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"Never stop working on your marriage"

Emily Marcucci, a Harvard grad from Massachusetts who has been married for 15 years and has 8 children, talks about the challenges and joys of raising a large family.

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Tell us a little about yourself and your family. What do you do, and what does your husband do?

My husband, Michael Marcucci, is a trial lawyer and a partner at Jones

Day, a global law firm, in its Boston office. I am at home with our 8 children – Madeline, 14, John, 11, Theresa, 9, Josephine, 8, Anthony, 6, James, 4 and Thomas, 4, and Anne, 11 months.

When you were dating and getting to know each other, how did you and Mike approach the topic of family? Did you guys plan to have many children?

Mike and I met in college at Harvard University and only dated for 6 months before getting engaged. Mike proposed shortly after he graduated and I still had a year left. Both the short dating period and the young age at which we were engaged put us in a unique category already – especially at our alma mater. While dating and during our engagement period, we spoke about a mutual desire to have a large family. I grew up with 10 siblings and loved the

love and affection I received from each of them. Mike also grew up in a tight knit family – he and his sisters and parents are very close. So, we were ready from day one of our marriage to be open to any children that God sent us. But it's not so much that we planned to have this number of children – it was part of God's plan, and we were open to it.

It was beneficial to speak of family and our ultimate trust in God before starting our marriage. Thus, we began our married life on the same page. In our case, God did not wait long to bless us with children! Madeline was born before our first wedding anniversary and we became pregnant with our second child when Madeline was just 9 months old. We were thrilled! Madeline brought us such joy – we could not wait to meet our second child. However, our son Phillip was stillborn at 32 weeks. We were devastated. Through our

sorrow, our marriage grew stronger. It also opened our eyes a bit. We wanted a large family, but we also realized through our loss that each child is a special gift from God and that no one is guaranteed the number of children they want or plan for. They are miracles given by God in His own time. After losing Phillip, Mike and I still desired a large family, but we began to think only about each child as he or she came, to be grateful for the miracles that each child was and is. Except when God sent twins; then we had to think about two children at once!

Based on your experience, how would you describe the role of parents?

A parent's job is to lead their children to become responsible adults. Parents are called to love each child unconditionally and help each child reach their full potential.

Their role, as parents, is to teach their children what is right and what is wrong and ultimately aid them on their journey towards heaven.

Additionally, parents must love and respect their children's freedom. This balance between teaching what is right yet allowing them to make mistakes gives them room to grow in virtue and ultimately learn how to be happy. Teaching virtues, or good habits, is best done through example, so actually, it is also a parent's responsibility to be working on his or her own human virtues. In this way, we try to show that "love is deeds, not sweet words" as St. Josemaria would put it. We have that and other inspirational mottos on the white board that serves as our family's "chore chart" (see below)

8 children is more than the average couple takes on these days. Is it hard to be a mother to so

many? How do you organize such a household?

Parenting is hard work – whether you have one child or 16!! So, to answer your question – YES, it is absolutely difficult to be a mother to so many, but I like the word “challenging” better. There may be different challenges in raising a large number of children versus a smaller number, but there are fringe benefits as well. More children mean more people who can help to run the household.

There are certain tips for organizing big families that I've learned from other parents, including my own parents who have 11 children. First, a spirit of service in the family is crucial so that everyone knows they have a part in taking care of the house and of each other. Chore charts tell everyone what they are expected to do. We have a big white

board in the kitchen which outlines the schedule for the day and who has what chore. We try to make it fun, though, because why not? For the summer, we are having the kids take turns cooking a meal once a week. An older child is paired with a younger child. They are so excited for it! I am too – it means a night off for me!

Parenting any number of children is also a challenge because (like all of us) they are works in progress, some more so than others. It is easy to get frustrated with our children from time to time; with more children, there are more opportunities to be frustrated at the difference between who they are today and who we are raising them to be. That is why it is so important to have a spirit of mortification and patience concerning the organization of the house. Outside of productions of the "Sound of Music," there are few large

households that run with military precision all the time. It always helps to keep your sense of humor, even during, or maybe especially during particularly challenging moments.

One last piece of advice for any mom – I heard this from a friend. She said she has learned to “beat her children up,” meaning she wakes up before anyone else and has a cup of coffee, prays, and plans her day. I find this early morning ritual can really put everything in perspective.

Sometimes it is hard to wake before the children, but the extra effort can make for a better day.

Pope Francis is asking us to pray a lot for the family right now, as well as for marriage. What do you think is the biggest challenge facing the family today?

One of the biggest challenges facing families today, at least in the United States, is a busy life style that leaves

little time for reflection. We run from activity to activity, sometimes at the expense of the family dinner – and a sit down family dinner is special family bonding time. Again, it takes a lot of effort to coordinate everyone's schedules but being together at the table gives us an opportunity to enjoy each other's company and learn some manners. We sometimes play a game at dinner called “Highs and Lows.” We go around the table, person by person, sharing our high and low points of our day. Even the littlest family members can participate. Our youngest, Anne, is so happy when we are all seated at the table together. Her joy is contagious.

How do you go about helping your children to embrace the faith, learn how to pray, develop Christian habits, etc.?

We try to integrate habits of faith into our everyday routine. We teach

our children to say a morning offering, a grace before meals and prayers at bedtime. Since they are woven into the fabric of the day they become part of a larger Catholic culture of our family. We attend Sunday Mass as a family and try to attend our parish monthly Eucharistic Adoration. When possible, I take the children to daily Mass with me as well. We celebrate the saint feast days of the children's names. We also encourage the children to read about some of our favorite saints. Between birthdays and feast days there is always a reason to celebrate! During Advent and Lent we have certain traditions to help each child prepare their hearts during that liturgical season. Finally, we have a list of people we are praying for as a family – if a relative is sick, or a family member is expecting a new baby. All these little habits of prayer add up – and they often spark good teachable moments

where the faith is explained to the children in context. The goal is for these things to be a natural part of our daily lives, and not something that is just done on Sundays or is otherwise cordoned off from the rest of what we do.

Do you have any advice for newly married couples?

Yes! I would tell newly married couples to never stop working on making your marriage better and stronger with each passing day...each passing year! Marriage requires total self-giving, but sometimes it takes time and effort – more time and effort than you think – to discover the best ways to give oneself more generously to one's spouse. These ways may change over time and as the children grow older. It should be a daily concern to find ways to give yourself generously to your spouse.

After we had been married about ten years, Mike and I took a marriage class called "Marital Love." Through it, we met other couples who were also committed to building strong marriages. One couple taught us about a concept that illustrates what I mean by working on your marriage daily. They called it making a "DTL" or a Decision to Love the other person each day and in little ways. We don't fall in love without our will and intellect. We choose to love a person and we can renew this decision again each day by choosing to do small acts of service for the other person. For example, if the trash needs to be taken out, a husband can make a DTL by taking out the trash. His wife could make a DTL and fix the shower head without asking her husband to do it. It's a lot of fun to point out all your daily DTL's to your spouse. Or to gently ask for something of your spouse as in

“Honey, can you make a DTL and bring me a glass of ice water?”

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