

# Dating, Courtship and Marriage - our Catholic Vision

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Part A is predominantly for engaged couples and Part B delves more into the joys and challenges of married life. Married couples may like to read both sections.

## Part A

Catholic Marriage is the voluntary union for life of one adult female to one adult male, who are free to marry, and who agree to accept any children who are born to them. Marriage is a sacrament and normally celebrated before a priest. God, via the sacrament, provides additional strength and is always there to help their marriage and bring out its fullest potential. Thus, a woman and a man bonded together in sacramental marriage are greater than the sum of their parts. The couple also are called by God to be a sign of His love to each other, their children and to their community. For a more detailed description of Catholic Marriage, please refer to Sections 1601 to 1666 of the Catechism. That is the theory! Now for the practice!

In practice, marriage is two people setting out on an exciting, unique journey of exploration together with no certain idea of where they are going, how to get there or of the hazards they will face on the way! Now, approaching 60 years of marriage, we would like to share something of what we have learned so far.

During the marital journey we believe the couple should be happy together and experience, in their mutual loving, the love of God and perhaps, a taste of heaven. Their destination should be to help each other to get to heaven itself. However, for this journey to be enjoyable and successful, we believe that there are three essential practical requirements: **a loving close friendship, sexual attraction, and public commitment.**

### Friendship

Dating provides an important opportunity to explore friendships with members of the opposite sex whilst keeping a safe psychological distance from them. Dating is a hit and miss set of encounters, with many challenges and can be greatly influenced by chance. Eventually, hopefully, one meets or dates someone who feels very different and is especially enjoyable company. One gradually experiences a powerful desire to be with that person all the time, to really know that person and a strong sexual attraction develops. If those feelings are mutual and both are mature enough and want to marry and have children, then dating becomes exclusive to that couple. Both are entering that age-long process known as courtship.

Courtship is critical for the future happiness of that couple. It is when they discover whether or not they can become close loving friends. If they can, then they will be able to face together and overcome all the hazards that married life may bring. They will bring happiness to each other, any children they may have and their friends and relatives. For

their children, a happy marriage is an immense benefit. Parents, who are close loving friends, usually create in their children strong senses of being loved, of security and of value. For a Catholic it is doubly important as there is only one opportunity to marry within the Church.

Friendship between men and women can be challenging as they are created through natural selection to be very different physically, psychologically, socially, and spiritually. Cultural influences increase all these differences which can make misunderstandings very easy. However, these very differences are fantastic and wonderfully complementary. Women and men were designed by God so as to become one as Jesus makes clear in Matthew 19:4-6: "They are no longer two but one body." Becoming one body in a happy and mutually growth promoting union and then creating and nurturing their children together is the most rewarding and joyful experience of most peoples' lives.

Courtship is the time when the pair begin to learn all they can about the other. To communicate who they are to another person requires that they understand themselves. Self-awareness also assists the understanding of others. To be a good friend, as to be a good spouse, sometimes requires hard work. Nobody is capable of being loveable or loving all the time. In courtship the couple can lay the foundations of either a good, bad or indifferent marriage.

To become close friends, couples require shared values, mutual trust, unselfishness, honesty, some shared interests, and enjoyment of each other's company. Shared values cannot be taken for granted in our current remarkably diverse culture where anti-Christian values about sex and marriage are quite common. Mutual trust is a loosening of one's emotional barriers and requires knowledge of the other, without which trust is dangerous. It requires learning to communicate well with each other about matters vital to marriage and family life. Communication requires much talking, listening, and thinking on both sides about these vital topics. Talking about feelings is more important than opinions. Listening is a great skill and goes far beyond hearing. It takes great patience, experience, and careful consideration.

Courtship is also the time when couples should learn to replace "me" and "mine" with "us" and "ours". It is a training in unselfishness. Sadly, some people have never learnt to put others first and therefore are incapable of loving someone. It is unwise for selfish people to marry as selfishness kills love eventually.

Unfortunately, many couples just drift into a sexual relationship without first discovering whether they can become close friends for life. Sexual intercourse has a powerful tendency to loosen emotional barriers and can lead a person to become very vulnerable to being hurt. Sometimes one of the pair is either unwilling or incapable of forming a close relationship. This often results in the other getting hurt. If, however, this couple do marry, then this often results in unhappy marriages or eventually single mothers with children being disadvantaged by having no father.

In the Catholic Church, couples are wisely required to go on engaged courses before marriage. These are designed to help couples know themselves and each other better, and also to make informed choices. Sometimes, couples discover that their choice is either unwise or that they need more time to get to know each other.

## **Sexual Attraction**

Mutual sexual attraction is essential for a successful marriage. In a Catholic marriage each has a responsibility to try to make their marriage sexually fulfilled and happy. Sexual intercourse has many functions in marriage. One most important function is to foster bonding together so as to become one as Christ intended. It dissolves barriers and binds people together. It is like a glue joining two people together in a powerful union which cannot be broken without injury to one or both parties. However, like all glues, it can only permanently hold together compatible materials. This is one reason why courtship must ensure that their different personalities will be truly psychologically compatible.

Sexual intercourse is also one of the most effective ways of conveying love. It also conveys playfulness, joy, happiness, forgiveness, relaxation, and a powerful sense of intimacy. Sexual intercourse should be a mutual decision based upon affection, love, and mutual understanding. In essence, it is the giving of oneself to the other. The strength of individual sexual desire will vary greatly at times due to factors beyond their control e.g. work, children etc. However, a persistent lack of sexual intercourse can make infidelity more likely. Infidelity in marriage destroys that sense of bonding, trust and intimacy and replaces it with anger and jealousy. It is then hard, but not impossible, to recover from this.

