



Virtual Marriage Retreat: National Marriage Week 2017

Day 1 – February 7 Theme for the Day: Marriage is a Blessing and a Gift

Breaking Open the Theme

“Among the many blessings that God has showered upon us in Christ is the blessing of marriage, a gift bestowed by the Creator from the creation of the human race” (USCCB, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, p. 1). The vocation to marriage is inscribed in the very nature of man and woman (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1603). As a natural institution, marriage has certain God-given characteristics. It is the permanent, faithful union of a man and a woman, intended for the good of the spouses and the bearing and raising of children.

Marriage was redeemed by Christ and elevated by Him to become one of the seven sacraments. In this way, Christ made marriage between a baptized man and a baptized woman a sign or visible embodiment of his love for the Church (see Eph 5:21-33). Sacramental marriage does not replace natural marriage but raises it beyond what husband and wife could achieve on their own, allowing them to share in God’s own divine life. As Pope Francis explains, “The sacrament of marriage is not a social convention, an empty ritual or merely the outward sign of commitment. The sacrament is a gift given for the sanctification and salvation of the spouses” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 72).

Reflection

Many neighborhoods are blessed to have a married couple who are the true community makers. This is the couple on whom everyone counts to generate enthusiasm for the block party or to welcome new arrivals. When this special couple also happens to be Christians, their positive influence gives the Church a good name and witnesses to Christ’s love. People seek their opinion on moral questions or ask them to pray for their loved ones. They seem to enjoy working together in the yard and on church projects. Their dinner table always has room for another teenager. In such a couple, people witness the natural and supernatural dimensions of marriage, in the flesh.

To Think About

(Choose one or more of the following questions to reflect on by yourself and/or with your spouse)

- (1) How has your spouse been a gift to you?
- (2) What would you like to do for your spouse that would express your love in a special way?
- (3) In what ways can your marriage become a gift to other people, not only to each another?

Prayer of Married Couples

Almighty and eternal God,
You blessed the union of husband and wife
so that we might reflect the union of Christ with his Church:
look with kindness on us.
Renew our marriage covenant.
Increase your love in us,
and strengthen our bond of peace
so that, [with our children],
we may always rejoice in the gift of your blessing.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.



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Day 2 – February 8 Theme for the Day: Marriage Is the Unique Union of a Man and a Woman

Breaking Open the Theme

In the beginning, God created man and woman in his image, “male and female He created them” (Gn 1:27). God planned that man and woman would be made “for each other”: “they are equal as persons...and complementary as masculine and feminine” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 372), “uniquely suited to be partners or helpmates for each other” (USCCB, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, p. 10). In a particular way, when a man and woman marry, they beautifully and uniquely complement each other. “The family is entrusted to a man, a woman and their children, so that they may become a communion of persons in the image of the union of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 29).

Although each individual person is irreducibly unique and fundamentally equal in dignity, obvious differences exist between men and women, and these differences are blessed by God. These differences can be seen not only in biological terms, but also in how we think, express ourselves, and even pray. A most obvious difference can be seen in the distinct gifts a man and a woman bring to sexual intercourse. Together, they jointly hold the potential to unite in the most profound way and to bring new life into the world. The “one flesh” union of husband and wife in marriage shows that their differences are a foundation for a beautiful unity.

Reflection

She proudly thinks of herself as a multi-tasker, able to juggle many things at once. Her husband might counter that he likes to concentrate on one thing at a time, focusing his attention on the task at hand. She may need to share her worries; he may be surprised to find that she isn't expecting him to fix them. He discovers that she needs to talk and relax into feeling romantic; she wishes he figured that out sooner. The beauty of marriage is that spouses have a lifetime to understand and appreciate their differences. *Vive la difference!*

To Think About

(Choose one or more of the following questions to reflect on by yourself and/or with your spouse)

- (1) Name one or two ways your spouse approaches problems that differ from the way you like to do things.
- (2) As a man or a woman, what unique qualities do you bring to relationships, at work and in your family?
- (3) How does being a man (or a woman) impact how you approach your relationship with God?

Prayer of Married Couples

Almighty and eternal God,
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look with kindness on us.
Renew our marriage covenant.
Increase your love in us,
and strengthen our bond of peace
so that, [with our children],
we may always rejoice in the gift of your blessing.

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Amen.



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Day 3 – February 9 Theme for the Day: Marriage Is a Communion of Love and Life

Breaking Open the Theme

In creating man and woman for each other, God made marriage to be love-giving and life-giving. We call these two purposes or “ends” of marriage the unitive and the procreative. They are inseparably connected because of the very nature of conjugal love, by which a spouse desires to give everything to his or her beloved: a total gift of self (see USCCB, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, pp. 15-16).

