



Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time June 12, 2016 C

◆ Catechism Lesson 5: Mary; Last Things ◆ Strengthening the Marriage Bond

This Wednesday, June 8, at 7:00pm in the Parish Hall, my catechism session will focus on Mary and the Last Things.

- ◆ Why do Catholics pay so much attention to Mary?
- ◆ Why do Catholics believe in the *Perpetual Virginity of Mary*, her *Immaculate Conception*, her *Assumption into Heaven*, and that she is the *Mother of God and the Church*? Why do Catholics have these beliefs when they have little or no foundation in the Bible?
- ◆ Why is Mary called the first disciple and the Mother of the Church?

If we have time, we will look at Catholic teaching regarding the Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven, Hell and Purgatory.

TIME Magazine on Marriage

This past week, TIME magazine had a very good article on Marriage. The following are a few excerpts.

For those who can stay the course, indicators that a long marriage is worth the slog continue to mount. Studies suggest that married people have better health, wealth and even better sex lives than singles, and will probably die happier.

Most scholars agree that the beneficial health effects are robust: happily married people are less likely to have strokes, heart disease or depression, and they respond better to stress and heal more quickly. Mostly, the health effects apply only for happy marriages, but a study in May found that even a bad marriage was better for men with diabetes.

Married women's finances are generally more robust than divorced women's. "Historically, divorced women have had the highest poverty rates among all-aged women in the United States," says Barbara Butrica, a labor economist at the Urban Institute.

John Gottman, one of the nation's leading marriage researchers and educators, reports that older married couples tend to behave like younger married couples outside the bedroom too. "The surprising thing is that the longer people are together, the more the sense of kindness returns," he says. "Our research is starting to reveal that in later life, your relationship becomes very much like it was during courtship."

The biggest disincentive to divorce, however, may be

the same as one of the biggest drivers of divorce: kids. Many sociologists and therapists agree that kids from what are known as "intact marriages," as a whole, do better on most fronts than kids from divorced families, unless the marriage is very high-conflict. (It should be noted that therapists are clear that some marriages are just too toxic to sustain, and if a spouse is in physical danger, he or she must leave.) Not all children of divorce are the walking wounded their whole lives, but the stats are not encouraging.

Research suggests that in the long term, children of divorced parents are more at risk of being poor, being unhealthy, having mental illness, not graduating college and getting divorced themselves. It's true that being poor might be the cause of all the other adversities. Nevertheless, studies that have taken income into account still found that kids from divorced families face more challenges than those from parents who stayed married.

Factors that keep couples together

The things we don't know about what keeps people together are legion. But here are some of the things we do know: if people get married after about the age of 26, have college degrees, haven't already had kids or gotten pregnant, and are gainfully employed, they tend to stay married. If individuals form romantic partnerships with individuals who are similar to them in values and background, they find it easier to stay married. And the devout, by a slim but significant margin, get divorced slightly less often than people for whom faith is not a big deal.

But what's the trick once you're hitched? It's hard to do thorough scientific testing of what actually makes a marriage work, because of the ethics of experimenting with people's lives. But over the years, sociologist, psychologists and therapists have seen patterns emerging.

A big No, No—Avoid contempt at all costs

One constant is to avoid contempt at all costs. By contempt, therapists mean more than making derogatory remarks about a partner's desirability or earning power. It's also communicated by constant interruption, dismissal of their concerns or withdrawal from conversation.

Contempt, say therapists, sets off a lethal chain reaction. It kills vulnerability, among other things. Vulnerability is a prerequisite for intimacy. Without

intimacy, commitment is a grind. And without commitment, the whole enterprise goes pear-shaped.

Alas, contempt's favorite condition for breeding is familiarity. And you can't have a family without familiarity.

*How to avoid it? There are two main antidotes, says Gary Chapman, arguably the country's most successful marriage therapist. His book, *The 5 Love Languages*, has been on some version of the *New York Times* best-seller list for eight straight years. The first, obvious as it sounds, is to figure out what specifically makes your partner feel loved. (According to Chapman, it's probably one of five things: words, time, kindly acts, sex or gifts.) And the other is to learn to apologize—properly—and to forgive. Disagreements are inevitable and healthy, so learning to fight fair is essential; resentment is one of contempt's chief co-conspirators.*

A big help—shared interests

Shared interests can help offset the changes that relationships go through. "The most successful couples began to embrace one another's interests," says Pillemer. Since people are staying healthy longer, they can be active much longer. "We try to find everything we can think of that we really like to do together," Jimmy Carter has said, and his 70-year marriage to Rosalynn endured four years in a governor's mansion, one presidency, several failed campaigns and a passion for Trikkies, among other trails.

