way of the world. "...for the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and those who enter through it are many" (Mt 7:13). We cannot look to the world for answers because the world cannot give what it does not have, essentially, Eternal Truth (Jesus).

Let the couple then use these principles also as an examination of conscience to help them grow in holiness so that they mutually sanctify each other. Let them be confident that with them, their marriage will truly be in the Lord. Finally, they should know they have the constant prayer and support of the Church as they begin their new life together, and that the Lord will be with them, always at their side. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20).

A word of caution about infidelity. It would be foolish for a couple to think they would never be tempted in this area. Nothing can destroy a marriage faster or leave it so permanently scarred as this. Couples must have a firm conviction that they will always be

faithful to their vows, which is why it is good to renew them often. This strong conviction is fostered by the principles of Communication, Practice of the Faith and NFP and will reduce their vulnerability by giving clarity to their vocation.

Finally, marriage preparation never really ends. Marriage is a journey, a journey of the closest of friendships. The couple who thinks they know it all are simply wrong. Marriage is a mystery of God and so more can and should be learned. Couples should read often about what makes for a strong marriage and get to know couples who have a strong marriage so to learn from them. They should never stop growing in their love and knowledge for this sacred and holy mystery.

THE INTERFAITH MARRIAGE

The interfaith marriage (or mixed marriage) is nothing new in the Church and many couples will find themselves in this situation. Everything we have just said still applies, the only difference will be the practice of the Faith. The non-Catholic will not be able to share in the Eucharist (Holy Communion), but is certainly invited to participate at Mass. There must be mutual respect for each other's denomination. Catholics, however, cannot compromise their belief that Catholicism is the fullness of Christianity, which is why they have the responsibility of raising the children in the Faith. This may lead to some tensions, but it is one of the concrete realities of dealing with a divided Christendom. The Church generously invites the non-Catholic to consider conversion believing this will enrich their Christian beliefs, but the Church does not impose conversion. The option to convert is always available to the non-Catholic throughout the marriage. Finally, let them realize that theirs is still a marriage in the Lord and that He will be there to guide them every step of the