

MARRIAGE AS A PATHWAY TO HOLINESS

MSGR. FRED DOLAN

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

This is a very special time of prayer - we could say that about any topic that we speak with Jesus about - but in this case, our topic is the sacrament of marriage. This is not just any topic, but it is the very cornerstone of society. Even as we begin this conversation with Jesus we have a very clear sense that we are treading upon- upon sacred ground. We know that Christian marriage is an image of the love between Christ and his Church. First things first, this vision of marriage as a genuine vocation. It is part of God's plan not just in general, not just for the species, but in the case of any given couple, it is a call from God.

St. Josemaria, when he would receive couples, he often would say, looking at each one of them, he would say to the husband, "Your wife is your pathway to Heaven." Then he would turn to the wife and say the same thing about her husband, and he really meant it. It was his way of saying very clearly, for you to get to Heaven, to achieve the sanctity that God Has in mind for you, well, there is your path, your spouse.

In one of St. Josemaria's homilies about Christian marriage, he says, "The spouses are called to sanctify their marriage and sanctify themselves in this union. The sacrament of marriage," he goes on to say, "is an action of Jesus who invades the souls of husband and wife and invites them to follow him, transforming their married life into a divine passage along the pathways of the Earth."

The founder uses a couple of very powerful words in that quotation. He says that Jesus invades the souls of the husband and wife. He enters into their souls and he transforms their married life into a divine passage. The original Spanish is *andar*, which means, Jesus walking along the pathways of the Earth in them and through their marriage. We ask the Lord right now in this time of prayer to re-ignite in us this- this awe of this sacrament. We have to be in awe because it is the stuff of sanctity. At the very same time, it is necessary to remind ourselves that Christian couples possess a secret weapon that is critical to their growth. And that's- that secret weapon is the primacy of grace. It is God's grace. Grace, we know, sanctifying grace, the sacramental grace, it is God's presence in our soul, God acting in and through each one of us. In the case of married couples, that grace is

critical to the growth of each of the two spouses. When we talk about the primacy of grace, we're talking about the importance of relying on the power of God's presence, the power of God's grace and action in our soul. It is a basic attitude of the Christian not only with regard to marriage but in general our Christian life. It is God who does the heavy lifting and giving primacy, giving priority to grace, is a matter of turning to the Lord on a daily basis and asking him to take over, to lead us higher and higher. In fact, to do the heavy lifting.

A long time ago, St. John Paul II was speaking to a gathering of recently married couples. And at one point, he said to them, "The Christian vision of marriage is indeed demanding because it is nothing less than genuine holiness. But never forget that God offers you all the means that you will need. The goal is very high. The means to get there are sky high." And when he talks about the means, he's talking about these- these channels of God's grace. He's talking about the sacraments, about prayer, about the holy Mass, frequent confession, a daily time of meditation, of pondering, of reflection, in order to see your spouse as God sees him or her.

One writer puts this point in a very powerful way, "To see as God sees," this writer says, "people can appear very different to us depending on whether we look at them with or without affection. Looking at people mercifully means seeing them as God sees them. Then we see them as they really are, men and women with virtues that we admire but also with defects that probably make them suffer, even if they don't show it. And that call for our understanding and help. Looking at them affectionately with love enables us to know them better and so also to love them better." In a marriage, it is absolutely crucial that each spouse make that effort to see the other as God sees him or her and as a result of that, to pray for that person. That could be a very interesting question to ask right now in our own personal prayer - that person, those difficulties I see, the challenges of whatever type, do I simply allow myself to get irritated or do I really and truly pray for that person? Do I turn to God's grace knowing that he can do anything?

Matrimony is a lifelong work in progress of entwinement. We never talk about entwinement, but here it fits perfectly, or you could say, invisible- invisible weaving, if you prefer. Here's a powerful image of what needs to take place beneath the surface day after day. A novelist says, "Love itself is what is left over when being in love has burned away." We had roots that grew toward each other underground and when all the pretty blossoms had fallen from our branches, we found that we were one tree and not two. It's a lifelong progress- a lifelong project of entwinement of those branches, those roots heading towards each other. But a married couple can never take for granted that the roots are indeed, in fact, growing towards each other. That is why it is crucial that there be frequent mid-course adjustments to get those- those roots back on track. It is far, far too easy to get distracted by non-essentials, whether it be in a marriage or just in general. In fact, a key question for any endeavor is, what is my business? What should I be focusing on? And what are the things that

have been perhaps distracting me that I now see I have to jettison because they are not part of my business even though they take up a lot of time?

