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Our marriage: based on love, faith and a sense of humour

Ian and Nicola Lewis share the joys and struggles of married life and describe the impact that St Josémaria's teachings have had on their approach to the vocation of marriage. Ian and Nicola live in Hamilton, New Zealand with their 8 children (with their 9th child due in April), ranging from 18 months to 15 years old.

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How did you prepare for marriage?

Before we were engaged we discussed the essential aspects of marriage: lifelong, open to children, and faithful to God. Although we were both unsure about how to cope with a large family (if that was God's plan) we knew He would help us deal with things as they arose. We were both a little nervous about what the future would bring but we resolved to have faith and trust in each other and God and make that big step together.

Ian proposed during a walk up Auckland's Mt Victoria and despite romantic intentions was unable to propose on one knee due to the numerous deposits left by the grazing cows. So from the very start we were well-grounded in the daily realities of life and the importance of a good sense of humour!

During our engagement we received marriage classes from a priest of Opus Dei, which helped to solidify our relationship and gave us a clear understanding of the commitment we were making. We learned that communication between spouses was crucial and that we would always have God's grace when we needed it, through the sacrament of marriage.

What is the best thing about your marriage?

We find that the best thing about our marriage is each other. We share the same beliefs and values and this has been a great benefit to making fundamental decisions such as having children, working through problems, and learning to love and forgive each other. We also love our children to bits - even though they sometimes drive us a little crazy. We pray together, go to Mass together

and we are conscious that we need to help each other get to Heaven.

What are some of the challenges in married life?

It is sometimes a challenge to get everything done. Our home life often feels chaotic and disorganised. It can be a challenge to remain serene and patient. Sometimes the logistics of dropping kids off to school, sports and other activities makes us feel like a non-stop taxi service.

It is also a challenge to raise children in a society that doesn't support the Christian values we are trying to pass on. However, we believe that we can change society by being an active part of it. We pay attention to the books our children read, the movies they watch and also the friends they spend their time with. We make a determined effort to spend time with our children: family trips, one-on-one time (even just doing the dishes

together), occasionally taking one or more of the kids out for an ice-cream etc. We have a few rules which can seem a bit restrictive to some: no sleepovers, one cell phone the children all have to share, limited computer & TV time. Instead of these things we do a lot of fun family trips and adventures (trips to the beach to watch the sun rise and drink a hot chocolate, trips to the west coast to watch the sunset and see the stars come out, day trips to national parks to play in the snow and visit hot springs). Many of our children's friends have commented to them that our family does "so much cool stuff" and we don't feel our children miss out by not having all the latest gadgets and technology.

How does your faith impact your approach to marriage?

We are both practicing Catholics and we attend daily Mass and go to

Confession regularly. The spiritual aid that comes from the Sacraments is a big help when the inevitable problems arise in our family life. If one of us loses their temper, we always make sure to apologise and talk it over. This is because we made a lifelong commitment to love and honour each other, and also because we know God is present in our marriage and our family and that mere “surface manners” aren’t enough; God knows what’s going on in our hearts. This helps us go a lot deeper into the reasons for conflict, and helps us treat each other with respect and humility rather than reacting with wounded pride.

Our faith also gives a deeper meaning to our marriage: rather than being a worthwhile but merely human thing, we believe that our marriage is a source of grace and a means for us to grow in holiness, and we treat things that threaten or

weaken our marriage very seriously. We pray regularly for our marriage and our family too, asking Our Lady and St Joseph to help us imitate their family life.

How have St Josemaría's teachings helped you as a couple?

St Josemaría's teachings that married life is a source of sanctification for the couple have been a great help for us. We know that the way we love each other, the way we behave at home, the way we deal with our neighbours and friends, the manner in which we raise our children, are all tied up and linked with the grace of God and the everyday ordinary life each Christian lay person has to lead.

Both of us are part of Opus Dei and our daily effort to live out our vocation – trying to offer our work to God and to be a good parent and friend, finding time for God in

prayer, Mass and the Rosary each day, regular confession, trying to be cheerful – helps us to keep starting over again (with God's grace) when we mess up and make mistakes.

Regular spiritual direction & formation helps us both humanly and spiritually.

Do you think it is important to have time alone as a couple?

Definitely! Although this can sometimes be a real challenge. Often the time in the evenings when the kids are in bed is taken up by other things and it can be difficult to find time on the weekends where we can just talk and spend some time together. But we make time to go out for dinner and movie dates regularly, and each year we go away for a weekend alone together. Sometimes we also send the kids to bed early so we can have time to talk or just have time as a couple.

What would you never give up as a family?

Communication, family prayer and the Rosary. We pray together each night and the kids join in for a decade of the Rosary and contribute their own little intentions - often a source of great amusement to us and the older children and probably Our Lord too.

What advice would you give to young couples preparing for marriage?

Get good advice from someone you trust, sort out the big issues before even considering marriage e.g. marriage is lifelong, open to children, and based on faith & God's love and support. Then when you've clarified the important things and had some solid advice and formation, don't wait. Get married and start the adventure.

Do you have any family customs or traditions at Christmas time?

We have a Christmas tree and a Jesse Tree which we make decorations for. We set up a crib and an Advent Wreath. The kids get involved in moving the crib figures closer and closer as Christmas Eve approaches. We talk with them about what St Joseph and Our Lady were going through and what the wise men would have been thinking. On Christmas Eve we go to midnight Mass and have a little tradition of gently putting the figure of the Child Jesus into the manger and all the kids give Him a kiss.