



MARRIAGE: OUR LOVE IS HERE TO STAY

The following is an interview with Mary Jo Pederson. She recently retired after twenty-five years on the staff of the Family Life Office of the Archdiocese of Omaha. She and her husband have been married for thirty-eight years. They have three grown children. This fall her book *For Better, For Worse, For God: Explaining the Holy Mystery of Marriage*, will be published by Loyola Press.

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How does the Catholic Church view marriage?

The church has a very positive vision of marriage as a happy, healthy, and holy life choice.

Today marriage is being questioned in all sorts of ways. Cohabitation is up; over a third of cohabiting couples have children in their homes, so they are moving ahead without marriage. In the past marriage gave women financial security; it offered the freedom to have sex and a place to have babies. Now people choose to have all those things without marriage.

The social sciences agree that marriage is really good for you. For men it equals giving up a pack of cigarettes a day in terms of health and life expectancy. **Married couples live longer, are wealthier, and have more satisfying sex lives than those who are single, divorced, or cohabiting. Children do better when parents are married.**

But what is truly unique about the church's view of marriage is that it is ultimately a pathway to salvation. Since the Second Vatican Council, the church has emphasized that in Baptism God calls everyone to holiness through different paths. God calls some people to marriage, a call that is equal in dignity to the call to the priesthood, to consecrated life, or to single life.

What value does the church's teaching on marriage offer couples?

What's lacking in our culture is a meaning system for marriage. What's the goal? If you looked at the secular world, you'd say the goal would be to have one of those vans with rear doors that open on both sides, a nice home, an investment portfolio, and the acceptance of your community. But people find that that runs out pretty fast, especially when you find out that the person you married is not perfect.

Catholic teachings on marriage function like three legs of a stool. The *first leg* is that marriage is a call to holiness. The church says the goal of being married is to

help you develop as a whole person in the image of Christ and to give and nurture life in cooperation with God. In marriage the call to holiness involves forging a common life, an "us" who can give life to the world.

The *second leg* is the idea that marriage is not simply a legal contract but also a covenant. A covenant is a solemn promise to one's spouse and to God to be faithful into an unknown future. It assures us that God is always with us in this grand enterprise that is married life.

The church calls people who make this covenant to two things: The first is to love faithfully and exclusively. And to love not simply in the secular sense, which is, "I'm attracted to you, you're my preference," but to love in the spiritual sense, which is, "I see good in you and I wish good for you."

We're also called to honor our spouse, which is actually to acknowledge that Christ lives in that person. Honoring is played out in everyday life when couples respect and accept one another unconditionally. I've never met a couple who thinks this is an easy thing to do since there are no perfect spouses or marriages.

The *third leg* is the teaching that marriage is a sacrament, a sign of God's love in the world. When you see spouses who are faithful through the ups and downs of life and who love unselfishly and forgive graciously, you catch a glimpse of what God's love must be like.

How do cultural values challenge that view?

We live in a consumer society. The consumer attitude is that marriage is about acquiring a wife or a husband, a home, children, and all the accoutrements that go with that. Your success is based on how much you acquire.

We also live in a "me first" culture. When you are not happy or you don't feel your needs are met, you find someone else who can satisfy your needs.

What does the church offer instead?

Practically speaking, the church offers married couples a supportive community that believes in lifelong marriage in the midst of a culture that doesn't. It offers sacraments that heal and strengthen couples throughout their lives, especially the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist.

It offers a different lens through which to view the ups and downs of married life. When we look through this lens, we ask questions like: What is God calling me to today? How are we building a relationship that's going to give life to the world?

You talk about how the Paschal Mystery relates to marriage. Can you explain what you mean?

Christ's dying and rising to new life is profoundly embedded in the seasons of a marriage.

After a few years of marriage my husband and I had our first child. We had to die, in a way, to much of the free time and sleep and money we enjoyed before we became parents, but we had begun an exciting and new phase of our lives.

When the babies grew up, there were many dyings and risings in our parenting years as we let go of preconceived ideas and grew into enjoying what each of our kids was becoming.

After the last child left home, we left behind the many activities and some of the friends that came with parenting, and there was another crossing over to empty nest life, which I think is God's reward for not killing off your children. It's really wonderful and it's not like going back to the beginning of marriage, either. It's a new married life full of possibilities.

These transitions I've mentioned can also be some of the most dangerous times for marriages. Studies show that marital satisfaction tends to plummet for most couples at the birth of the first child. That's why I think parishes need to have baptismal programs with marriage education to explain how to nurture the marriage after children.

How does Catholic tradition view the roles of men and women in marriage?

The Catholic Church teaches the radical equality of men and women in its vision of the marriage covenant. That doesn't mean sameness. It means that each reflects the divine in different ways. While some of our evangelical brothers and sisters maintain that men have a greater spiritual responsibility for the twosome, that's not a Catholic teaching.