If we ask ourselves that question often, well, then it becomes that much easier to focus on our business and to do so with a laser-like intensity, to ponder it, and then to act accordingly. This means, of course, giving top priority to helping your spouse and children to thrive in all aspects. Marriages flourish when there is unity, when both spouses really grow toward each other on a daily basis. And there are two attitudes that we can underline that help tremendously in this project of growing towards each other. There is admiration and loyalty.

In the first place, admiration. There has to be genuine admiration for the gifts of the other. Pope Francis, as you know, wrote a very beautiful document called *The Joy of Love*. At one point, he says, "Loving another person involves the joy of contemplating and appreciating their innate beauty and sacredness." How important it is to begin that marriage with great admiration and then to make sure that- that that admiration grows throughout the course of the marriage.

There is a sublime passage in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* that you may have forgotten because it's on page 1093. It involves a married couple, Nikolai and his wife, Marie. One evening, Nikolai found his wife at her writing table writing something. "What are you writing, Marie?" he asked. Marie blushed. She was afraid that what she was writing would not be understood and approved by her husband. "It's my diary, Nikolai," she said, handing him a blue notebook filled with- with her firm, bold handwriting. "A diary?" said Nikolai, with a shade of mockery. And he took the notebook and began to read. Everything in the children's lives that seemed to the mother of interest as showing the character of the children was noted down. Nikolai put the book down and looked at his wife. The luminous eyes looked at him doubtfully to see whether he approved or not. There could be no doubt of Nikolai's approval of his enthusiastic admiration of his wife. This untiring, perpetual spiritual effort enchanted him. He was in awe at her spirituality, at that elevated, moral world that he could hardly enter and in which his wife always lived. He was proud that we- she was so clever and so good, recognizing his own insignificance beside her in the spiritual world, and he rejoiced the more that she with her soul not only belonged to him, but was a part of his very self. Well, few people can express such sublime truths as well as Tolstoy. There's admiration, there is being in awe, and there is loyalty.

Going back to Pope Francis, "Married couples joined by love speak well of each other. They try to show their spouses good side, not their weakness and faults. In any event, they keep silent rather than speak ill of them." Someone was recently talking about having listened to an experienced married couple giving a marriage prep course. And at one point, the woman of the- this experienced couple startled this- this young crowd by saying, "If I were to speak with friends, with other people,

about my husband's faults and foibles, I would be unfaithful to him." That's a rather shocking way of putting things, but she was making a very important point. She was- I would be un-loyal, I would be disloyal. If I were to- to use the Pope's words, if I were to speak of his weakness and faults.

She went on to give another bit of advice that can help us in this time of prayer. She said that long ago she and her husband had come to an understanding about the fact that they would refuse to use bazookas. Now, the- the young people preparing for marriage looked rather puzzled by this. But she went on to explain what she meant by bazookas. She said, bazookas are these- these long tubes that a soldier will put on the shoulder that reach way back and launch missiles. And this married couple had agreed long ago that when they- whenever they would get into an argument, which is inevitable, no bazookas, no reaching way back and saying to the other, okay, well three years ago you did this or that - that would be a bazooka. But those things have been forgotten, they've been forgiven, so that is not allowed. And it is tremendous advice.

Admiration, loyalty. And we can add the importance of refreshing, renewing the marriage throughout the course of one's married life. A great attitude, a great conviction, would be to be determined to have a routine free zone - no routine, no sinking into ruts, no taking the other for granted. But on the contrary, always trying to surprise the other. Someone was telling recently a very beautiful anecdote, someone who lived at a distance from his parents. One day he was speaking on the phone with them. The- this person's mother was in one room and his father was in the other room on a different phone. And halfway through the conversation, the mother, who was sitting in the kitchen- kitchen table, suddenly said, what is this? Her eyes had just rested on an envelope with her name on it. So, right there during the conversation, she opened the envelope and it was a letter from her husband who was in the next room. And, by the way, these two were getting very close to celebrating their golden wedding anniversary.

