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Intimacy in Matrimony: Spousal Happiness and Openness to Life

A new article in the series on married love. "Selfishness sooner or later reduces love to a mere satisfaction of instinct and destroys the bond which unites parents and children."

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By Eunice Wong

Every human person is born to form intimate relationships. Before birth we were literally inseparable from another human being for nine months. And after birth, we continue in a state of total dependency and continue to have a close relationship primarily with our mother and then with other caring adults. We didn't feel good about leaving this comfortable situation and cried whenever it was threatened, starting when we were first pushed out of our mother's body and then we were handed into someone else's arms. Later on in life, we learn to make friends, some of whom will become inseparable, and we are heartbroken when school finishes and we need to part ways.

Then a day comes when we meet a person of the opposite sex we feel attracted to in ways we never experienced before. We start off, perhaps, by making casual

conversation; we discover we share the same, or complementary, interests, likes and dislikes, and we feel comfortable being in each other's company. We begin to share more of ourselves – our achievements, the happy moments in our life, our dreams and aspirations. We progress to a stage where we take the leap to unlock the hidden parts of our soul, to unveil our weaknesses, our deep anxieties and fears.

This is not an easy step. But it is the critical test to know whether we will be accepted as we are, or doubted, or even be rejected. *Talk and listen to each other, get to know each other, respect each other, as though each of you is a treasure that belongs to the other*, advises Saint Josemaría.^[i]

When the relationship passes this test, we begin to feel more and more like being part of each other because we have gotten to know our loved one well and, most importantly, we

are certain that our loved one is starting to know us as we know ourselves. We are ready and, as the cliché goes, we believe we have finally found the “other half” of me, and together we will become a whole.

This journey towards intimacy between two persons is described by Matthew Kelly as a process of progressively revealing ourselves and “sharing who we really are with another person.”^[iii] The progress towards communion between the lover and the beloved is well captured by Pope Francis in describing the encounter between the first man and the first woman *asa direct encounter, face to face, eye to eye, in a kind of silent dialogue.* Then *as the woman of the Song of Solomon will sing in a magnificent profession of love and mutual self-bestowal: “My beloved is mine and I am his... I am my beloved’s and my*

beloved is mine.”^[iii] Finally when the man is "joined to" his wife, it *bespeaks a profound harmony, a closeness both physical and interior. The result of this union is that the two become "one flesh," both physically and in the union of their hearts and lives.*^[iv] It becomes "conjugal love embodied in a unique and privileged physical action whereby intimacy is expressed,"^[v] where man and woman are joined as husband and wife in the conjugal act.

This is a unique human situation because only husbands and wives (and not persons in any other relationships) “are united in mutual knowledge and love – a love that is not simply spiritual but also bodily, and a knowledge underpinning their love, which is likewise not mere speculative or intellectual knowledge; it is bodily knowledge as well.”^[vi] It is also privileged because in conjugal love husband and wife

are expressing, with their bodies: “I give you what I give to no one else.”^[vii]

During courtship and engagement, for the man and woman to develop a relationship that will last the test of time, the mutual self-revelation of their personalities (communication) must be honest and truthful.

Revealing oneself fully is a risky business (one risks being misunderstood, ridiculed or even rejected), and requires commitment and conviction. Our desire to be accepted may prompt us to dissemble: for example, we may pretend to share the same interests, or hide faults. If a marriage is based on one or both parties presenting a false or distorted image, the “you-and-me” whole is fraught with inherent contradictions and becomes unstable. Only a relationship based on truthful mutual revelation, unreserved self-giving and

acceptance of the other is the source of happiness.

