

FOR YOUR MARRIAGE

Virtual Marriage Retreat: National Marriage Week 2018

Join us in celebrating National Marriage Week (February 7-14, 2018) by taking a few moments each day, together with your spouse, to reflect and pray. This year's theme is **Marriage: School of Life and Love**. The reflections are drawn from a few magisterial documents: *Mulieris Dignitatem*, an apostolic letter on the dignity and vocation of women by Pope John Paul II (1988), *Humanae Vitae*, an encyclical by Pope Paul VI on the regulation of birth (1968), and *Amoris Laetitia*, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation by Pope Francis, as well as from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and Sacred Scripture.

Day One: Marriage is a School of Life

Breaking Open the Theme

For those called to the vocation of marriage, it is a school of life. Marriage teaches us about ourselves and others, how to make and maintain good relationships, how to develop character and virtue, and how to love those whom God gives us as family. The unique relationship between husband and wife is a privileged place for this journey of life where a couple learns how to become the man and woman they are called to be *together* in a union of life-giving love. Sanctified and fortified by the matrimonial covenant, husband and wife assist one another in "a *partnership of the whole of life*" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.1601). Marriage shows in a special way how men and women are made for each other.

In His divine design, God has established marriage as an "intimate community of life and love" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.1603; see *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 67). As a community of persons, it reflects the shared life and love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Moreover, the indissoluble union of husband and wife in Christian marriage "is a sign of how much Christ loved his Church in the covenant sealed on the cross" (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 73).

Reflection

In our technological age, it can be difficult to put aside the cell phone and laptop to spend some quality time living side by side with those who are most precious to us. Marriages can become strained by the constant ringing and ding of our devices, which increasingly demand our attention, and life can quickly pass us by without our noticing or being present to those around us.

Marriage demands a far greater commitment of life than an occasional glance in the direction of our loved one. In order for a marital relationship to grow and deepen, it needs to be watered and nurtured, cared for and tended to like any delicate form of life. It requires our undivided attention and devotion.. All married couples to some extent experience a certain learning curve in marriage. It takes time and repetition to learn the lessons that make marriage a school of life.

To Think About

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

- (1) What are a few lessons that you have learned at the school of marriage?
- (2) How could you improve your ability to learn from one another as a couple?
- (3) In what way can you and your spouse improve your "partnership of the whole of life"?

Holy Couples - Saints Louis and Zelig Martin

Prayer of Married Couples (see last page)



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Day Two: Marriage Lasts for Life

Breaking Open the Theme

“The matrimonial union of man and woman is indissoluble...” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1614). Marriage is a sacred covenant, a bond “established by God himself” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1640) that is permanent. From the beginning of time, God intended it to be this way, such that “when ‘a man shall leave his father and mother and is joined to his wife, so that the two become one flesh’, there remains in force the law which comes from God himself: ‘What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder’ (Mt. 19:6)” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 12).

Following from the permanency of marriage is its faithfulness and exclusivity: “Married love is also faithful and exclusive of all other, and this until death. [...] Though this fidelity of husband and wife sometimes presents difficulties, no one has the right to assert that it is impossible; it is, on the contrary, always honorable and meritorious. The example of countless married couples proves not only that fidelity is in accord with the nature of marriage, but also that it is the source of profound and enduring happiness” (*Humanae Vitae*, no. 9). “The lasting union expressed by the marriage vows is more than a formality or a traditional formula; it is rooted in the natural inclinations of the human person” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 123). Moreover, the sacramental grace received in marriage between the baptized is available to the husband and wife to assist and strengthen them at every moment—times of joy and times of pain, sadness, and need.

Reflection

Every couple will experience at some point in their marriage times of pain and dissatisfaction. It is to be expected that imperfect people lead to imperfect couples. Perfection and impeccability are not what make for good marriages. A good marriage is one in which husband and wife continue to try and try again. They don’t give up on themselves or on one another (or on God!). Marriage is a lasting commitment to be tenacious in this ongoing relationship to one another. The ability to forgive and start again is the most eloquent expression of faithful love.

In a “throw-away” culture of hook-ups, co-habitation, and pre-nuptial agreements, the commitment to anyone “until death do us part” can be perceived as irresponsible at best or terrifying at worst. Many people desire lasting commitment but at the same time fear it or fear rejection and failure. The Christian way of life challenges us to embrace the grace of God, which makes all things possible and satisfies the innermost desire of men and women for love that lasts.

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 examples of tension or difficulty in your marriage. How have you worked through these times or plan to?
- (2) In what ways, if any, is your fidelity to one another challenged? How can these challenges be met?
- (3) How does forgiveness play a part in your marriage? Are there areas that still need to be forgiven?