Mutuality in marriage has to do with more than roles based on gender. It has to do with the discernment of gifts. My job is to help Dave increase his natural gifts and develop some gifts that he doesn't have. That's his job with me, too.

For instance, I'm a feeler. Dave's a thinker. I'm Italian; he's Danish. He's very calm, and I'm very emotional. I'm spontaneous, and he's a planner. After 38 years, I've learned about planning from him, and he is much better at being spontaneous. Our partnership is strengthened by our differences.

In your book you talk about the spiritual disciplines of marriage. What are you referring to?

Spiritual disciplines are actions taken to promote community and to honor or worship God. All vocations have spiritual disciplines. For example, in the monastic life monks get up early to pray. It's a way to worship God, but it's also part of their common life.

Like all vocations, marriage has many of these disciplines, and they may be different for each couple.

Can you give an example?

When we had three small children, I quit my job to be home with them. My husband is a natural introvert, but he's a lawyer, so all day he'd be talking, and he needed to have some quiet when he came home.

He used to come in, kiss me hello, the kids would grab him, but then he'd walk upstairs to change and close the bedroom door.

I was upset by that. Well, eventually we talked about this, trying to describe how we felt and what we needed, and he agreed to spend 15 minutes before going upstairs to change so the kids and I could download our day and reconnect with him.

I call that the discipline of doorway patience. It's a way of yielding to the needs of the family, of putting aside self-gratification for the benefit of the beloved or of the community. It may not sound like a great spiritual activity. But I maintain that when you practice the discipline of doorway patience, you honor God because you are loving in a radical way for the good of another.

That sounds like what you might find in a popular book about how to succeed in marriage.

There is a relationship between what the social sciences are doing to promote long-lasting, satisfying marriages and what the church is doing to promote sacramental, covenantal marriages.

Social-science-based marriage education promotes skills. I think the church is recognizing the connection between relationship skills and virtue. What starts as a skill can become a virtue, and virtue is one of the pathways to holiness.

For instance, the big push in secular marriage education has always been for improved communication skills. Learn to listen to your spouse; give feedback so they know you've heard them; don't interrupt or be thinking about your response before they're done talking; really acknowledge that you understand.

You simply cannot have "a partnership of love and life," which is John Paul II's definition of marriage, unless you do these things. If you're talking to each other in disrespectful ways or if you're resolving conflicts by fighting like cats and dogs, then you're not going to be able to achieve the communion that is promised in marriage. You have to learn some skills first.

The bishops' initiative on marriage established the website ForYourMarriage.com, which has references to some really good material on marriage.

But we could do so much more in reaching young couples. Two of my children just got married, and I ended up getting endless emails from the wedding preparation website theknot.com; after the wedding was over I received emails from thenest.com, which featured stuff about decorating, entertaining, and sex in marriage. Where is the church in all of this? Our theology is in a book somewhere, but our beliefs also need to have a presence on the Internet, where the young people are.

What could parishes do differently?

Some parishes are doing a creative job of supporting marriage. They offer classes, days of reflection, marriage programs, couple groups, and marriage anniversary celebrations. But it's difficult to get parishes to establish ongoing marriage education and support because the awareness isn't raised yet that this is a necessary part of a long-term, satisfying marriage.

The church has a serious responsibility to do this because it's the only place where people are being asked to stay married forever. At the altar we say, "This is for life," and then we send couples out without any tools to help achieve that goal. There are many excellent programs that can be offered in parishes with little effort.

A priest gets five to seven years of formation; a sister gets five to eight years. A marriage gets 12 to 20 hours of formation if couples make an Engaged Encounter. That's the formation for 50 years of marriage! It doesn't make sense.

Besides, couples can't do all the formation before the marriage. The challenges of marriage change over time. At each life stage there has to be another opportunity to do an in-service and to be reminded of the meaning of marriage in the Catholic sense.

Have you sensed a lot of resistance to marriage education from couples?

Not so much resistance as lack of awareness of how much it can help and lack of time to do it. There is a stigma to marriage education that's never existed for continuing professional education. If you're an accountant, when the new tax code comes out, you spend a week in a seminar figuring it out. If you attend a marriage enrichment event, people used to say, "Are you guys having trouble?"

I think we'll run into resistance for 10 or 20 years, but if the church sticks with it, we'll have a structure for ongoing support of and formation for marriage.

How do you see the connection between spirituality and sexuality within marriage?

Most couples don't feel that the bedroom is the place where they have the potential for being truly holy. There's still a sense that you shouldn't talk about your sexual relationship, let alone relate it to your spiritual life or God. The church has trouble talking about pleasure and acknowledging that sexual intimacy is not just procreative and unitive but also fun. It feels good. It makes you feel completely alive. You are drawn out of yourself—and that is a deeply spiritual experience.

