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Marriage, Life's Greatest Tango

This article celebrates Christian marriage as a lifelong commitment, and the virtues needed for it to grow and flourish. With a couple's sincere effort and the help of grace, their union will be an authentic reflection as God's timeless masterpiece.

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The Beauty of Christian Marriage

Through the course of history, the institute of marriage has been the cornerstone of strong and healthy families. When Christians are committed to living out their marital vows, they transmit a norm of self-sacrifice and love to their children and the community. This good example is then passed on to the next generation, and it reflects the beauty of a sacramental marriage as a path to holiness. We see this in the lives of Saints Joachim and Anne, the biological parents of our Blessed Mother, as well as the parents of St Thérèse of Lisieux, who were recently canonised in 2015 for their witness to the faith, love for their children, and perseverance through hardship. The recognition of these married couples as saints highlights that holiness is attainable for all within the vocation of marriage and family life.

While modern society may sometimes present ideals that could contradict Christian teachings on spousal love and fidelity, our faith offers a clear way forward. With a firm affirmation to God's truth, we are able to discern the ones that are incompatible with norms of Christian morality, such as laws permitting divorce or same-sex unions, just to name a few. The response to these contemporary challenges lies in our marriage vows; a sacred and lifelong commitment in which God is called upon as a solemn witness. This principle of fidelity also applies to all vocations including the priesthood and religious life, where God invites each one to persevere with a sincere heart. As Scripture attests, *'let your yes be yes, and your no a no'* (Mt 5:37). In this connection, St Josemaría reminds us that *'the kingdom of heaven is won by violence.'* [1] The interior struggle therefore lies in each small moment,

firmly rejecting false ideas and erroneous thought that may separate us from God.

Christian marriage is truly a path to sanctity, which is the ultimate aim of our earthly pilgrimage. God desires all married couples to pursue a life of holiness, and we must be convinced of this. Throughout his priestly ministry, St Francis de Sales taught that this call to holiness extends to everyone, emphasising the importance of tailoring Christian piety to each person's unique circumstance. In his spiritual classic *Introduction to the Devout Life*, he wrote that it would neither be appropriate for a Bishop of a diocese to adopt a Carthusian solitude, nor for a father of a family to adopt radical poverty like the Capuchins. [2] As such, it is through the faithful fulfilment of duties in marriage out of love for God that radically transforms ordinary moments into

opportunities for growth in grace and sanctity.

Growing Together as a Married Couple

When a couple decides to get married, it represents a mutual commitment to give themselves wholeheartedly for a lifetime. This commitment provides a great opportunity for both parties to develop further and become better individuals. To that end, it is important to choose someone who is dependable and supportive, and who can inspire the other to flourish.

While imperfections may exist, marriage provides a unique space for mutual support and understanding, where couples can help one another grow more in appreciation and love. In this regard, the virtues and values cultivated since childhood can form a solid foundation for marriage. Being a shared journey, a couple that

genuinely works together is in a much better position to succeed in terms of building a stronger and joyful relationship. In marriage, it takes two to tango. At its core, there is also an immense spiritual unity when a couple professes the same Catholic faith, as it provides a moral compass and strength to overcome adversities in life.

St Paul in his preachings to pagan lands coined marriage as *sacramentum magnum*, or the great sacrament (*Eph 5:32*). This is because the union between a husband and wife is intended to mirror the deep and loving union between Christ and his Church. Therefore, marriage should be like fine wine which ages well over time. Here, the true strength of a marital union is cultivated from within. Nonetheless, there may be a tendency towards familiarity and routine which couples must struggle against.

Paradoxically, the tedium of daily life offers an excellent opportunity to counter complacency. By consciously refining our appreciation for our spouse, we prevent taking them for granted, and this in turn preserves harmony in a relationship. Friction and disagreements may still occur occasionally, but they should not surprise us. Growth is fostered by embracing humility. By acknowledging the areas that we fall short in, we can seek forgiveness and cheerfully resolve with a sporting spirit to do better next time.

If religious and celibate life seeks mastery over one's inclinations in order to be recreated in God's image, there is no reason why marriage with a similar aim of holiness should be any different. This is not simply theological speak but a deep truth which requires real effort and hard work. In a thriving marriage, the focus shifts beyond an agreed

division of tasks to a continuous desire to outdo each other generously in love and service. As we give ourselves in all things, our hearts will gradually expand, embodying the very essence of Christian service and self-surrender. This also makes the atmosphere within the family more pleasant over time. In marriage, couples must be fully convinced that they can be true saints, i.e. 'canonisable saints'.

Marriage should be a fun process of self-discovery, where one learns and grows together with his or her spouse. According to Aristotle, happiness or what he calls *eudaimonia* is the result of pursuing excellence in virtue. [3] Marriage is precisely the perfect platform to acquire a virtuous life. For most, God provides a spouse and family as a means to exercise virtue and grow in happiness. Our Christian faith teaches us that sanctity is the sum

total of many moments of conversion. Applying this wisdom, when difficulties arise in marriage, we are invited to reflect on how we can personally improve in order to foster a spirit of joy and mutual gratitude within the relationship. True spiritual growth in marriage blossoms by dint of constant effort to act with understanding and integrity in every situation, guided by tenets of Christian morality.

