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## Matrimonial Love

A new article in the series on married love. "The effort to love is the effort to give ourselves more to the other person each day. Since true love implies dying to our own self-interest, it doesn't come easily."

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**By John & Joann Ooi**

*They say, love is blind. Marriage is the eye-opener.*

*What do you do when you don't like what you now see?*

## **Joann:**

The eye-opening may take place soon after marriage, when the heady emotions have subsided. Or with 'distractions' such as focusing on career or raising the children, it may come many years later.

## **John:**

When you don't like what you see, it is timely to rediscover some old truths. And what are these?

We were created by God for a purpose, to share the joy and happiness of Heaven with Him eternally. This means that in our journey through life, we are invited to love God more each day and thus grow in holiness. For those of us called to the vocation of marriage, this love of God is expressed

primarily through our spouse and family.

In his apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Pope St John Paul II stated that holiness is not only a state but a task, whereby Christians should strive for a full Christian life, imitating Jesus Christ who gave his life for each one of us (cf. nos. 30-31).

*The invitation to live in the married state which we had earlier accepted is closely and naturally tied to the invitation to be holy.*

### **Joann:**

Another truth to rediscover is the meaning of love. The ancient Greeks had four terms to describe different types of love (eros, storge, philia, agape). The highest form, agape love, is unconditional love which accepts the other person as he/she

is, despite the flaws and faults, and which gives while expecting nothing in return. In its essence, love is a verb, that is, self-sacrificial actions that we choose to take irrespective of the feelings.

### **John:**

The effort to love is the effort to give ourselves more to the other person each day. Since true love implies dying to our own self-interest, it doesn't come easily.

We have had our share of difficult times in our 3 decades of marriage. During these times, it has been helpful to keep in mind 'the big picture' – our destination and the meaning of our lives. In short, it is to work towards achieving the joy of heaven eventually through learning to love God, our spouse, family and neighbour more each day on earth.

St Josemaria Escrivá put it this way, "Christian couples should be aware that they are called to sanctity themselves and to sanctify others, that they are called to be apostles and that their first apostolate is in the home. They should understand that founding a family, educating their children, and exercising a Christian influence in society, are supernatural tasks. The effectiveness and the success of their life – their happiness – depends to a great extent on their awareness of their specific mission." (*Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá*, 91)

## **Joann:**

Faithful married love is heroic as it takes a lot of continual and persistent hard work. We would like to share with you some simple ideas which we found useful to live by in

those difficult periods when we had thorns in our relationship that threatened to overshadow our whole marriage.

## ***Look After Yourself***

**Joann:**

Although we love and recognised how important God is in our marriage and even though we have a lot in common, we quickly realised in the early years of our marriage how different we both were. We did not see eye to eye on many issues big and small (e.g. money, discipline of our kids, how we celebrate birthdays, Christmas, our wedding anniversaries, planning our holiday itineraries). During these disagreements, we tried to force the other to conform to our own views. This usually just led to more arguments and a deterioration in

our relationship. The reality is that we will only change if we want to. What is within our control in the situation is ourselves. We can adapt and change our own attitude and be more open to each other. I decided to change my attitudes towards John in many areas of our relationship. Eventually he responded by changing too.

### **John:**

To change our attitudes without resentment, we need to give attention to looking after ourselves in the different aspects. We can't give peace and joy to our family when we don't have it ourselves. When we are healthy and well (in the different aspects of our being – physical, mental, emotional, social, spiritual), we have a greater capacity for adapting and handling difficulties.

One good way I've learnt to improve my well-being is to count my blessings - especially for the gift of my family (yes, including Joann when she is being 'ever so difficult'). Gratitude is strongly related to life satisfaction. Observe your friends – have you noticed that grateful persons are less complaining, and are happier and more optimistic?

Try this out for a week: Each day, give thanks to God for three blessings in your life.

### **Joann:**

I try to look after myself by: keeping healthy and fit through exercise (physical), reading or learning something new (mental), keeping in touch with my friends (emotional / social), maintaining my prayer life and regular confession (spiritual). You may not have time to do all of

them each week, but over a period, you should be doing something in each area to look after oneself.

A word of caution – if you want advice about how to deal with difficulties in your marriage, get it only from persons who really care for you and who believe in marriage as a life-long commitment. Careless opinions from the wrong advisers can cause you to make poor decisions that you will eventually regret.

### ***Communication With The Heart***

**Joann:**

All counsellors would stress the importance of communication to maintain or rebuild a relationship. However, exchanging views and words over a contentious matter does not equate to communication –

communication is more than talking. What is more important is to listen and to *communicate with the heart*, with understanding and empathy for the other, irrespective of whether the views and feelings expressed are logical.