When a man and a woman exchange marital consent, they establish a partnership for the whole of life. They mutually vow an exclusive fidelity that is open to the procreation and nurture of children. “The gift of a new child, entrusted by the Lord to a father and a mother, begins with acceptance, continues with lifelong protection and has as its final goal the joy of eternal life” (Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 166). In participating in God’s love, husband and wife are empowered to make a total gift of self to each other. This gift of love is always fruitful, even for couples who are not blessed with children. As Pope Francis says beautifully, “Love refuses every impulse to close in on itself; it is open to a fruitfulness that draws it beyond itself” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 80).

Reflection

When they were newlyweds, both were sure that this was the one person who completed their world. They thought they could never love each other more. When they found they could not have biological children, they adopted their little girl and discovered a new dimension to their love. The day they first held her in their arms, they suddenly saw each other in a new light: Mom and Dad. In becoming parents, they began to understand something new about why God had brought them together. Their feelings of great joy were accompanied by feelings of overwhelming responsibility; they knew they would need God’s help.

To Think About

(Choose one or more of the following questions to reflect on by yourself and/or with your spouse)

- (1) If you are a parent, how has your child (or children) been a blessing to you? How have you changed for the better since becoming a parent?
- (2) If you do not have children, how do you expect that having a child would change your marriage?
- (3) How can couples continue to strengthen their marriage when they become parents?

Prayer of Married Couples

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look with kindness on us.
Renew our marriage covenant.
Increase your love in us,
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so that, [with our children],
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Amen.



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Day 4 – February 10 Marriage is a Sacrament of Christ’s Love

Breaking Open the Theme

“[Jesus] heals marriage and restores it to its original purity of permanent self-giving in one flesh” (USCCB, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, p. 30). But the Lord does not stop there. Christ generously invites husband and wife to participate in His spousal love for his Church. Christian spouses are drawn into this love by the grace of the Sacrament of Marriage, so that their own love might reflect the loving communion of the Blessed Trinity. In this way, the marriage of two baptized Christians becomes a living and effective sign: a sign which makes present the union of Christ with His Church (see Eph 5:21-33).

Jesus is truly present in His followers and in their marriages. Practically, this means that when life’s difficulties press in on husband and wife, they are not alone. Though they remain fallible and weak human beings, Christian spouses can rely on Jesus to help them to continue in love even when it seems impossible. As Pope Francis says, “God’s indulgent love always accompanies our human journey; through grace, it heals and transforms hardened hearts, leading them back to the beginning through the way of the cross” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 62). The Lord never abandons marriages and families, but gives them the grace to find true healing and happiness.

Reflection

She had felt that the world was crashing around her when she learned of her husband’s affair. Still, she was determined to fight for her marriage, and he wanted desperately to heal what he had damaged. Popular wisdom was not on their side, and people let her know it, too. After tears and late-night talks, some angry exchanges, and lots of counseling and prayer, she and her husband reconciled. She would say it was faith that made the difference, but mostly they don’t explain their decision to others. They just say, “We’re married.” That was 10 years ago, and new friends would never guess what they went through. Most couples will not be so severely tested, but a failure to be forgiving can make even small faults—leaving the cap off the toothpaste, poor hygiene, or weak cooking skills—destructive to a marriage.

To Think About

(Choose one or more of the following questions to reflect on by yourself and/or with your spouse)

- (1) How has the grace of the Sacrament of Marriage sustained you in difficult times?
- (2) What are some of the joyful things about being married? What are some of the challenges? Can something be both joyful and challenging?

Prayer of Married Couples

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Renew our marriage covenant.
Increase your love in us,
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so that, [with our children],
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Amen.



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Day 5 – February 11 Marriage Is the Foundation of the Family and Society

Breaking Open the Theme

The early Church understood the Christian family as an *ecclesia domestica*, or domestic Church. “The family is called a “domestic church” because it is a small communion of persons that draws its sustenance from the larger communion that is the whole Body of Christ, the Church, and also reflects the life of the Church so as to provide a kind of summary of it” (USCCB, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, p. 39). The domestic Church rests on the foundation of a baptized husband and wife. They establish a communion of love into which children are welcomed.

By creating a home where love, care and growth in the faith flourish among family members, married couples reflect the life of the Church in the world. Indeed, as Pope Francis says powerfully, “the Church, in order to fully understand her mystery, looks to the Christian family, which manifests her in a real way” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 67). In the family, parents teach their children how to pray, how to embrace God’s loving commandments, and how to grow in virtue and holiness. The Christian family that celebrates the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, establishes a reciprocal relationship between the family and the entire Body of Christ that is the Church.

