

FROM THE PASTOR'S



27th Sunday in Ordinary Time, October 8, 2006 B

SMART MARRIAGES -ANNULMENT QUESTIONS

About ten years ago, I attended a National Conference on “Smart Marriages”. The conference was hosted by an organization called *Coalition for Marriage, Family & Couples Education*. Participants included therapists, clergy, policy makers and anyone interested in having a smart marriage and happy family.

The following are some excerpts from an interview of the director of Smart Marriages. In my humble opinion she makes a lot of good points:

What is this “Smart Marriage” thing about?

It's the idea that marriage is skill-based. Like football. The way we have it set up now a couple gets married and we send them out there to win based on “Love and commitment.” That's like asking a football team to win on team spirit—“for the Gipper” - but not letting them learn any plays or signals. No skills at all—just win on love. The basis for a smart marriage is exciting new research that finds that what is different about the marriages that make it—that go the distance and stay happy—are behaviors and skills. And even more exciting they are simple skills that any fool can learn.

After speaking a bit about the courses the organization offers and the skills they teach, the interviewer continues:

So, it's all about skills? Actually it sounds like it's about learning how to fight.

Yes, and no. It is all about skills. One great skill in all relationships, even friendships, is knowing how to manage conflict. The couples that stay happy don't start out richer, better looking, more passionate, or more committed. And, remarkably, they disagree about just as many things—and the same things as the couples that divorce. It turns out all couples fight about all the same things! Money, time, housework, sex, priorities, the kids, etc. How they handle the inevitable disagreements is crucial and the best predictor of divorce. But as John Gottman pointed out in his :Report From the Love Lab” there are also equally important skills for expressing admiration and appreciation for each other and for accepting influence from each other.

These courses are for engaged couples or newlyweds? The idea is to learn how to do it right in the beginning?

Yes, they're great for couples just starting out. But these are relationship skills — and at any stage of the game. Long-married couples with serious problems can learn skills to sort things out and, in doing so, can fall back in love. And long-married couples without problems should

*rush out and sign up. It's a great way to celebrate an anniversary—to make a good thing even better—and keep things zipping along. It turns out you can teach an old dog new tricks. Both genders. The research finds that the challenge isn't our gender differences so much as it is the new challenges and demands faced by both men and women. As Peggy Papp puts it, it's not that men are from Mars and women from Venues, it's that we're all from Earth—and all the rules are changing. “All couple today are pioneers—whether they're newlywed or long-married—as they try to work out the demands of two-earner, time pressured lives.” In designing her course, *Maintaining A Loving Relationship*, she asked herself what couples need in order to make it. “These exercises help couples learn very simple skills to open a new dialogue with each other, open up new pathways.” That sums it up—our new optimism about marriage. And about self-help marriage education. People are sick of leaving it up to chance—they're ready to become proactive about making their relationships last.*

The lady being interviewed said that the only wedding gift that she now gives is the gift of a course on marriage. What a wonderful suggestion.

What are nine things you'd tell couples—pointers from the conference—about how to have a smart marriage?

1. It's not differences but how you handle them that separates the successful marriage from the failures. Disagreement isn't predictive of divorce. Fighting isn't predictive of divorce. Stonewalling, avoidance, disengagement, contempt, criticism and silent treatment are.

2. Marriage does matter—it affects your health, wealth, sexual satisfaction and your kids.

3. All couples have approximately ten issues they will never resolve—if you switch partners you'll just get ten new issues, and they are likely to be more complicated the second time around. What's important is to develop a dialogue or “dance” with your particular set of issues—as you would with a chronic bad back or trick knee. You don't like them, you wish they weren't there, but you keep talking about them and learn how to live with and accommodate them.

4. Love is not absolute, a truth, or a limited substance—that you're in it or out of it. It's a feeling that ebbs and flows depending on how you treat each other. If you learn new ways to interact, the feelings can come flowing back, often stronger than before.

5. Remember that marital satisfaction often drops with the

birth of a baby, and with each successive birth—that's normal. Marital satisfaction is at its lowest when there are kids in the house between 11 and 16. That's normal. Hang in there. Satisfaction goes back up with the empty nest—the final stage of marriage, the last third, is the real honeymoon period.

6. Sex ebbs and flows, comes and goes. That's normal. Enjoy the flows. Creating good marital sex isn't about putting the sizzle back into your sex life. Early marital sex is sex between strangers—you don't know your partner or yourself at that point. It's not about going back—it's about going forward. Passionate sex is based on knowing your partner and letting them know you. Intimate sex is passionate sex.

7. Repair attempts are crucial—highly predictive of marital happiness. They can be clumsy or funny, even sarcastic—but this willingness to make up after an argument or fight is central to every happy marriage.

8. Welcome, embrace and integrate change. Learn ways to discuss and update your wishes, hopes, dreams, your desires and beliefs. On a regular basis. We too often interview each other before marriage and then think "that's it." The marriage vow is a promise to stay married, not to stay the same.

9. Take a different marriage education course or read a book on marriage every year. Become an informed consumer and rate the courses, discuss with your partner which you liked best, which ones you think helped you the most. The courses don't tell you what kind of marriage to have—that's up to the two of you. They give you the tools—the hammers, screwdrivers and levels—so you can build the kind of marriage that suits you and which can help you negotiate and renegotiate your own value and meaning.

I am sure as believers we would add the faith dimension to the above nine points. Every couple would be wise to pray daily for their marriage. "Lord, help me to be a loving and caring spouse this day to N. . . ."

Reflection Questions

- What spoke to you most in the above article?
- What one step might you and your spouse take to strengthen your marriage?

Marital Infidelity

The news that one's spouse has been unfaithful has to be one of the most **devastating** and painful experiences in life. Sometimes it destroys a marriage, but sometimes it is a catalyst for a whole new chapter in a marriage relationship. If you would like to read some very interesting articles on marital affairs, order a copy of the March/April 2000 issue of the magazine, **Marriage**. The telephone number is 1-800-627-7424. One article states some affairs are intended to say, "The marriage is over,"

while others are intended to create a crisis so that one can get one's spouse's full attention. The magazine states that the latest research says that, of those who have affairs, 76% remain married. That is good news.

Three web sites.

smartmarriages.com, offers a host of resources. The following are three:

- **Association for couples in Marriage Enrichment. (It may be a different name now. Web—www.bettermarriages.org.**
- **Before you Divorce—strong medicine for failing marriages.** This course contains five video sessions providing a "reality check" for couples considering divorce. For more information see, www.beforeyoudivorce.org. Also see page 8 of this bulletin regarding information on *Divorce Care Recovery Seminar*.
- **Building Successful Stepfamily. For more information see www.successfulstepfamilies.com**

Our Diocese hosts a **Marriage Encounter weekend** about ten times a year. The purpose of the weekend is to "make good marriages better

Our Diocese also hosts a **Retrouvaille Weekend** for crisis marriages. The next one is October 20-22, 2006. For more information call 407-977-8126 web site at retrouvaille.org. All calls are confidential.

Annulments

If you think you are excommunicated because you are in a second marriage not blessed by a priest or deacon, you are incorrect, I wish you would come see me or email me on this issue. If you presently do not go to Holy Communion because of a marriage outside the church or for some other reason, I also wish you would come see me or email me.

Next weekend, Fr. Fred Ruse will speak at all of the Masses about our **Sister Diocese in the Dominican Republic**. See insert on Sister Diocese in today's bulletin. A second collection will be taken for an education project, which Father will speak about. If you kept your Sister Diocese envelope from July '06, you can place your donation in that envelope. Checks made out to Ascension Catholic and in memo: Sister Diocese

In Christ,