Finding the right soul mate is a myth

Another helpful adjustment is to drop the idea of finding a soul mate. "We have this mythological idea that we will find a soul mate and have these euphoric feelings forever," says Chapman. In fact, soul mates tend to be crafted, not found. "There are tens of thousands of people out there that anyone could be happily married to," says Gottman. "And each marriage would be different."

And how do you make a soul mate? Practice, practice, practice. Pillemer observed that long-married couples he interviewed always acted as if divorce was not an option. "People really had the mind-set they wanted to stay married," he says. They regarded their partnership as less like buying a new car and more like learning to drive. "Marriage is like a discipline," he says. "A discipline is not reaching one happy endpoint."

Sex and marriage dates

If all that discipline sounds a bit dreary, take heart, because the regimen includes bedroom calisthenics. A 2015 study found that sex once a week was the optimum amount for maximizing marital happiness. The Canadian researchers who analyzed data from three different studies found that sex played an even bigger role than money in happiness. The difference in life satisfaction between couples who had sex once a week and those who had it less than once a month was bigger than the

difference between those who had an annual income of \$50,000 to \$75,000 and those who had an annual income between \$15,000 and \$25,000.

Sex, of course, does not occur in a vacuum (unless that's the way both partners like it). Therapists urge couples not to let the kids keep them from going out. "It does not have to be huge swaths of time but bits or chunks," says Scott Stanley, a co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver. "Even something as simple as taking a walk together after dinner." This is not time to work out differences. "When they should be in fun and friendship mode, [some people] switch into problem and conflict mode. Don't mix modes."

Men more emotionally involved

*One of the more controversial ideas therapists are now suggesting is that men need to do more of the "emotional labor" in a relationship—the work that goes into sustaining love, which usually falls to women. "What we do in a relationship is, by a large margin, the crucial factor that separates a great relationship from a failed one," writes Gottman in his new book, *The Man's Guide to Women*. "This doesn't mean that a woman doesn't need to do her part, but the data proves that a man's actions are the key variable that determines whether a relationship succeeds or fails."*

Men are beginning to step up at home and value work-life balance almost as much as women. But recent scholarship has reinforced the value of old-school habits too—having family dinner and saying thank you actually make a difference.

Choose well

The one piece of advice every expert and nonexpert gives for staying married is perhaps the least useful one for those who are already several years in: choose well. The cascade of hormones that rains down on humans when they first fall in love, while completely necessary and wonderful, can sometimes blind individuals to their poor choices. Therapists suggest you ask friends about your prospective life mate and listen to them. Aim to find someone you know you'll love even during the periods when you don't like him or her so much.

And then, cross your fingers. As Grunwald puts it in an aphorism that may end up in a future marriage book "Just pick out a good one and get lucky."

Reflection questions

- ◆ What spoke to you most in the article?
- ◆ Was there anything you didn't like or disagreed with? If so, what?
- ◆ In your opinion, what factors strengthen marriages? What factors weaken marriages?

Book: *Promises to Keep—Developing the Skills of Marriage*

Over the years I have read many books on marriage. The abovenamed by Kathleen Fischer and Thomas Hart remains my favorite. Its content is described in the back cover of the book in the following way:

The aim of this book is to help couples cultivate the attitudes and skills needed for a happy marriage. In it the authors draw on their own married experience and those of the countless couples they have worked with in counseling and marriage enrichment events over many years. Incorporated here too are the best insights of religious and psychological writers on marriage.

The first chapter lays out the spiritual vision. Each succeeding chapter focuses on the practicalities, with the spirituality in the background. There are many brief vignettes drawn from married experience. Every chapter ends with an exercise designed to get the couple talking about their own relationship, celebrating their strengths and pinpointing areas of growth they would like to work on together. There are also suggestions for further reading on specific areas.

The book is written for a broad married audience: beginners, middle-agers, and seasoned veterans. It treats the stages of marital development with the challenges peculiar to each, as well as the constant issues of marital relating. Whether a couple is in crisis and feeling the need for help in navigating difficult terrain, or simply looking for something that will get them talking about all the important aspects of their relationship so that they can revitalize and deepen it, this book is filled with practical suggestions offered within the context of a spiritual vision.