Reflection

Whenever he heard an ambulance siren, he offered a prayer for those involved in the accident or medical emergency. When the family pet passed away, she took care to bury it lovingly in the garden. Their Catholic faith was evident in the artwork on the walls and in the simple prayers offered at table and at bedtime. They celebrated the anniversary of their child’s baptism with ice cream sundaes, and always managed to pull together a group of neighbors for Christmas caroling. Their children saw and treasured these rituals of family life.

To Think About

(Choose one or more of the following questions to reflect on by yourself and/or with your spouse)

- (1) What does your family do that brings you together?
- (2) What opportunities for passing on your faith are uniquely present in family life (that don’t usually happen at church)?
- (3) In your home, identify some reminders of God’s presence. What can you add to or change about your home to increase your awareness of God in your daily life?

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Amen.



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Day 6 – February 12 Theme: Marriage is a Journey of Human and Spiritual Growth

Breaking Open the Theme

“On their wedding day, the couple says a definitive ‘yes’ to their vocation of marriage. Then the real work of marriage begins” (USCCB, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, p. 45). Each stage of marriage has its own joys and sorrows, opportunities and challenges. A couple grows in holiness by journeying with Christ through the mystery of His life and that of His Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Glorious Ascension (the Paschal Mystery).

Pope Francis emphasizes in *Amoris Laetitia* that married love is “a process of constant growth,” such that “a love that fails to grow is at risk” (no. 134). The Paschal Mystery unfolds again and again throughout marriage and invites spouses to continually grow in love. There are Holy Thursdays, times of loving service when couples put their own needs in second place. There are Good Fridays, times of suffering, tragedies, even death. There are Holy Saturdays, times of waiting and uncertainty when all seems dark and the couple wonders what is to come and even if their marriage will survive. Then there are Easter Sundays, when renewed faith or celebrations such as the marriage of a child or the birth of a grandchild bring new hope. Through all of these moments, a couple can grow in love and holiness.

Reflection

When he returned from his tour in Iraq, the baby was nine months old. He felt like an outsider in his own family. There was no way he could fully explain what his past year had been like, and he had missed so much at home. The baby didn’t know him and certainly didn’t seem to need anyone but Mom. His wife was thrilled that he was home, but she resented that his return had thrown a wrench into her well-established routine. They felt a great distance between them. Memories of the happy days when they were first married helped to give them faith that God meant for them to be together, and they looked with hope to better days ahead. She found support from other military spouses; he found sound advice in his talks with their pastor. Now, their baby is four years old. Their marriage and their family bond are strong. They volunteer as a mentor couple to support other military couples struggling with similar transitions.

To Think About

(Choose one or more of the following questions to reflect on by yourself and/or with your spouse)

- (1) Think of a time from the past when your marriage went through a transition. Describe life before, during and after the transition. What got you through? How was God present to you?
- (2) How has surviving a time of trial, either personally or in your marriage, better equipped you to support others who are suffering or struggling?

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Day 7 – February 13 Theme: Marriage Is a School of Love and Gratitude

Breaking Open the Theme

As Adam recognized Eve as God’s gift to him, likewise spouses should recognize each other as God’s gift in their lives. Marriage is “a school for nurturing gratitude for the gifts of God and for openness to the gifts of God that are proper to marriage,” such as sexual intimacy and children (USCCB, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, p. 50). Through life’s journey, sometime a husband or wife may need to reflect on the gift of the other, especially when misunderstandings or difficulties arise. To remember how this person came to offer love so unexpectedly or how one recognized the other as “made for you” is to be humbled by the divine gift you have received.

In those moments of remembering, thankfulness should fill one’s heart. Spousal gratitude is linked to conjugal charity. It will help husband and wife to persevere in fidelity, kindness, communication, and mutual assistance. “In the joys of their love and family life, he [Jesus] gives them [spouses] here on earth a foretaste of the wedding feast of the Lamb,” (Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 73).

Reflection

Watching her husband reading to their young children one evening, her heart swelled in gratitude for the tender and loving man that God had made for her. Catching her look of love, he paused and looked deeply into her eyes, returning her smile. He savored the moment of peace and the warmth of his family surrounding him, thinking that he certainly had so much to be grateful for. Later, after the children were tucked in bed, she embraced him and told him how grateful she was to have him. He wondered aloud, “God has given us so much, I’ve been feeling lately like we certainly have a lot to offer another child...”

To Think About

(Choose one or more of the following questions to reflect on by yourself and/or with your spouse)

- (1) List five ways that you show gratitude toward your spouse. Which two ways does he/she like best? Resolve to do those two more often.
- (2) What good thing did your spouse do recently that you could have thanked him or her for, but didn’t? Make a note to remember next time.

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Amen.