



Marriages Matter

An ages-old institution faces new challenges.

By: Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz

The front door swung open at my knock, and a young man greeted me with a hearty, "Come on in, Father! We've been looking forward to seeing you." The feeling was mutual. As I stepped into the living room and greeted the couples gathered there, I felt grateful for our friendship.

We had met some years earlier on an Engaged Encounter weekend. They were preparing for marriage then; I was on the retreat team working with two married couples to give presentations and offer direction. When that retreat ended, five of the participating couples decided to keep getting together. They invited me to their reunions, and so our friendship grew over the years.

As these men and women opened their hearts and homes to me, I witnessed some of their joys and challenges. I saw them move into marriage, begin families, and work to raise their children. I heard about their difficulties and their need for support. I saw how much wisdom and insight they had to offer and how they reached out to others. I always left those gatherings feeling enriched.

Marriage Matters. Over the years, I have been blessed to know many couples like these—"real" people who demonstrate the meaning of Christian marriage by the way they live. I am always deeply grateful for—and impressed by—their witness, because it's no secret that married couples and the very institution of marriage are facing great pressures and challenges.

This is why, in 2005, the Catholic bishops of the United States launched the National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage. Together with lay people and clergy, social scientists and theologians, we want to help strengthen marriage and to support couples in the call to live out the grace of their sacramental commitment. Last November's pastoral letter, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, was one of our projects; so is a Web site with resources, ideas, and inspiration for married life (www.foryourmarriage.org).

I was privileged to oversee this project for a number of years, and I have to admit that it was a bit of a roller coaster. On the one hand, we bishops wanted to be very clear about divorce, same-sex unions, contraception, cohabitation, and all the contentious issues that surround marriage today. On the other hand, we wanted to be understanding and supportive, offering pastoral help for grasping and living out the high calling of marriage.

Searching for Supports. In the course of this project, we consulted with two hundred focus groups made up of couples at every stage of marriage. A number of people in these groups brought up the topic of support—or, to be more precise, the lack of it. As one person put it: "Once our wedding was over, I had this feeling that, in the eyes of the church, we were a completed project." Hearing this, I thought to myself: "Wow! That's how I felt sometimes when I was preparing couples for marriage!" It wasn't that I didn't care anymore. Rather, it was the feeling of accomplishment that comes when any important goal is met—especially when so many other important things are clamoring for attention.

Still, I can understand why couples might feel unsupported as they launch into marriage and family life. It used to be that society offered them many built-in supports. My parents, who raised their five children in a little Pennsylvania coal town, benefited greatly by the fact that their family, church, and neighborhood all overlapped and supported one another.

For instance, the evening meal was an important part of our family life, and we kids knew it. It was the time when we all gathered to eat, connect, and share about the day's events and accomplishments. Even if we were out playing ball with friends, we knew we had to be home by 5:30. The other families in our neighborhood did the same, so it felt natural. I also remember how neighbors would get together on the front porch on warm summer evenings. The children played, the adults talked about local happenings, sports, and politics, and a sense of community was built.

Today, however, this kind of community support is hard to find. It's still vital for family life, but in most places, it doesn't just happen anymore. It has to be developed, with couples taking the lead to build the kind of community that will help them the most.

A Question of Expectations. One goal of the bishops' initiative is to discover how Catholics today understand marriage. As I talk with people about this, I sometimes think of the popular prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Every day I pray the longer version, which ends with the phrase: "So that I might be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with you forever in the next." I always laugh over that word "reasonably"—but really, it's an invitation to reflect on our expectations.

In my conversations, I have often been struck by people's heightened expectations of what marriage should be like. Young people, especially, have great expectations of personal fulfillment. But unless they also have a developed sense of God's grace in their lives, they will assume that everything depends on them and may become almost paralyzed with fear of getting hurt. This mindset can present a significant challenge to a marriage.

What happens when a couple hits the inevitable bumps in the road? They will be very disappointed and even disillusioned if they expect their spouse to be that perfect soul mate who never lets them down. "Yes, we do marry our soul mates," I once heard a wise couple say. "But it's at the end of the marriage and not the beginning that we discover this!"

It's not a question of expecting little or nothing. After all, God calls every Christian couple to an intimate communion of love that reflects the life of the Trinity. That's a high expectation indeed! But as with every vocation, it's essential to pray and ask, *What do you want, Lord? Are my expectations in line with yours?*

The key, I believe, is to have expectations that move us out of ourselves rather than inward. Along these lines, I found it interesting that more than one couple in our focus groups said that their relationship grew when they started doing some kind of service together. In other words, it's by looking outward that we find the personal fulfillment we seek. If we become self-absorbed, we risk losing sight of the joyful gift of self that is at the heart of every vocation.

Quiet Heroes. Sometimes, you recognize this joyful, sacrificial love when a person makes a decision that seems somewhat surprising. I remember a father who gave up a fast-paced, high-paying job and took another that paid only

a third as much. "I was traveling all over the world, but I wasn't seeing my children grow up," he told me.

And sometimes, you sense that same heroic quality in the more quiet, day-to-day choices a couple makes. I think of how my father supported us as a coal miner. And how devotedly both my parents cared for my brother, George, who was born with Down syndrome and lived with them into adulthood. I would be the last person to minimize the challenges involved, but I know that along with the sacrifices, they found great joy in Georgie.

I experienced that, too, when George came to live with me after our mother's death. He moved into the rectory, became an active worker in the parish and treated everyone as family. Parishioners would tell me, "We miss you when you go on vacation, but we really miss Georgie." Always, until his death in 2002, my brother was an infallible sign of God's presence—a person who brought out the heroic, hidden best in those around him.

Too Hard? Pope Benedict XVI once observed that there are some people who profess faith in God but then act as if God doesn't exist and everything depends on them. You might say that, in practice, they are atheists.

Let's not fall into this trap. It's true that we face many challenges today. But it would be a mistake—a heresy, in fact—to think that everything rests on our shoulders. Essentially, renewing marriage and family life is God's work! Our part is to serve his plan as faithfully as possible and to cooperate with the movements of grace as he gives them to us. God is calling us, each in our own way, to be witnesses to the goodness and beauty of his plan for marriage. It's a prophetic role, and it takes courage. First and foremost, then, let us look to God. He will surely supply everything we need. n

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