### **John:**

For example, Joann is more expressive verbally than I am. When she comes home from work she wants to talk about the events at work and vent her frustrations. I on the other hand prefer to sit through dinner quietly reflecting the events of the day. Joann gets upset when I am inattentive and appear uninterested. Not only that, when I hear her talk about her problems, I tend to go into problem-solving mode and suggest solutions. Many times she didn't need my solutions – she knew what she should do. I have

learnt that what she really wanted is someone to listen and to provide emotional support.

**Joann:**

At other times, when we are in the midst of a quarrel, compromise solutions are brought up. They seem logical solutions to John and he makes an intellectual case for them, but they don't speak to my heart and I don't find them palatable or reasonable.

**John:**

In or even before the discussion, we must also be aware of whether we are unthinkingly operating in attack mode. When a relationship is going through a difficult time, there is a tendency to interpret words, actions and intentions negatively. To communicate better we need to be

aware of how past experiences are affecting our openness to each other. Little fruitful discussion can take place when one or both spouses are in attack mode, so we have to anticipate and create the favourable conditions to have a meaningful and rational discussion. This may mean postponing further discussion to a better time, or discussing the approach to be taken even before we dive into the issue itself. Or it may mean making EBA deposits (see next section) to build up the openness and affection that allows communication with the heart.

### **Joann:**

In many marriages, there is one simple ingredient that has gone missing without the couple realising

it – gentleness. What is this?

Gentleness is:

- not yelling at your spouse when you are angry
- not gloating when you are right
- being patient
- giving the benefit of the doubt to your spouse
- saying “please” and “thank you”

**John:**

Gentleness gives a certain tone to the relationship. Another way to think about communication is to ask, *is there gentleness and affection in your verbal and non-verbal communication?*

***Growing in Love Through Little Things***

## **Joann:**

We've also notice that after some years of marriage many couples tend to be laissez-faire about maintaining their relationship. They stop making an effort to grow in love. To help our relationship keep growing, we have found the concept of Emotional Bank Account (EBA) helpful.

## **John:**

We are all familiar with financial bank accounts – we deposit or withdraw money from our account with a bank, and if we have a healthy positive bank balance, we have financial strength to work towards attaining our goals. EBA represents the quality of the relationship – making a deposit is doing the things that build trust, and making a withdrawal is each action

that reduces trust. If I have a healthy positive emotional bank balance with you, there is trust and we can work at solving our problems. On the other hand, a low or even overdrawn balance means that there is low or no trust, so that real communication is difficult.

It is easier to build up a healthy EBA through many small deposits rather than a few large deposits.

How do I make an EBA deposit into Joann's account? Little things like:

- spending time with Joann on an activity that she enjoys or just listening to her
- keeping my word or a promise I made
- saying thanks or showing appreciation to her for keeping the house pleasant, warm and homely to live in

- apologizing for my part in that quarrel in which both of us blew up.

## **Joann:**

Some examples of EBA withdrawal would be:

- flaring up or giving in to quick-temperedness
- not valuing or denigrating your spouse's views or opinions;
- using the cell phone when having a meal with your spouse; and
- belittling or criticizing your spouse in front of other family members or friends.

With consistent and regular EBA deposits, however small, trust develops and the relationship strengthens.

## **John:**

St Josemaria Escrivá said, "The secret of married happiness lies in everyday things, not in daydreams. It lies in finding the hidden joy of coming home in the evening, in affectionate relations with their children, in the everyday work in which the whole family cooperates; in good humour in the face of difficulties that should be met with a sporting spirit; in making the best use of all the advantages that civilisation offers to help us rear children, to make the house pleasant and life more simple." (*Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá*, 91)

At the closing Mass of the 8<sup>th</sup> World Meeting of Families in September 2015, Pope Francis said something very similar, "Like happiness, holiness is always tied to little

gestures. These little gestures ... are little signs of tenderness, affection and compassion. Like the warm supper we look forward to at night, the early lunch awaiting someone who gets up early to go to work. Homely gestures. ... Like a hug after we return from a hard day's work. Love is shown by little things, by attention to small daily signs which make us feel at home."

### **Joann:**

Try this out for one week: Make an effort to do one little thing each day for your spouse that is an EBA deposit. (As EBA involves a subjective element, there is need to discern what constitutes a deposit or withdrawal for your spouse.)

### ***Conclusion***

## **John:**

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states "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." (No. 1604)

Think of it like this. Our God-given role in marriage is to unfailingly support, lovingly challenge, and persistently encourage each other to become what God created us to be in His plan of love, helping each other to become saints on the way to heaven.

## **Joann:**

Keeping the promise made on our wedding day to love our spouse for better or for worse, in good times

and in bad is not easy. There is need to struggle to be faithful to one's vocation of marriage. But it is in the struggle to be faithful to matrimonial love that we will find God and find joy.

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