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Keep the Fire Burning

A new article in the series on married love. "Marriage requires effort! It is a constant beginning again and again. Do not take love for granted. Make a joyful gift of yourself to your spouse."

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Our deepest craving is to be loved. God is LOVE par excellence. "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.”[1]

Marital love is total, exclusive, permanent and fruitful – a real gift to each other, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, "till death do us part." By human standards one might say it is an impossible reality. However, “for a Christian, marriage is not just a social institution, much less a mere remedy for human weakness. It is a real supernatural calling. A great sacrament, in Christ and in the Church, says St Paul.”[2] It is a vocation to love our spouse just as Christ loves his Bride, the Church, and to aim for the heights of love and communion.[3] “Husband and wife are called to sanctify their married

life and to sanctify themselves in it.”[4]

Every loving intention, thought and gesture takes on meaning and supernatural value. “A married couple should build their life together on the foundation of a sincere and pure affection for each other, and on the joy that comes from having brought into the world the children God has enabled them to have. They should be capable of renouncing their personal comfort; and they should put their trust in the providence of God.”[5]

For Christians, it takes three to get married: husband, wife and God. Their covenant provides a solid footing for family life. God becomes the anchor and wellspring of their love. Feelings are not the compass point. Love is a choice shown by deeds. Real love knows how to sacrifice for the beloved. As St.

Josemaria says, “Our faith does not ignore anything on this earth that is beautiful, noble and authentically human. It simply teaches us that the rule of our life should not be the pursuit of pleasure, because only sacrifice and self-denial lead to true love. God already loves us; and now He invites us to love Him and others with the truthfulness and selfless authenticity with which He loves.”[6]

He goes on to insist “that marriage is a great and marvelous divine path. Like everything divine in us, it calls for response to grace, generosity, dedication and service.”[7]

Whether you have been married two months or twenty years, you need to be constantly falling in love with your spouse. There is no automatic pilot. All marriages need continual nurturing and fine tuning. Marriage is hard work, and requires overcoming the conflicts that will

arise. You did not marry the wrong person, just a different person.

“Couples have the grace of the married state – the grace they receive in the Sacrament of Marriage – which enables them to live all the human and Christian virtues in their married life: understanding, good humor, patience, forgiveness, refinement and consideration in their mutual relations. The important thing is not to give up the effort, not to give in to nerves, pride or personal fads or obsessions. In order to achieve this, husbands and wives must grow in interior life and learn from the Holy Family to live with refinement – for supernatural and at the same time human reasons – the virtues of a Christian home. I repeat again that the grace of God will not be lacking.”[8]

Keeping romance alive ensures the couple’s affections don’t cool or wander elsewhere. When children

are small, neither energy, time, nor money seem to be available. Yet strengthening their marriage must remain a central concern since “parents teach their children mainly through their own conduct. What a son or daughter looks for in a father or mother is not only a certain amount of knowledge or some more or less effective advice, but primarily something more important: a proof of the value and meaning of life, shown through the life of a specific person, and confirmed in the different situations and circumstances that occur over a period of time.”[9]

Your marital love has a deep impact on your family. It creates an emotional template for all other intimate relationships your children will have. When parents give priority to their marriage, much of their parenting is taken care of. As St. Josemaria said, “theirs is a home full

of light and cheerfulness. The unity between the parents is transmitted to their children, to the whole family, and to everyone who is involved in their life.”[10] Family is the basic cell of society and a school of virtues. From parents, children learn to love, forgive, share, care and bear burdens out of love. When the family is strong, society is strong. Herein lies the way for the future evangelization.

Marriage is the first gospel children “read.” They will know you are Christians by your love. Actions speak louder than words. St. Paul says, “Charity is patient, is kind; charity feels no envy; charity is never perverse or proud, never insolent; does not claim its rights, cannot be provoked, does not brood over an injury; takes no pleasure in wrongdoing, but rejoices at the victory of truth; sustains, believes, hopes, endures, to the last.”[11] Struggle to

make this a reality. Write down all your spouse's positive qualities. How often do you applaud these strengths? Maybe write a love letter. See Christ in your beloved.

You also need to be Christ for your spouse. Do not let work, children or life drain you so they get only leftovers. Conserve time and energy for your spouse. Set better limits. Love must be experienced in meaningful ways. Your spouse needs to hear it, feel it, and experience it many times. Consciously express love through your words, physical touch, acts of service, quality time together and surprise gifts. Marriage requires effort! There are no quick fixes, no magic wands. It is a constant beginning again and again. Do not take love for granted. Make a joyful gift of yourself to your spouse. "Do everything for Love. Thus there will be no little things: everything

will be big. Perseverance in little things for Love is heroism.”[12]

Marriage calls us to an enduring love. Study your spouse. Listen to the non-verbals. Unity is not the same as equality. Nurture a unity of values, but do not confuse unity with uniformity. Know what makes your spouse tick and what ticks them off. Focus on constructing and complimenting, rather than complaining and criticizing. True love is sacrifice. Marriage is not giving your spouse a makeover, but loving each other with your defects. Approach each other with respect, gentleness and understanding to fuel your marriage.

Make time for each other. Fifteen minutes here, an hour there, an evening together, an overnight getaway at some point. Let marriage take priority over parenting, work, and friends because it is your

vocation. Keep your love young: your tone of voice, your thoughtfulness, your kindness, your generosity. Sprinkle surprises into the week. “To be happy, what you need is not an easy life but a heart which is in love.”^[13] A successful marriage depends on how well you know your spouse’s needs and how well you meet them. Carve out the time – in the morning over coffee, after supper, walks together, romantic interludes, shared interests, or a planned date night.

Couples do well to keep their love aflame and grow in the knowledge of Christian living. “They have been called by God to form a home, to love one another always, to love each other with the love of their youth. Anyone who thinks that love ends when the worries and difficulties that life brings with it begin, has a poor idea of marriage, which is a sacrament and an ideal and a

vocation. It is precisely then that love grows strong. Torrents of worries and difficulties are incapable of drowning true love because people who sacrifice themselves generously together are brought closer by their sacrifice. As Scripture says, a host of difficulties, physical and moral, cannot extinguish love (*Cant* 8:7).”[14]

Husband and wife “are called to grow continually in their communion through day-to-day fidelity to their marriage promise of total mutual self-giving.”[15] Play your part in salvation history by sanctifying your marriage and family life. In doing so, you will help build the civilization of love.

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- [1] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1604.
- [2] St. Josemaria Escriva, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 23.
- [3] See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1616 and 1617.
- [4] St. Josemaria Escriva, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 23.
- [5] St. Josemaria Escriva, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 25.
- [6] St. Josemaria Escriva, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 24.
- [7] *Conversations with Monsignor Escriva de Balaguer*, no. 93.
- [8] *Conversations with Monsignor Escriva de Balaguer*, no. 108.
- [9] St. Josemaria Escriva, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 28.

[10] St. Josemaria Escriva, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 30.

[11] *1 Cor* 13:4-7.

[12] St. Josemaria Escriva, *The Way*, no. 813.

[13] St. Josemaria Escriva, *The Way*, no. 795.

[14] *Conversations with Monsignor Escriva de Balaguer*, no. 91.

[15] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1644.