

The Art of Accompaniment in the Discernment of Relationships

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Relationships are hard. Most people treat relationships too casually unlike a rigorous job that requires attention and some dedication for success; like a career that does not require any effort. The fact remains that a relationship that leads to a mutual covenant is a big commitment and there is no doubt about it. It could be rightly said that the decision to get married will impact one's life more deeply than almost any other decision in life. The modern trends seem to indicate that most young people are not only anxious about the prospect of marriages, but shun it as well. This could be as a result of the fear of losing the marriage. Numbers never tell the accurate story, but in the case of divorce, the statistics are startling. The bottom line is that there are compelling statistics about the divorce rate in the Western cultures, which continues to hover around fifty percent, and the highest percentage of divorces occur within the first 10 years of marriage. I refer to this time frame as "*marriage on the threshold*". Regardless of the specific figures on divorce or struggling marriages, the most important fact is that couples with relationship struggles face traumatic experiences and it can leave them with emotional and physical scars that last a lifetime¹.

The problem that I have observed is that people rush into marriage with little or no knowledge of the truth about their prospective spouse. Alternatively, most young adults have concerns about their ability to maintain a successful relationship and it compels them to cohabitate rather than to get married or to stay forever single. When it comes to dating and choosing a life partner, most young adults feel left alone by the Church. They try to figure it out on their own or rely on fate and hope for the best. The vocation to marriage in effect comprises two callings: one, to marriage in general

¹ Bloom, Asher, & White, 1978; Burman & Margolin, 1992

as a basic lifestyle; the other, to marriage with a specific person as one's life-partner.² The second aspect of the Christian vocation; a mutual call to commit to a particular individual until death, calls for a careful discernment. It demands a careful openness and honest questions: Is God calling us to wed each other? Is this person the spouse whom the Lord intends for me?³ The call to commit to one individual for life is a journey that requires accompaniment. It is a journey of discovery of oneself and of the prospective spouse. It is not simply the making of a choice. The desire to get married should never override the need to choose the right partner. The real stories that follow are heart-wrenching accounts of men and woman who wanted marriage to be a wonderful experience but instead faced great hardship because they failed to make the right choice. My conviction is that many of the struggles of most married couples could have been avoided had they been accompanied through the route of discernment. Discernment during courtship or dating, will help the young adults to identify the flaws of their intended spouses so they may determine which ones they may tolerate and which others they cannot accept. Discernment is a special gift. Discernment is not about choosing from available options, but a discovery. Discernment as a process of discovery is not about 'what I do,' but about 'who I am called to become.' It is a journey that requires an accompaniment. In his 2013 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* ("the Joy of the Gospel), Pope Francis uses a new word "*the art of accompaniment*" to help us comprehend the vision of the New Evangelization. For Pope Francis, the call of "Genuine spiritual accompaniment always begins and flourishes in the context of service to the mission of evangelization."⁴ In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis sees pastoral accompaniment as fundamental of leading others closer to God.⁵ With Pope Francis' emphasis on *discernment* and *accompaniment*, the Church has to pay attention to the needs of her sons and

² Marie Coombs, Francis Nemeck, *Discerning vocations to marriage, Celibacy and Singlehood*; 2001, p.43

³ Marie Coombs, Francis Nemeck, p.45

⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium*, No.173

⁵ *Amoris Laetitia*, No. 170

daughters in today's world. Pope Francis referred to the concept of accompaniment as a means to walk with or alongside another: "all of us are invited to be a church capable of walking at people's sides, which accompanies them on their journey."⁶ In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis, reiterated: "*The Church will have to initiate everyone - priests, religious and laity- into this 'art of accompaniment' which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other*" (cf. Exodus 3:5).

Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* urges: "Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: 'We have always done it this way.' I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities. A proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them will inevitably prove illusory."⁸

When the Holy Father challenges us, we take it heart. In the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston we agreed to think differently and to act differently in order to break the circle of divorce in our communities. Accurate statistical analysis on divorce will not solve the problem of failed marriages facing most people especially the young adults, if we choose to do nothing. We have been blessed in our Archdiocese through the collaborative efforts of "Family Life Ministry, Young Adult and Campus Ministry and Emmaus School of Love", to experience the advent of a New Evangelization on discernment this last year. We have begun an intentional 6 months series on discernment on relationship before marriage called "*Discovering Love with Clarity.*" This is a singular opportunity dedicated to our Singles, Dating and Engaged Couples to eradicate the problems that blind fold them in their search for a true life partner.

⁶ Pope Francis' meeting with Bishops of Brazil (CNBB), July 28, 2013

⁷ The Joy of the Gospel, p.169

⁸ *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 33