In daily life, our actions are sometimes guided by our feelings. While they naturally arise, our Christian faith invites us to elevate our responses through intellect and reason. To a certain extent, how we react to issues reflect the depth of virtue we are trying to cultivate. For instance, it is easy to be kind and cheerful with our loved ones when we feel great, but the true measure of our growth lies in our ability to offer a gentle smile or a patient word even

when we are physically tired. It is precisely in these moments where we demonstrate our commitment to constantly will the good, regardless of circumstance. On this point, St Thomas Aquinas explained that rather than simply following our antecedent passions (i.e. those immediate, natural responses), we are encouraged to pause and make a reasoned judgment according to moral principles before acting. [4] In essence, it means thinking before we act. For example, we could choose to step away from an argument when we are upset. In doing so, we create space to engage in a calm, reasoned conversation later on. This intentional way of living fosters prudence and patience in marriage.

Virtues Needed for a Happy Marriage

Let us now look at how the virtues can be more operative in our lives,

before considering five simple ones that are essential for a happy marriage. At its core, a virtue is a type of habit, or a stable quality acquired through the repetition of many morally good acts. Conversely, vices are bad habits which we develop through sin and imperfections. As such, virtue requires constant effort and exercise for it to grow. Just like the human muscle, practice leads to growth and perfection over time. On the other hand, if we do not use it, we will gradually lose it. In short, natural virtues are those which can be developed purely through human effort and are attainable by all, notwithstanding one's religion. However, the beauty of a Christian marriage lies in the fact that it is also a sacrament. If we do our part, God through sanctifying grace will ensure that we grow in supernatural virtues, and thus achieve sanctity. This is what sets it apart from a non-

Christian marriage, where even the most mundane activities in daily life can acquire a divine value.

Of the virtues with direct relevance to marriage, the first we will explore is friendship. In his writings, St Thomas espoused the Aristotelian viewpoint that friendship can be directed towards the delightful, the useful, or the virtuous. [5] Here, the highest form is the friendship of virtue, which is based on charity and mutual admiration with regard to the other person. [6] In a relationship, both parties should strive to help each other become more virtuous over time. To do so, they must constantly will the good of the other. In marriage, such friendship can be purposefully cultivated through having a shared emotional life, where couples are closely united and supportive in joyful, sad and challenging occasions. It can also be further strengthened

by opening up and allowing personal vulnerabilities be known to one's spouse, trusting that he or she will always be there to help us grow. If we put this into practice well, we should be able to say with confidence that our best friend in life is our spouse. [7]

Virtue is about seeking excellence, and the second one for us to consider is self-forgetfulness. To be clear, we are not implying that we should forget about our identity and who we are as a unique individual. Rather, self-forgetfulness is a dimension of humility, and it involves prioritising the well-being of others over one's own desires or interests. As humans, it is only natural that we all have needs and wants, but we should never allow them to form a disordered attachment within us. Essentially, the root cause of sadness is self-love. When a person is somehow unable to fulfil or obtain

the object desired (be it material or immaterial), gloominess sets in. In marriage, the secret to happiness is the willingness to yield in one's own preferences. This allows us to forget about ourselves, and makes family life more pleasant in our homes. Concrete examples of this could be the sacrificing of personal leisure time for a family activity, supporting the needs of our spouse even when it is inconvenient, listening attentively to the other party without interjecting with our own views, or perhaps giving up the best portion of food at the dining table. Doing so with alacrity cultivates the habit of 'others before self', and enables one to grow interiorly over time.

The third virtue worth cultivating is sincerity. In a Christian marriage, sincerity is not just about telling the truth when asked (which should be a given), but rather a profound transparency that permeates the

entire relationship. In other words, it involves an honest initiative of sharing one's thoughts, feelings, desires or even struggles and thus, creating a deep level of understanding and empathy. On this virtue, St Margaret Mary Alacoque once expressed the following: *'If I should see a soul adorned with all virtues except sincerity, it would all seem to me but deceit and illusion.'* [8]

These are strong words, but filled with much wisdom. Sincerity forms the basis in which true intimacy and love takes root. In practical terms, it means fulfilling our promises and commitments big or small with our spouse, ensuring consistency in our words and actions, being transparent with our feelings whether positive or negative, and owning up to our limitations and mistakes when they occur. In this way, mutual trust is strengthened, which forms the bedrock of an authentic and healthy relationship.

Next is generosity. By nature, it resembles magnanimity, but with a much wider scope. Simply put, generosity is exercised when one acts unselfishly and cheerfully for the benefit of others, conscious of the value of his help despite the costs involved. St Thérèse of Lisieux in her *Poems* penned that *‘to love is to give all and to give oneself.’* [9] This is the attitude we need to have in relation with our spouse, i.e. to give and never count the cost. For marital love to grow, we should never hold back when it comes to showing affection, tenderness and sensitivity. For a married couple, holiness is precisely found in the details. An exercise of generosity of heart can be shown through words of affirmation or comfort, in acts of service in carrying out daily tasks, spending quality time with each other and giving gifts on special occasions such as birthdays or anniversaries. But most important of all, learning how to forgive. To

forgive requires a great personal sense of security and willingness to serve others. It is not to belittle the seriousness of the injury done to us, but instead recognising that the other party stands in greater need of receiving our love. [10] Every time we exercise forgiveness, our hearts expand, and we resemble more closely the heart of Christ, which is the purest form of generosity one can exhibit as a Christian. This is truly the key for a marriage to succeed.

