

Chapter 1

Introduction to Matrimony

Marriage is like a fine wine; it improves with age and appreciates in value. Torrents of worries and difficulties are incapable of drowning true love because people who sacrifice themselves generously are brought closer together in the long run. . .

Blessed Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer

Never be cynical about love, for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment, it is as perennial as the grass. . .

Max Ehrmann

There is nothing in the world—no possible success, military or political, which is worth weighing in the balance for one moment against the happiness that comes to those fortunate enough to make a real love match—a match in which lover and sweetheart will never be lost in husband and wife. I know what I am writing about, for I am just as much devoted to Mrs. Roosevelt now as ever I was. . .

Theodore Roosevelt
President of the United States (1901-09)
at the age of forty

What Do You Think of Marriage?

Marriage has been variously described as a great work, a great adventure, a great responsibility, and a great joy. Needless to say, it is all of these, not to mention a great disappointment to those who approach it irreverently or ill prepared. But above all, marriage is a great vocation, full of grace for those who give to it all that they are and possess. Scripture tells us that Jesus blessed the wedding feast at Cana with a sudden burst of spiritual energy, nothing less than His first public miracle. Surely, He must have thought the

occasion a worthy one.¹ My parents used to say that although their life together was not always smooth sailing—they had their share of arguments—it was nonetheless worth it. And so it was. Have you ever known anyone to be unhappy who was happily married? Many, on the other hand, with successful careers and a high standard of living, feel emotionally devastated because they are insecure at home or because their marriage has crashed. The right partner will bring out the best in you, soothing your heart when it aches and tapping hidden strengths—in short, helping you to make of the “lumber of your life not a tavern, but a temple.” You, in turn, will do the same for your better half, just as the two of you, working together, will afford solace and comfort to friends and neighbors by the warmth of your hospitality.

The other side of the coin is that the same spouse who soothes will also irritate, tempting you at times to commit everything short of hari-kari. Marriage multiplies responsibilities and puts one to the test in unforeseen ways. If, based on what you are able to observe, you are a bit apprehensive because you sense a stiff challenge ahead, you are right. With all of its rewards, matrimony makes demands. Like life itself, it requires that we possess the desire and the will to grow as people. Those, therefore, who may be looking, first and foremost, for what they can get out of it are in for a big disappointment because conjugal love means giving rather than getting. It means having to say one is sorry and saying it often. Instead of using your spouse for your own ends, you will find yourself sacrificing for the good of the marriage. Time and time again, you and your partner will extend yourselves to the absolute limit because love that is true knows no bounds, and true love is the only kind that lasts.

A great saint by the name of Catherine of Siena once had a vision that God was offering her many crosses, some small, others

¹ Pope John Paul II, in his *Letter to Families* (1994), calls marriage “a true vocation” as well as “a great mystery” (quoting Saint Paul). See nos. 18-19.

large. Anxious to please she selected the heaviest. “No,” said the Lord, “that one is not for you. It is reserved for married couples.” Catherine’s insight may be a trifle tart, but it serves as a useful corrective to the prevailing notion that it is somehow easier to be married than to lead a chaste single life. Where is the evidence for such an assumption? Whatever our state in life, whether we are single, married, or bound by religious vows, there will be trials. The thing to bear in mind is that God has promised each and every one of us all the means necessary to carry on, and to carry on beautifully, provided we do what we can to cooperate. And that, of course, is where pre-Cana comes in. Before athletes enter competition, they prepare. Before soldiers go into battle, they train. And the same holds true of marriage. As in sport and combat, there is no substitute for preparation. Marriage handbooks may not simulate actual “field” conditions, but in many ways they can come close, and it will be the aim of the following pages to come as close as possible.

Even if there were no trend afoot to treat matrimony lightly and to discount the whole idea of lifelong fidelity, there would still be a need to prepare for marriage, just as one prepares for any significant event in life. Priestly vocations are brought to fruition by years of seminary training. Ambitious parents aiming at a prestigious Ivy League education for their youngster go out of their way to enroll the child in the right nursery school. A lengthy apprenticeship is necessary to become a full-fledged plumber or electrician. Many newlyweds anticipate parenthood by attending a series of childbirth courses. Yet ironically, in one of the most vital commitments of all, marriage itself, the only courses seem to appear after the fact: “Parenting Without a Partner,” “Handling Your Divorce,” or “Making It in the Post-Marriage Singles World.”

Curiously enough, the Catholic Church is one of the few institutions in the world that requires some type of formal instruction before marriage, and this is due, in large part, to her insistence on

the sacramental and binding nature of the union.

