

Virtual Marriage Retreat: Marriage & Mercy

Looking for a way to enrich your marriage? Take our seven day virtual retreat! Each day for seven days, set aside some time for prayer. This retreat is based on the theme of “marriage and mercy,” since the Church is currently celebrating the year-long Jubilee of Mercy. There are two other retreats available as well: 1) Pope Francis’ advice about marriage and family life; 2) Reflections on the USCCB pastoral letter *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*. Both are [available here](#).

Each day has a theme, followed by ways to put the theme into practice through prayer, reflection, and action (Pray – Reflect – Do). End each mini-retreat by praying the prayer for married couples. If possible, do the retreat together with your spouse!

Day One: With Mercy, God Goes First

Quote for reflection:

“In short, we are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us. Pardoning offenses becomes the clearest expression of merciful love, and for us Christians it is an imperative from which we cannot excuse ourselves.” – Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, no. 9

Breaking open the theme:

Perhaps one of the most powerful verses in all of Scripture is Romans 5:8, “But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” *While we were still sinners*, Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice of his life. This same principle is shown in the story of the prodigal son: while the son “was still a long way off” his father runs to him and embraces him (Luke 15:20). When it comes to mercy, God seeks us first. Always. What possible response could we make to such overwhelming love? To receive it gratefully, and show that same mercy to others.

Real-life example:

Stephanie was still fuming days later. Her husband of just over a year, Tom, once again had lost track of time with his friends and made her wait for hours, wondering where he was and worrying about him. She refused to let it go; how could he be so insensitive? And he didn’t even seem sorry. At the same time, Stephanie realized deep down that her unwillingness to forgive Tom was also hurting her, causing her a lot of tension and unhappiness. Recalling advice they had received during marriage preparation, Stephanie began praying for the Lord to soften her heart, and said out loud, “I forgive you” even though she didn’t feel it. While it didn’t happen instantly, she did feel more charitable toward Tom over time, and felt her own heart become lighter. Soon they were able to talk calmly about what had happened, reconcile, and talk about what to do differently in the future.

Put it into practice:

1. **Pray:** Read Matt 18:21-35 together with your spouse, about the unforgiving servant.
2. **Reflect:** Do you find it hard to forgive others unless you think they “deserve” it or have “earned” it? Why? Reflect on your own life and the gift of God’s mercy to you.
3. **Do:** Are you holding a grudge about something and refusing to forgive? Try journaling about your feelings or talking with a trusted spiritual director. Perhaps even take the plunge and say, “I forgive you.”

Prayer for 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.

Day Two: Mercy and the Sacraments

Quote for reflection:

“Husbands and wives should take up the burden appointed to them, willingly, in the strength of faith... Let them implore the help of God with unremitting prayer and, most of all, let them draw grace and charity from that unfailing fount which is the Eucharist. If, however, sin still exercises its hold over them, they are not to lose heart. Rather must they, humble and persevering, have recourse to the mercy of God, abundantly bestowed in the Sacrament of Penance.” – Bl. Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, no. 25

Breaking open the theme:

Bl. Paul VI talks about the “burden” given to husbands and wives of living their marriage faithfully day in and day out. While that might at first sound like a harsh word, not many spouses would disagree that on *some* days at least, marriage can feel burdensome! The pope goes on to lay out something of an “action plan” for spouses who want to keep their marriage strong: regularly receive the Eucharist, the “unfailing fount” of all grace and strength; and go often to the Sacrament of Penance, where God’s mercy is found in abundance. To hear the words “...and I absolve you from your sins” brings tremendous peace, as well as the strength to overcome sins in the future.

Real-life example:

While John and Marissa didn’t go to confession as much as they would have liked – it always seemed hard to find the time, especially on Saturday afternoons – there was no doubt that they felt a difference whenever they did go. After receiving the sacrament, Marissa noticed that she could be calmer when she felt frustrated with her husband, and John found it easier to say “I’m sorry” to his wife after saying it to God in the confessional. Both resolved to make confession a more regular part of their life as a family.

Put it into practice:

1. **Pray:** Memorize the Prayer of Contrition said during the Sacrament of Penance. Even outside of the confessional, it can help spur you on to love of God and growth in virtue.
2. **Reflect:** Do you feel closer to God after confession? Closer to your spouse? Why might that be?
3. **Do:** Block off on your calendar a regular time for confession for the whole family, like every third Saturday (for example). If you don’t make it sometimes, don’t fret; but do make an effort.

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Amen.