Lastly, the virtue of fidelity. From a faith perspective, fidelity goes beyond the absence of physical infidelity. Instead, it encompasses a complete and unwavering commitment of the heart, mind, and soul to one's spouse, striving towards a lifelong dedication to the marital covenant. Beyond the honouring of marriage vows, fidelity encompasses our innermost desires as Christ instructed, where even an impure

thought is akin to committing adultery in one's heart (cf. *Mt* 5:28). Love between a husband and wife must therefore be mutually exclusive. Likewise, Scripture highlights that '*the eye is the lamp of the body*' (*Mt* 6:22). It shows that to live fidelity well, we should never allow our hearts to be attached to anyone from the opposite sex other than our spouse. Moreover, fidelity carries with it an obligation for couples to endure difficulties in life together, such as financial struggles, career crises, ill health and other personal challenges. Through this, marital love deepens and becomes more resilient, capable of withstanding the vicissitudes of time.

Relying on God's Grace through the Sacraments and Prayer

The virtues which we have just considered can and should be practiced by all, Christians and non-

Christians alike. Nonetheless, it is useful to recall that the hallmark of a Christian marriage lies in its very essence, which is a path to holiness. For the vocation of marriage to truly flourish, one must firmly rely on God's grace as well. In this regard, couples are encouraged to incorporate a prayer routine into their daily schedules. At its core, prayer is a dialogue with a loving God who helps us reflect on our experiences, and to make sense of them from His viewpoint. When faced with decisions, big or small, we have the privilege of bringing them to Him in prayer first. As Blessed Guadalupe Ortiz encouraged: *'Go deeper in that silence to arrive where God alone is: where not even the angels can enter without our permission.'* [11] Through it, we will gain clarity and insight into our marriage, and how to make it even better.

Besides prayer, the sacraments are a great source of help for couples. As Christians, our priority for marriage must be set right, i.e. love for God in the first place, followed by our spouse and children. This order must never be inverted. A Christian marriage is a sacrament in itself, and there are special graces that God grants to couples who sincerely try to grow in their vocation. Likewise, the Holy Mass should be at the very centre and root of our lives. St Jean Vianney wrote that *'there is nothing so great as the Eucharist. If God had something more precious, He would have given it to us.'* [12] On this note, we may wish to consider attending Mass more than once a week should our schedules permit. When Our Lord is received with good dispositions in Holy Communion, we obtain many graces to overcome the various challenges which marriage and family life entails. And last but not least, frequent confession.

Sincere reconciliation with God fortifies us against temptation, and helps foster a greater sense of self-awareness and humility within marriage.

Learning from One's Faults

Marriage is a beautiful, shared journey of learning and growth. Yet, in every relationship, there will be moments where our words or actions may not be received in a way we intended. These are not setbacks, but valuable opportunities to enrich our understanding of oneself and each other. St John Chrysostom once shared in his *Homilies* that *'our personal mistakes are our most successful teachers. Human nature is such that it needs to stumble against rocks in order to verify this painful reality.'* [13] The most successful couples are those that see the value of teamwork, and that they are in it together as a team. Practically, this

means being able to celebrate the small wins in daily life, and not maintaining an eidetic memory of past faults committed. Through this, the foundation for a happy marriage becomes firmer with each passing year.

Two thousand years ago, a heartwarming story of a beautiful and holy matrimony was written in the little town of Nazareth, that of Mary and Joseph. We should thus be inspired to compose our own, emulating the same spirit of love and sacrifice that permeated the Holy Family. Hopefully, at the end of our earthly pilgrimage, we will be able to hear the same words as written in Scripture: *‘Good and faithful servant, you have been faithful in little, and I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master’ (Mt 25:21).*

[1] St Josemaría Escrivá, *Furrow*, no. 130.

[2] St Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part I, chap. 3.

[3] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099b16, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vols. 1 and 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

[4] St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 24, a. 3.

[5] St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 23, a. 1.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Cf. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 123.

[8] Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen O.C.D., *Divine Intimacy*, trans. Discalced Carmelite Nuns of Boston (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers Inc., 1996), 851.

[9] Donald Kinney O.C.D., trans., *The Poetry of St. Thérèse of Lisieux* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1995).

[10] David Isaacs, *Character Building: A Guide for Parents and Teachers* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1984), 28.

[11] Mercedes Eguíbar Galarza, *Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri* (Milan: Edizioni Ares, 2019), 79.

[12] St Jean Vianney, *Eucharistic Meditations* (Strongsville, OH: Scepter Publishers, 2016)

[13] St John Chrysostom, *De Paenitentia Homiliae 4*.

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