Chapter 3 focuses on communicating well

Even though everyone says that the key to a successful marriage is good communication, I prefer to say the key is ‘commitment to the commitment.’ But obviously good communication is very important. The authors of the above mentioned book remind us that communication is more than words. We also communicate by silence, by tone of voice and volume, by facial and bodily expression. We communicate by leaving or not showing up, or by coming late.

The author of *Promises to Keep* names **nine important aspects of good communication**. They expand on each one (which I don’t have space for here).

1. Listen without interrupting.
2. Check to see if you have heard the message correctly before responding. “Is this what I heard you say...?”
3. Agree before you disagree. Don’t start with ‘But’; start with ‘Yes’ before you express how you differ.
4. Discuss one issue at a time. Resist getting sidetracked onto other issues.
5. When talking, mainly use “I—statements” rather than

“You—statements.” In other words, talk more about what is going on inside you rather than focusing on what you *think* is going on inside the other person.

6. Talk mainly about feelings rather than thoughts. Feelings focus on the heart, ideas on the head. If we stay in our heads, we will never get to the heart of the issue.

7. When talking, often use the words “seems” and “sometimes.” “Sometimes” and “not very often” are much easier to listen to than “always” and “never”— which are exaggerations. For example, “You never say you love me.”

8. Express the positive freely. Find ways to affirm your spouse. Affirmation builds up a relationship. Criticism tears down a person.

9. Express the negative in a gently way. Paul says “Speak the truth in love.”

Chapter 2 focuses on intimacy

The authors write: “The heart-to-heart sharing that constitutes genuine interpersonal intimacy does not come easily to most of us. It frightens us on several scores, and we shy away.”

The following are four factors that make intimacy difficult. The authors comment on each of the following nine points:

1. *When I open my heart, I make myself vulnerable.*
2. *If I get too close, I will be swallowed up.*
3. *I will be shattered if I lose what I love.*
4. *I have never experienced intimacy, and I simply don’t know how to get close.*

Helps to getting close

1. *Make a decision that you will seek and open yourself to intimacy, even though it entails hurts along the way, even though it sets you up for the pain of loss.*
2. *Push yourself across your threshold of comfort, and share what feels dangerously personal.*
3. *Keep your fear of rejection more manageable by starting with smaller, less threatening items.*
4. *Work on your partner a bit, if necessary, to help them be the kind of receiver you need.*
5. *Protect yourself from getting swallowed up by asserting yourself and by setting limits at appropriate points.*

Marital Intimacy Inventory

Read through these descriptions of the kinds of intimacy that deepen a marriage relationship. Then take time

for you and your spouse each to choose the one area where you are most satisfied with your relationship, and the area where you would most like to see your relationship grow. Share your selections with one another. Throughout the book you will find suggestions for developing these aspects of your marriage.

1. Commitment Intimacy: A sense of being “for” each other, trust, investment in the ongoing growth of the relationship.

2. Emotional Intimacy: Sharing of significant meanings and feelings, the touching of the innermost selves of two human beings.

3. Sexual Intimacy: Sensual-emotional satisfaction, the experience of physical sharing, pleasure, fun.

4. Intellectual Intimacy: Sharing the world of ideas, reading, discussing, studying.

5. Aesthetic Intimacy: Sharing experiences of beauty - music, nature, art, theater, dance, movies.

6. Creative Intimacy: Sharing in acts of creating together, parenting and other ventures, mutually feeding each other so that each can realize his/her potentialities as a person.

7. Recreational Intimacy: Relating in experiences of fun and play.

8. Work Intimacy: The closeness of sharing common tasks, such as maintaining a house and yard, raising a family, earning a living.

9. Crisis Intimacy: Closeness in coping with problems and pain, standing together in the major and minor tragedies of life.

10. Service Intimacy: Shared dedication to a common cause or value beyond the marriage.

11. Spiritual Intimacy: Sharing life meanings, faith, forgiveness, expressions of worship, awe, wonder.

12. Communication Intimacy: Shared vulnerability through mutual self-disclosure, receptive listening, acceptance and feedback.

13. Conflict Intimacy: Facing and working through differences to creative resolution and increased closeness.

14. Intimacy and Autonomy: Respect for the natural rhythm of intimacy and aloneness, accepting each

other’s need for privacy and solitude.

Reflection questions

1. If married, which of the above 14 types of intimacy do you share with your partner? Are there any other types of intimacy that you can think of?

2. Which type/s of intimacy do you not share with your spouse and would like to work on?

Have a blessed week,