Holy Couples - Saints Gregory and Nonna

Prayer of Married Couples (see last page)



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Day Three: Marriage Welcomes Life

Breaking Open the Theme

The Church teaches that there are two ends or purposes of marriage: the unitive - the intimate union of man and woman - and the procreative - the fruit of their union. Married love is life-giving, fruitful. “And if each of these essential qualities, the unitive and the procreative, is preserved, the use of marriage fully retains its sense of true mutual love and its ordination to the supreme responsibility of parenthood to which man is called” (*Humanae Vitae*, no. 12).

A child is the incomparable gift of marriage between a man and woman. Procreation is a wonderful and awe-inspiring participation in God’s creation. From the beginning of creation, God intended that man and woman partake in this transmission of life “to which marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordered: ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it’ (Gen. 1:28)” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 6). The gift of human life is meant to arise from a mutual cooperation between God’s love and the love of the couple. Moreover, it is the fruit of the mutual self-giving of the spouses in marriage (see *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 18). This beautiful interplay of cooperation and mutual self-giving are vivid examples of how God continues to create life through those who welcome it.

Reflection

Every married couple forms a community of life around them, but not every couple will experience this through the gift of their own child. This can be a source of great pain and discouragement. Infertility is on the rise in the United States and many couples who dreamed of large families are faced with the unexpected inability to bear children. However, God still wants the couple to partake in His creative love. He desires that every marriage be fruitful. The fruitfulness of Christian marriages “expands and in countless ways makes God’s love present in society” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 184).

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 demonstrate the mutual gift of self in other ways that serve as an example to your community? What other life-bearing fruit has God born through you?
- (3) Do you know a couple experiencing infertility or miscarriage? How have you accompanied them in their pain?

Holy Couples - Saints Joachim and Anne

Prayer of Married Couples (see last page)

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Day Four: Marriage is a School of Love

Breaking Open the Theme

“It is a love which is total—that very special form of personal friendship in which husband and wife generously share everything, allowing no unreasonable exceptions and not thinking solely of their own convenience. Whoever really loves his partner loves not only for what he receives, but loves that partner for the partner's own sake, content to be able to enrich the other with the gift of himself” (*Humanæ Vitæ*, no. 9). To love another for his or her own sake requires selfless seeking of the other's authentic good. This selfless form of friendship takes on new qualities and responsibilities in marriage when our own happiness also depends on it.

Marriage is a school of love because it demands the gift of love each and every day. The source of our love for one another lies beyond ourselves, it is rooted in the love of God: “The order of love belongs to the intimate life of God himself, the life of the Trinity. [...] Love, which is of God, communicates itself to creatures: ‘God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us’ (Rom 5:5)” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 29). When drawing from the love of God, we can transform our marriages into true friendships of authentic self-giving. Moreover, marriage is “an ‘affective union’, spiritual and sacrificial, which combines the warmth of friendship and erotic passion, and endures long after emotions and passion subside” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 120).

Reflection

Friendship can take many forms, between men and women, gals and pals, and brothers and sisters. The friendship that exists in marriage, however, is an unrepeatable form of friendship that combines both *philos* (friendship) and *eros* (attraction), allowing it to take on new dimensions of intimacy and involvement. It can sometimes be difficult to draw the line between what we share with our best friends and what we share with our spouse exclusively. It is important to define ‘friend boundaries’ as couples and recognize that however close we may be with others, there is always something unique to the friendship we cherish with our spouse.

To Think About

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

- (1) How do you and your spouse nurture your unique friendship?
- (2) Are there any friends who get in the way of your own bonding time?
- (3) How can friends of one or the other spouse become friends to both spouses and enrich rather than detract from your marriage?

Holy Couples - Saints Isidore the Farmer and Maria de la Cabeza

Prayer of Married Couples (see last page)

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Day Five: Marriage Reflects God's Love

Breaking Open the Theme

“God who created man out of love also calls him to love the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. For man is created in the image and likeness of God who is Himself love. Since God created him man and woman, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1604). With these words, the Church reminds us that married couples are called to be living signs of God's love to the world. Moreover, they represent the union of Christ and His Church: “The marriage of those who have been baptized is, in addition, invested with the dignity of a sacramental sign of grace, for it represents the union of Christ and His Church” (*Humanae Vitae*, no. 8; see *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 11).

These may seem like impossible expectations. How can married couples be living signs of God's love and Christ's love for the Church? It is actually easier than expected. God gives us examples of His love in the Old Testament using the analogy of a man's love for a woman (see Is. 54:4-8, 10). Israel is His bride with whom He makes a covenant: “On the part of God, the Covenant is a lasting ‘commitment’; he remains faithful to his spousal love even if the bride often shows herself to be unfaithful” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 23). In a similar way, Christ nourishes, protects and loves His bride, the Church, composed of us men and women, with a tender love despite her shortcomings. Furthermore, “marriage and the family have been redeemed by Christ and restored in the image of the Holy Trinity, the mystery from which all true love flows” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 63). God does not expect us to love any differently than how He loves: with faithfulness and forgiveness.