The same conditions apply to all aspects of the marital relationship, body as well as soul. “Nothing can undermine a marriage so much as the refusal to know and accept one’s spouse or to let oneself be known fully by him or her. Marriage is constantly endangered by the possibility of one spouse holding something back from the other; withholding some knowledge that he or she does not want the other to possess. This can occur on all levels of interpersonal communication: physical as well as spiritual.”^[viii] _____

What does honesty in bodily intimacy mean? “In true marital intercourse, each spouse renounces protective self-possession, so as to possess fully and to be fully possessed by the other. This fullness of true sexual gift and possession is

achieved only in marital intercourse open to life. Only in procreative intercourse do the spouses exchange true ‘knowledge’ of one another, and truly speak humanly and intelligibly to one another; they truly reveal themselves to one another in their full human actuality and potential. Each offers, and each accepts full spousal knowledge of the other.”^[ix] —

This “knowledge” of the body which husband and wife exchange is something real, the sharing of a power which arises from his masculinity and her femininity: the power of their fertility:^[x] “Take what I have to give. This will be a new me. United to you, to what you have to give – your seed – this will be a new ‘you and me,’ fruit of our mutual knowledge and love.”^[xi] —

In other words, withholding fertility – stopping the mutual giving of their “seeds” by the use of contraceptive measures – is the ultimate lie, the ultimate deception, expressed with

the body. This cannot be compensated for, no matter how open the couple is in sharing their intimacy at the intellectual and spiritual level. The new “you-and-me” exists then as a hypothetical entity. No true union exists at the physical level because what happens with the body is temporary, conditional, and shielded.

“Contraception reduces a couple to two individuals seeking pleasure,”^[xii] and it is so easy to confuse pleasure, a transient sensation, with enduring happiness. We started our relationship by showing interest in and care for each other – our interests, our background, our dreams and aspirations. We encourage each other and support each other in so many ways but, more importantly, we need also to approach our marital relationships with the same care, tenderness and

sensitivity to each other's physical conditions.

Relationships based on contraception give couples the easy way out. They don't need to read the signs of the body, and there is no need to act accordingly: there is no need to respect what the woman's body is saying through these signs. The exchange is turned inwards to oneself, to one's own gratification rather than being a self-giving to the other and towards forming the new "you-and-me." It is therefore not surprising that couples who practice Natural Family Planning consistently report more satisfaction in their married life and that the divorce rate is so much lower than with couples who use contraception. ^[xiii]_____

“Wishing to associate them in a special way in his own creative work, God blessed man and woman with the words: *Be fruitful and*

multiply.”[xiv] God bestows upon men and women this power, this ability to bring forth life together. The history of humanity is never short of examples of those who, like our first parents, are tempted to *be like gods* (Gen 3:4). And yet, here we are shunning and rejecting this very powerful gift which is shared with us by the original Author of life. An irony indeed! Humanity needs to regain this power, to “rediscover the divine gift of human sexuality and in this way, to avoid the cheapening of sexuality which is common today.”[xv]

“Man, male and female, is created in the image and likeness of God by being created in the covenant relationship of marriage. That is the primordial image of God, and God says, ‘Be fruitful and multiply. Let the two become one,’ and they discovered in this act of marriage how the oneness is more than just a fleeting emotion. It’s more than just a

physical sensation, it becomes a real fact. It becomes a metaphysical reality because when the two become one, nine months later you've got to give that 'one' a name, and that child embodies the oneness that the two became – to show those two that God has designed their oneness to be permanent, to be exclusive, to be life-giving and therefore, to be faithful.”^[xvi] _____

The true union between husband and wife is encapsulated in the new life that ensues from it. Happiness comes from open and truthful intimacy; happiness in marriage is predicated upon open and truthful union – which must be open to the emergence of new life. Every new pregnancy brings renewal of intimacy between husband and wife. The husband doesn't need to experience the extreme effects of “sympathetic pregnancy” to feel the mood changes, the bodily changes of

his expectant wife. He will want to be supportive and empathetic and perhaps also participate in the birthing process. For the wife, it is a time of profound closeness with her husband through the child who is formed from the “co-mingling of substance” from both of them. Part of her husband is now inseparable from her for nine months, has a beating heart next to hers, is feeding through her and is entirely enwrapped in her.

A child on the other hand “gives new life to parents.”^[xvii] With every new child, the husband-and-wife partnership takes on a new project, a new venture. Each child brings new dreams, new aspirations to the family. Each child is a marvel as he or she always reflects some aspects of the parents, the grandparents, the aunts and uncles. Each child also brings surprises as he or she displays unique talents and potential. A new

meaning develops in the husband-and-wife partnership. In their innocence, children are "naturals" in showing affection. They are "adorable" and evoke responses of affection from adults, parents, older siblings. In this way, the family learns about love. The total dependence of babies, the needs of growing children, the loving concern for offspring even as they grow into adulthood, open the eyes of the husband and wife to the deep meaning of selfless love, sacrificial love.