And the letter said the following, "Dear Precious One... every few generations, a special person is put on Earth to lead, to inspire, to give hope, to spread love, and to be loved. I am so grateful that you said yes when on bended knee I slipped an engagement ring on your finger. The angels in Heaven watch over our growing flock and we are blessed beyond our dreams. I love you, my one and only brown eyes." A great question for each one of us to ask in our own prayer, is there anything I can do with anyone in my own household to surprise them, to inject a sense of newness - that spark of newness that can refresh, renew, my love.

You may be thinking that very little - if anything - has been said about children so far. But as is obvious, everything changes in a marriage when children begin to arrive. We are already way over the limit of anecdotes and quotations, but let's face it - when it comes to this sublime topic, there are certain people who have just captured the essence, the depth of marriage, in an especially

eloquent way. And so, we dare to reach once more into our quiver of quotations. There was a member of Abraham Lincoln's Cabinet by the name of Edwin Stanton who said the following in a letter to his wife, Mary: "We, years ago, were lovers. We are now parents. A new relation has taken place. The love of our offspring has opened up fresh fountains of love for each other. We look forward now to life not for ourselves only but for our children. I loved you for your beauty and grace and loveliness of your person. I love you now for the richness and surpassing excellence of your mind. One love has not taken the place of the other but both stand side by side. I love you now with a fervor and truth of affection that speech cannot express."

What happens when things are not so rosy? Hanging onto anger, to resentment, to hurt can poison a marriage. The name James Dobson will no doubt- no doubt be familiar to you. Someone asked him one day, since almost every couple fights from time to time, what distinguishes a healthy marriage from one that is in serious trouble? And Dobson's answer is the following: "It is true that conflict occurs in virtually all marriages. That is how resentment and frustration are ventilated. The difference between stable families and those in serious trouble is evidenced by what happens after a fight. In healthy relationships, a period of confrontation ends in forgiveness and drawing together in deeper respect and understanding. But in unstable marriages, a period of conflict produces greater pain and anger that persists until the next fight. When that occurs, one unresolved issue is compounded by another and another and that accumulation of resentment is an ominous circumstance in any marriage. Is this not why the Apostle Paul admonished us to never let the sun go down on our anger?"

We spoke earlier of a secret weapon, that weapon of God's grace. A very tangible secret weapon you may be familiar with is the *Novena to St. Josemaria for Forgiveness*. It is a novena containing test- texts of St. Josemaria to really help to come to understand what is going on when- when that poison can enter, that poison of resentment, of anger. Marriage is hard work. Marriage involves imperfect people, yet people who are called to love each other with their defects and limitations. We have to realize, and we see we've been talking to the Lord about this, that this is a sublime calling. Even in the midst of limitations we can never take our eyes off the ultimate goal which is sanctity. That is why you can help us to consider one final thought from Pope Francis again from this document, *The Joy of Love* where he talks about the need to fight to make that that marriage grow.

He says, "A love that is weak or sickly incapable of accepting marriage as a challenge to be taken up and fought for, reborn, renewed and reinvented until death, that marriage cannot sustain a great commitment. It will give into the culture of the ephemeral that prevents a constant process of growth." The Holy Father speaks often about the culture of- of the ephemeral - here to- here today, gone tomorrow. And he's saying, what is needed is the real kind of love, a love that will lead to

accept that marriage as a challenge, one that will lead each of the spouses to do whatever it takes to renew, to reinvent, to give rebirth to that marriage, to that relationship .

With that in mind, we finish this time of prayer by turning to Our Lady, she who was- who is this aqueduct, this channel of God's grace. We assure Our Lady for who knows how many- the millionth time that we are fully determined to turn to her on a daily basis, especially through praying her rosary, in order to bring about that very same depth and very same commitment, at least we can aim for this, that existed there in the Holy Family in Nazareth.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations that you have communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help in putting them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



ST. JOSEMARIA INSTITUTE

WWW.STJOSEMARIA.ORG

Content may not be published or reprinted without permission.

*We are pleased to offer a transcript of this podcast to serve the needs of all our subscribers.
Please note, however, that this transcript is generated by AI and may not be perfectly accurate.*