So the way I like to talk about it is this. The capacity for sexual intimacy, particularly intercourse, is a gift from God and has a profound capacity to image God. When done well, it is a gift of self to the other.

Therefore it's an important part of a couple's spiritual life to be good at that. I don't mean "good" in the sex manual sense, but to be of one mind about it, to find a pattern of lovemaking and sexual togetherness that bonds

them. It's hard for some couples to recognize that God created sexual loving and that in marriage God draws us together into a communion of life in this very pleasurable way.

Part of a couple's spiritual task is to work on their sexual union, to talk about what it takes so that they become 'one flesh' physically as well as emotionally and spiritually.

Unfortunately, what usually happens if a couple's sex life isn't going great, it just gets shoved under the rug. Research shows that there are a lot of sexless marriages out there because people are tired, they can't find the time, and they feel disconnected. If a couple doesn't appreciate the centrality of their love life, they're missing a big part of sacramental marriage.

Do you ever find that using religious language about sex sometimes makes it sound a little overspiritualized?

It depends on what you mean by "overspiritualized." Nothing is outside the embrace of God, even our most intimate and secret moments. Pope John Paul II said that married sex is sacramental because it images the love Christ has for his church. This flies in the face of a cultural notion of sex as recreation, as a "right" that everyone has.

The pope didn't follow it up with, "So in your sex life, work at being self-giving and generous." It's lay theologians and laity themselves living in Catholic marriages who need to say, "This is what sacramental sex means in our life."

The bishops aren't going to talk about the details of married sex life, like the fact that a man needs to engage in a certain degree of foreplay to make it possible for his wife to enter into this union in a way that is energizing for her, and how that can become a spiritual discipline of his. They could say that, but I don't think it's their job to say things like that. It's our job.

It seems the strongest message we hear from the church about sex is that it's for creating a family. This message of yours sounds just as important.

Our children have been an amazing gift to our married relationship, and as young adults, they still are. **If marriage is a school of love, as John Paul called it, having children is graduate studies.** Children stretch our capacity for love and self-giving beyond anything we could imagine. Most couples discover that being open to life and raising children is an advanced placement course in learning to love as God does.

But it's important for the church to also encourage couples to pay attention to and nurture the unitive dimension of their sex life because it also gives life, just in a different way.

Making love is just that; it makes more love in the house, in the world. I remember a couple telling me about a time when the husband was unemployed, and how hard it was on his self-esteem. He remembered when they made love during that period, his wife's total acceptance of him

gave him encouragement and renewed energy to continue to search for a job.

How can couples work some of the church's teachings on marriage into their own relationship?

Couples can consider church teachings on marriage as something we can work toward, even if we're obviously not perfect. It gives meaning to our efforts.

Of course, some days we're there and some days we're just not. You wake up some mornings and you look over and you say, what was I thinking? That's part of it, too.

Christ is present in those very mundane, even disappointing moments of married life.

That's incarnational thinking, and if you haven't been schooled in it, it's hard to see that forgiving your spouse for leaving the car in the garage on empty for the fourth time is bringing Christ's forgiveness into the world. It's actually a holy act.

When you forgive somebody for something they did that hurt you or caused you inconvenience, you are being Christ to that person. You're not going to think that way unless you really believe you have the capacity to image God in the world.

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A Father's poem to his daughter on her wedding.

(The wedding day was postponed for six months due to the bride's cancer.) This poem was written by Jack Corcoran, a parishioner.

My Dearest Jessica,

May 9, 2008

I've been fretting for the past few days, wondering what I could say; to best express my feelings on this your wedding day.

I couldn't be happier for you and for Gavin for the joy in your hearts and the love that you have. A spark in your eyes let me know from the start; this young man from Ireland had captured your heart.

The beginning of your marriage was delayed by tribulation; but you weathered it together, now it's part of your foundation. If I ever had the slightest doubt, you two were meant to be, the way that lad took care of you, was proof enough for me.

The rest of your life's journey, from today into tomorrow; will surely have more ups and downs and be paved with joy and sorrow. But those hardships that we all must face will never undermine us; if we accept them as a part of life, but not let them define us.

So today let's just be thankful and filled with exultation; we're with our friends and family and primed for a celebration. Let's share this time together and focus on today; let's tip a few, and share a meal, then dance the night away.

And all the while be thankful for the blessings we hold dear. For all those in our midst today and those we wish were here.

I'm thankful to the Crowley's for raising such a man and I'm happy that our families are together once again. I'm thankful to your mother, for my daughter and my son; Whose love's been most responsible for the people we've become.

So finally now my little squirt, it's time to close this rhyme and tell you that I love you now' and till the end of time. You're with me and you'll always be' alive here right inside of me.

*And when I miss your freckled face,
I'll know you're in a perfect place;
And for that my girl I'm truly glad.*

And I remain: Yours truly, Dad

A Happy Father's Day to all our dads.

Have a blessed week,