Day Three: Mercy is Slow to Anger and Quick to Forgive

Quotes for reflection:

“Merciful and gracious is the Lord, slow to anger, abounding in kindness.” (Psalm 103:8)

“Jesus, who knows us well, teaches us a secret: don’t let a day end without asking forgiveness, without peace returning to our home, to our family. It is normal for husband and wife to quarrel...perhaps you were mad, perhaps plates flew, but please remember this: never let the sun go down without making peace! Never, never, never!” – Pope Francis, [Address to Engaged Couples](#) (2.14.14)

Breaking open the theme:

In Pope Francis’ typical expressive style, we can picture vividly the strong emotions that can be present in a marriage during a disagreement: “...perhaps plates flew”! But drawing on the wisdom of the Scriptures (Eph 4:26), the Holy Father urges couples to follow a tried and true rule: forgive each other before the day is over. As the Psalmist says, the Lord shows his mercy by being “slow to anger.” What a beautiful image: imagine if spouses were slow to anger and quick to forgive, instead of the other way around.

Real-life example:

Janice knew that she had a quick temper. Especially when she was tired, or when her plans were disrupted at the last minute, she just felt so angry. She often took it out on her husband Todd, and she always regretted it afterwards. Todd often felt like he was on eggshells around her, not knowing when the next outburst would come. Sincerely desiring change, Janice spoke with her spiritual director about ways to channel her anger and interact with Todd in a more loving, merciful way. For example, she learned to take a break – step away – when her feelings of anger threatened to overwhelm her. Over time, she made great strides in becoming “slow to anger.”

Put it into practice:

1. **Pray:** Read together with your spouse Ephesians 4:25-32, which is packed with advice for daily life.
2. **Reflect:** What are your anger “triggers”, the things that make you mad easily? Think about what might be behind them. How could you respond differently in those moments?
3. **Do:** Put the words “slow to anger” somewhere in your home as a reminder to be more merciful.

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Amen.

Day Four: Mercy and Tenderness

Quote for reflection:

“Merciful love also means the cordial tenderness and sensitivity so eloquently spoken of in the parable of the prodigal son, and also in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. Consequently, merciful love is supremely indispensable between those who are closest to one another: between husbands and wives, between parents and children, between friends.” – St. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, no. 14

Breaking open the theme:

St. John Paul II, in his encyclical “Rich in Mercy,” gives some helpful descriptors of mercy: *tenderness* and *sensitivity*. Consider the Scripture story he references, the return of the prodigal son. In this story – beloved also by Pope Francis – the father is a model of tenderness. He yearns for his son’s return and he runs to meet him, embracing him in a joyful, tender hug. He doesn’t first tell him what he did wrong; first he assures him of his love. It can be hard to be merciful when someone close to you has let you down. But an attitude of tenderness can help see the whole person and not just his or her failings, and goes a long way in mending relationships.

Real-life example:

Ronald set high standards for himself and his family: his wife of eighteen years, Jackie, and their four children. When one of them made a mistake or did something wrong, his manner was stern and he made very clear his disappointment. His well-intentioned goal was to help his family grow in virtue. But one evening after chastising his daughter for a poor grade, she shouted at him, “You are always so harsh!” Stung, Ronald spoke with his wife and to his surprise, she agreed that he could lighten up a bit. “Maybe be a little more kind,” she said, “more tender. We’re all trying our best, after all.” While it felt uncomfortable at first, Ronald started to make a conscious effort to be gentler with his wife and children, and was pleased to see their relationships deepen in ways they hadn’t before.

Put it into practice:

1. **Pray:** Read the Scripture story of the prodigal son (Lk 15: 11-32) together.
2. **Reflect:** How can you be tenderer toward your spouse and children?
3. **Do:** The next time your spouse or child does something to disappoint you, try to temper your disapproval with an affirmation of their goodness and your love for them.

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Amen.

Day Five: Mercy and Patience

Quote for reflection:

“Brothers and sisters, God’s face is the face of a merciful father who is always patient. Have you thought about God’s patience, the patience He has with each one of us? That is His mercy. He always has patience, patience with us, He understands us, He waits for us, He does not tire of forgiving us if we are able to return to Him with a contrite heart.” – Pope Francis, [Angelus](#) (3.17.13)

Breaking open the theme:

Have *you* thought about God’s patience, like the pope asks? Think of all the times in the Old Testament when the Lord gave the Israelites another chance after they sinned. Think of Jesus’ words that we should forgive others “not seven times but seventy-seven times” (Matt 18:22). Even now, there is no point during our life when it is “too late” for God to forgive us. We shouldn’t put off asking God’s forgiveness, but neither should we fear that he will grow tired of our pleas for mercy. This same patience should be shown to our family members, too.*

*This does not mean that spouses or children should endure domestic violence. If you or someone you know is in danger in their home, please contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233.