As Catholics, we reject categorically the idea of divorce and remarriage, believing that no marriage, however ill-advised or troubled, is ever beyond redemption. When we pledge our loyalty “for better or worse,” “in sickness and in health,” we are saying in effect that nothing, absolutely nothing, can ever invalidate our commitment: not cancer, not paralysis, not childlessness, not alcoholism, not even infidelity. Separation may be warranted in extreme cases, but never divorce and remarriage. This is one of the cardinal tenets of Catholic teaching, firmly in place for nearly two thousand years, and it comes directly from Christ, as well as Saint Paul.² Jesus restored marriage to its original ideal after it had been debased by polygamy, divorce, and adultery.

We are all aware that ecclesiastical authorities have been known, on occasion, to grant a declaration of nullity (commonly known as an “annulment”), stating that, in the absence of certain preconditions, a marriage never took place (in the sense that the contract between consenting parties that is required for marriage was never valid to begin with).³ Critics are quick to suggest that annulment is merely divorce, Catholic style. But this is not so. There may have been abuses, particularly in the United States in recent years, owing to the human side of the Church, and such abuses may have undermined the Church’s credibility.⁴ But we should not be put off. Clerical compromisers are a well-known breed in Church history, leaders who capitulated to the “powers that be” either out of weakness or genuine pastoral concern. What is heartening is that the Church is still the Church. She is still teaching essentially what she taught two millennia ago. Christ’s vicar on earth has been totally consistent over the years in holding that once a valid union is contracted, it is indissoluble—that is, unbreakable. Prominent figures such as Bishop John Fisher and

² See Appendix B.

³ See Appendix C.

⁴ See Appendix L.

Sir Thomas More of England gave their very lives in defense of this principle, which remains to this day one of the most precious jewels in the crown of our faith.

Apart from the fact that divorce has been linked with the likelihood of early death from strokes, hypertension, respiratory and intestinal cancer; apart, too, from the fact that children from broken homes are more likely to do poorly in school, abuse drugs, break the law, and attempt suicide, nothing could be more positive or more healthy than the Catholic stand on indissolubility.⁵ And the reason is simple. Only if one is committed to giving one's all, only when one is shielded from the temptation to look for a way out when caught in the eye of the storm, does marriage come into its own. Conversely, the moment one accepts the possibility of divorce and remarriage, even for serious reasons, then one is sanctioning divorce on demand—for whose reasons are not serious? And with what result? All marriages, even sound ones, wind up on shaky ground. Given today's moral climate, with its stress on situation ethics, married couples are an endangered species. The fact that half of them choose to separate is a pretty sure sign that many, if not most, of the others must be struggling just to keep up appearances. One might add, on the basis of statistics, that the rate of failure for those who remarry is staggeringly high, higher even than the rate associated with first marriages. Furthermore, according to a recent survey conducted by researchers at the University of Virginia, seventy-two percent of all divorcées are convinced, within two years of marital breakup, that their divorce was a mistake.⁶

Naturally, the more serious we are about marriage, the more anxious we will be to prepare, especially if we believe there can be

⁵ Philip Yancey, "God is Good for You," *Catholic Digest* (February 1992), 2. Judges have required applicants for divorce to take upward of four hours of courses to familiarize themselves with the many ills visited on the children of divorced parents, *The New York Times* (January 23, 1992), C8.

⁶ *National Catholic Register* (May 24, 1992), 5 (the proportion for men was also high: sixty-one percent).

no turning back. It is an interesting commentary on today's society that jurors selected in some places for federal trial duty are likely to receive a more thorough cross-examination than many young people contemplating marriage. The judge will try to ascertain if they have any emotional blocks, prejudices, or compromising relationships, any "chips on the shoulder," so to speak, that could prove damaging. They will be quizzed on their understanding of the essentials of the law and asked if, once in deliberation, they expect to have enough gumption to stick to their opinion even if they find themselves a minority of one. Attorneys on both sides will also want to know if potential jurors are humble enough to reassess their position should they be convinced by fellow jurors, in the heat of argument, that they are wrong. Humility . . . courage . . . understanding . . . emotional fitness—these are the very same traits required for a successful marriage.

No couple wants to have their relationship examined with a fine-tooth comb and to have questions tossed at them once they have settled on a definite course of action. But those who submit cheerfully can rest assured that if their intentions are pleasing in God's sight, nothing on the face of the earth is going to thwart them. If, on the one hand, there are underlying problems, now is the time to face them. If you are headed for trouble, now is the time to reconsider. If, on the other hand, you are on the right track, your chance for a smooth and happy adjustment will be greatly enhanced by going into marriage with both eyes open. Love need not be blind. The fewer surprises the better.