It began with the mother "laying down her life" on the delivery table, followed by the birth pangs, nursing pains, sleepless nights, stretch marks. There may be financial worries, holidays much longed for giving way to children's extra needs. The many little irritations, conflicts, differences of opinion that are common in family life require husband and wife to bite

their tongues, to think a little less of himself or herself. They need to *keep quiet, to wait and say things in a positive, optimistic way. When her husband loses his temper, the moment has arrived for the wife to be especially patient until he calms down, and vice versa.*^[xviii] They need to allow their children to see *in their parents an example of dedication, sincere love, mutual help and understanding.*^[xix]

In Pope Francis' closing remark at the 8th World Meeting of Families he said: *Jesus knows that where children are concerned, we are capable of boundless generosity.*^[xx] Children enrich the relationship of husband and wife, enabling them to live out to a fuller extent the true meaning of self-giving love. For a marriage to *preserve its initial charm and beauty, both husband and wife should try to renew their love day after day, and that is done through sacrifice, with*

smiles and also with ingenuity.

^[xxi] *Torrents of worries and difficulties are incapable of drowning true love because people who sacrifice themselves generously together are brought closer by their sacrifice.* ^[xxii] In this way, Christian couples are brought to the fulfilment of their mission to sanctify themselves and to sanctify others, that they are called to be apostles and that their first apostolate is the home. ^[xxiii]

In the words of Saint Josemaría, *What matters is the integrity and honesty with which married life is lived. True mutual love transcends the union of husband and wife and extends to its natural fruits – the children.*

Selfishness, on the contrary, sooner or later reduces love to a mere satisfaction of instinct and destroys the bond which unites parents and children. ^[xxiv]

Eunice Wong

[i] St Josemaría Escrivá, *Get-together in Venezuela, February 11, 1975, response to questions from an engaged couple* (<https://www.josemariaescriva.info/article/engagemen...>)

[ii] Matthew Kelly, *The 7 Levels of Intimacy*, 2007

[iii] Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, 10 March 2016, no. 12

[iv] *Ibid*, no. 13

[v] Cormac Burke, *Covenanted Happiness, Love and Commitment in Marriage*, 1990, Four Courts Press, Dublin, p. 32

[vi] *Ibid*, pp. 35-36

[vii] *Ibid*, p. 32

[viii] *Ibid*, p. 36

[ix] *Ibid*, pp. 36-37

[x] Cf *Ibid*, p. 33

[xi] *Ibid*, p. 32

[xii] Kimberley Hahn, *Live-Giving Love, Embracing God's Beautiful Design for Marriage*, 2001, p. 70

[xiii] Fr Joseph Tham, M.D., *The Missing Cornerstone: Reasons Why Couples Choose Natural Family Planning in Their Marriages*, 2003, p. 57: "Statistically, couples using NFP have less than a 6% divorce rate, while the U.S. population as a whole has a rate of 50%."

[xiv] *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 50, as quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1652.

[xv] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: *Note on the banalization of sexuality regarding certain*

*interpretations of “Light of the World”
by Benedict XVI, 2010*

[xvi] Scott Hahn, “Christ and the Church: A Model for Marriage,” in the “Catholic Adult Education on Video Program”

[xvii] Kimberley Hahn, *Life-Giving Love, Embracing God’s Beautiful Design for Marriage*, 2001, p. 57

[xviii] Saint Josemaría, *Conversations with Saint Josemaría Escrivá*, 108

[xix] *Ibid*

[xx] Pope Francis, *Homily at Conclusion of 8th World Meeting of Families, September 27, 2015*

[xxi] Saint Josemaría, *Conversations with Saint Josemaría Escrivá*, 107
(<https://stjosemaria.org/st-josemaria-escriva-10-que...>)

[xxii] *Ibid* 91

[xxiii] *Ibid*

[xxiv] *Ibid* 94

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