Real-life example:

For Kathy, one of the biggest challenges in her marriage was forgiving her husband of forty-two years, Dave, when he did the same inconsiderate thing, *again*. “Why can this man not learn?” she would grumble to herself. At the same time, she knew that she, too, struggled with the same selfish tendencies now as when they were newlyweds, and Dave time and again offered his forgiveness to her. In other words, a good dose of humility and self-knowledge helped Kathy realize that Dave was in fact trying and that her willingness to forgive (seventy times seven did not seem far-fetched for one lifetime!) made their marriage ever-stronger.

Put it into practice:

1. **Pray:** Ask the Lord for patience like his, especially for the daily opportunities to forgive your spouse.
2. **Reflect:** Is there anything you are holding back confessing to God, or to your spouse, because you’re not sure if they will forgive you?
3. **Do:** Thank your spouse for the forgiveness he or she offers you.

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Amen.

Day Six: Jesus Shows Us the Face of Mercy

Quotes for reflection:

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” (Matt 5:7)

The Paschal Mystery – Jesus’ death and Resurrection – “bears within itself the most complete revelation of mercy, that is, of that love which is more powerful than death, more powerful than sin and every evil, the love which lifts man up when he falls into the abyss.” – St. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, no. 15

Breaking open the theme:

To know what mercy really is, we must look at Jesus. Mercy is more than simple kindness or forgiveness or being nice to people, although it can certainly be shown in those actions. The most perfect image of mercy, though, is Jesus’ willing sacrifice on the Cross and his triumph over death itself. Because Jesus defeated sin, we can be forgiven our own sins, no matter what. We can take confidence in Jesus’ promise that good will ultimately triumph over evil. That is the message of mercy!

Real-life example:

For over twenty years, Michael had felt a gnawing guilt over his habit of watching pornography. He loved his wife, Janet, and furtively hid his pornography use from her. But one day – he knew it had to happen eventually – she found out. Janet felt deeply betrayed, and Michael felt almost unbearable shame. They both wondered whether their marriage would survive. Janet insisted that Michael seek out help, so he called their parish priest. In their first meeting, Michael let everything off his chest for the first time, all the years of hiding and guilt and sin. The priest responded with kindness and offered the Sacrament of Penance. Michael felt overcome with unworthiness but also for the first time felt hope that he could change. God’s mercy had never felt so real.

Put it into practice:

1. **Pray:** Together with your spouse, pray the Divine Mercy Chaplet for your marriage and family.
2. **Reflect:** What difference does it make to you to know that God’s mercy can forgive *any* sin and that his goodness triumphs over *all* evil? What would it be like if this weren’t true?
3. **Do:** If you or your spouse is struggling with a major sin like pornography use, infidelity or something else damaging to your marriage, get help right away from a priest or trusted friend.

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Amen.

Day Seven: Forgiveness in the Family

Quote for reflection:

“One cannot live without seeking forgiveness, or at least, one cannot live at peace, especially in the family. We wrong one another every day. We must take into account these mistakes, due to our frailty and our selfishness. However, what we are asked to do is to promptly heal the wounds that we cause, to immediately reweave the bonds that break within the family.” – Pope Francis, [Wednesday Audience](#) (11.4.15)

Breaking open the theme:

Do Pope Francis’ words ring true to you? “We wrong one another every day.” We are frail and selfish. Unfortunately, sin affects all of us and all of our relationships. The communion of persons in marriage and the family is a sign of God’s love, so division and strife strike at its very meaning and mission. However, the realization that we fail our family members, perhaps even daily, is not a cause for despair. It is an invitation to receive God’s mercy and to offer that mercy to our loved ones – “immediately,” says Pope Francis!

Real-life example:

After a long day of work, both Samuel and Angela felt tired and out of sorts. When they realized that neither of them had thought to make babysitting arrangements for the following travel weekend, the incriminations started. Ten minutes later, they both felt even worse and now misunderstood and blamed. “Is this what marriage is supposed to be like?” thought Angela to herself. Samuel was about to storm out of the room with an angry word when he stopped and checked himself. He had been trying to get into the habit of offering forgiveness *quickly*, before a situation escalated. “I’m sorry, honey,” he said. “Look – let’s get some dinner and wind down, and then figure something out.” The words were welcome and healing to Angela, and she too was grateful for an about-face that prevented the couple from another dead-end argument.

Put it into practice:

1. **Pray:** Ask the Lord’s healing for situations in your marriage and family that aren’t peaceful.
2. **Reflect:** What areas of selfishness do you struggle with the most? How do they affect your spouse?
3. **Do:** Don’t hesitate to speak healing words into a tense situation as soon as possible: “I love you,” “I forgive you,” “I’m sorry.” These can defuse tension and re-focus the conversation.

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