Reflection

We all grow up with role models and people to whom we look up as examples of how we want to be. When we think of other married couples whom we admire, what is it about them that attracts us? What is it that we like about the way they carry themselves and interact with each other? What are some of their qualities that we would like to imitate? Do they somehow reflect the love of God? Married couples can be terrific role models, friends, and mentors. Why not reach out to couples who seem to have a ‘special-something’ and ask them their ‘secret’?

To Think About

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

- (1) How do you and your spouse reflect the love of God to others around you and to one another?
- (2) Is there a couple at Church or in your community that you look up to?
- (3) As a married couple, how can you better practice faithfulness and forgiveness?

Holy Couples - Saints Zachary and Elizabeth

Prayer of Married Couples (see last page)



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Day Six: Marriage Lives by God's Law of Love

Breaking Open the Theme

"Married love particularly reveals its true nature and nobility when we realize that it takes its origin from God [...] Marriage, then, is far from being the effect of chance or the result of the blind evolution of natural forces. It is in reality the wise and provident institution of God the Creator, whose purpose was to effect in man His loving design" (*Humanae Vitae*, no. 8). If marriage is part of God's loving design for man and woman, then there are specific laws that He has instituted to guide it. By "preserving intact the whole moral law of marriage, the Church is convinced that she is contributing to the creation of a truly human civilization" (*Humanae Vitae*, no.18).

The law of marriage is part of God's law of love that protects human love from manipulation and inauthenticity. This law also governs and protects life, the fruit of love. For this reason, "to experience the gift of married love while respecting the laws of conception is to acknowledge that one is not the master of the sources of life but rather the minister of the design established by the Creator" (*Humanae Vitae*, no.13). Thus, "the Church's teaching is meant to help couples to experience in a complete, harmonious and conscious way their communion as husband and wife, together with their responsibility for procreating life" (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 82). Love and life, therefore, are designed and guided by God's law, allowing for their natural flourishing and fulfillment.

Reflection

Some couples struggle with God's law governing the sanctity of sexual intercourse, reserved for marriage, as a one-flesh union open to life. There is a natural, God-given means for the regulation of birth (commonly called Natural Family Planning), which allows couples to responsibly welcome life as their situations allow. There is no reason, therefore, to fear that God or the Church unreasonably expects more than a couple can give. If you or another couple is confused by the Church's teaching on the natural regulation of births, talk to your priest or diocesan family life director. More information can be found here: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/natural-family-planning/index.cfm>.

To Think About

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

- (1) Do I understand what the Church teaches about the regulation of births? Am I aware of a natural family planning alternative to contraception?
- (2) How can I support or help educate another couple that struggles with this issue?
- (3) What does following God's law of love mean to my spouse and me? Does it impact the way we look at our marriage?

Holy Couples - Blessed Luigi and Maria Beltrame

Prayer of Married Couples (see last page)

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Day Seven: The Family as a Domestic Church

Breaking Open the Theme

“In humble obedience then to her voice, let Christian husbands and wives be mindful of their vocation to the Christian life, a vocation which, deriving from their Baptism, has been confirmed anew and made more explicit by the Sacrament of Matrimony. For by this sacrament they are strengthened and, one might almost say, consecrated to the faithful fulfillment of their duties. Thus will they realize to the full their calling and bear witness as becomes them, to Christ before the world. For the Lord has entrusted to them the task of making visible to men and women the holiness and joy of the law which united inseparably their love for one another and the cooperation they give to God's love, God who is the Author of human life.” (*Humanae Vitae*, no. 25)

The early Church understood the Christian family as an *ecclesia domestica* or domestic church. 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.

By the power of the Holy Spirit working in the married couple, they “are consecrated and by means of a special grace build up the Body of Christ and form a domestic church, so that the Church, in order fully to understand her mystery, looks to the Christian family, which manifests her in a real way” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 67).

By their reception of the sacrament of marriage, Christian parents “become ministers of their children's education. In educating them, they build up the Church, and in so doing, they accept a God-given vocation” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 85). 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.

Reflection

Family is the fundamental unit of society. Strong families lead to strong societies and nations. Without the family, our social, political, and cultural spheres would be deeply shaken to the core. Unfortunately, there are already signs of a weakened societal framework due to the breakdown of family structure. The Church also depends on the family, calling it to be a beacon, a reflection of God's people. The family begins with the marriage between a man and a woman, united by God. Within their home, the couple nurtures the life of a domestic church by welcoming new life and fostering love in their midst. In this way, they give witness to Christ and build the Kingdom of God.

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 your family or you and your spouse are striving to be a domestic church.
- (2) How do you and your family live a sacramental life? Is that sacramental life reflected in your home? How could it be improved?
- (3) Do you and your family give testimony to your faith by witnessing to friends and acquaintances?

Holy Couples - Saints Aquila and Priscilla

Prayer of Married Couples (see last page)

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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.*