## **Public Commitment**

A public commitment is fundamentally different from a private one, in that it is made before families, friends, the state, religious authorities and God. All of these acts as witnesses to their promises to each other of a permanent and exclusive sexual relationship. All those who witness should have a responsibility to support and help the couple in that permanent and exclusive commitment to each other. A public commitment before God, before a Catholic priest and community conveys the sacrament of Marriage on the couple and assures them of God's help in keeping that commitment to each other.

People can often say in the spur of the moment "I love you". This is often based on a transient feeling of affection, or sexual attraction. It can be dismissed as quickly as it is made and should not be taken as a permanent commitment. It is a private not a public commitment.

Public commitment is an important, even necessary protection for women and children. A woman in having sexual intercourse is always making a vastly deeper biological investment than a man. She is much more vulnerable since sexual intercourse always carries some risk of pregnancy which changes a woman permanently not just physically, but also psychologically and socially. A man can make a woman pregnant and then disappear, taking no responsibility for the consequences of his actions. A woman who has intercourse

without a public commitment is taking a far greater risk for herself and any children she might have.

Unmarried mothers can be significantly disadvantaged in the job market and can suffer disproportionately from poverty. Coping with children alone is difficult and almost impossible without help when illness strikes. Children from stable parental relationships tend to do much better, physically, emotionally, educationally and to have good marriages themselves. They are much less likely to commit offences or have psychiatric or educational problems. Marriages usually are much more stable than cohabiting relationships. Catholic marriages, by their permanent and exclusive nature, are powerful motivators to work to overcome any marital problems and should be the most stable of all.

## **Part B**

### **The Challenges and Joys of Married Life**

Every marital journey will face hazards which can arise either from outside or inside the marriage. External hazards can bring the couple together to overcome them. The hazards from outside are legion; illness, poverty, unemployment, social unrest, drugs, and alcohol are currently quite common in our society. The problems from within the marriage are the more difficult to deal with as they tend to separate the couple. The usual areas within marriages which are the source of most serious marital problems are sex, money, children, and religion.

Misunderstanding is a potent cause of all marital disagreements. Sadly, it is easier to assume rather than to understand, to blame rather than accept responsibility, just as it is easier to be angry rather than sad. It is so very easy to forget that people are more important than issues. Mostly, problems can be overcome by good communication, compassion, careful thought, compromise, tolerance, and acceptance. However, when feelings are very strong on both sides, logic and rationality can fly out through the window. Feelings are particularly important as they affect all thinking and behaviour. Misunderstandings often occur because feelings are not understood, they should not be ignored or hidden. Some people hide their feelings even from themselves because of shame. However, feelings are neither right nor wrong. They are just part of us. How they are expressed can be a matter of right and wrong.

In serious difficulty, the technique of dialoguing is useful for understanding feelings and the roots of those feelings. It involves writing a love letter to one other describing their deepest feelings on the difficulty. These feelings arise from the past. Troubles and hurts from childhood, school, past relationships, and previous conflicts in the marriage often leave a residue of powerful poorly understood feelings. This technique gives the time to dig deeply and prayerfully to understand better the matter and its profound effects on their feelings. The couple exchange letters and then try to understand the feelings of the other on the issue. Prayer separately and together is vital. God sometimes provides both welcome and unwelcome enlightenment! Once feelings are properly understood, reason can return, and conflicts solved.

A golden rule in any conflict is that the more a person is convinced that the other is entirely at fault, the more likely it is that the person is not facing a problem in themselves. It is here that Jesus's saying in Matthew 7: 4 is so helpful to married couples; "Take the plank out of your own eye first and then you will see clearly enough to take the splinter out of your brother's eye." Couples should individually try to become a better spouse instead of trying to change the other. It is amazing how, when people change themselves for the better, the marital problems seem to diminish. Both should share the responsibility for causing the conflicts, understanding them, and resolving them. Blame is unhelpful. It leads to hurt and anger. Understanding is helpful as it leads to solutions. Blame separates; understanding unites.

Everyone has mental scars, like physical scars, from childhood and earlier life which are brought into marriage. All need to try to understand these and gradually heal them. We recommend a book called *Habits for a Healthy Marriage - A Handbook for Catholic Couples* by Dr R.P Fitzgibbons. He scientifically and spiritually analyses marital problems based upon his 40 years' work with couples. He discusses anger, selfishness, control, emotional distancing, anxiety, compulsions, sadness, and loneliness etc. He analyses the problems each brings to marriage and then heals using both psychological and spiritual methods. Problems, honestly faced, are a great opportunity for personal growth and a wonderful marriage.

Catholic marriage is a sacrament which is both a gift and a sign. This means that God offers special help to each couple by a special gift of His grace to enable them to love each other to an extent beyond their natural capacity. They are called to act as channels of His love to each other, their children and to all they meet. Their task in marriage is to help each other to keep those channels clear. This allows God's love to flow free from the obstructions caused by their faults, inadequacies, fears, and failures. That love is expressed by the couple in innumerable acts of loving kindness, generosity, patient listening, and forgiveness, etc. These loving acts are signs of God's love at work to all who see or experience them.

We would like to end by quoting Pope Francis on married communication. He says living together is an art and involves three key phrases: "May I?", "Thank you", and "I'm sorry". The first shows respect and mutual obedience, the second shows gratitude and the third admits our own often repeated failures as spouses and asks forgiveness. If we follow his advice, then our spouse also hears loudly and clearly another joyful phrase - "I love you".

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