



If this story, about a couple married for 62 years who died 4 hours apart, does not make you sigh just a little, well ... I'm not sure you have a soul.

Or how about the story about Fred Stobaugh, the 96-year-old widower who wrote an ode to his late wife, "Sweet Lorraine," and entered it in a song-writing contest? If you can watch the video without tearing up, don't bother reading on. You're just not human.

Why do stories like these touch our hearts in such a moving way? I think it's because stories like these so clearly demonstrate the lifelong commitment marriage is meant to be. Till death do us part. We say the words, and we see in them an ideal to aspire to, something we all long to attain, and yet not all of us do.

It's cliché to lament divorce statistics, but in an attempt to combat the problem of rising divorce rates and declining marriage rates, let's take a look at some cultural problems that can be obstacles to healthy marriages.

1. We have a mixed-up idea of married love.

It's normal to go into marriage with some expectation of romance and lovey-dovey stuff. After all, that's how people wind up wanting to get married in the first place. They fall in love, they have a romantic relationship, and they are so crazy about each other that they can't wait to start "together forever." That's awesome. That's fun. That's how God intends for couples to begin.

Every healthy marriage, no matter what stage its in, does have some measure of romantic love. Just as people have different personalities, though, different marriages do too, and most marriages don't maintain that full-force "romantic" feeling forever. And we should not expect them to.

When people mix up married love with romantic love, they wrongly feel that their marriage is in decline when the romance begins to fade. There are fewer rose-petal baths and more insurance premiums. There are no more love songs and an awful lot of day-to-day drudgery.

Fading romance in a culture that tells couples they can quit when it gets hard, leave when they "fall out of love," or their spouse "doesn't make them happy anymore," is a recipe for discouragement and the kinds of negative, selfish thoughts that can lead to divorce.

2. We fail at self-giving love.

This is a problem I have observed even among very "faithful" Catholics who know and love a lot about their faith. Somehow, we as a Church have failed to help some husbands and wives hear and understand that their call to marriage is a call to make a total gift of self to their spouse.

St. John Paul II emphasizes the importance of "self-gift" in *Gaudium et Spes*:
Man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.

That "sincere gift of self" he mentions is a daily call to sacrifice, and I will let you in on a little secret: It's not feel-good stuff. It hurts. Like sacrifice always does. That's why they call it sacrifice.

In my own life, I have seen what look like "perfect" marriages on the outside fall apart on the inside because of a failure of one or both of the spouses to recognize this simple fact: Love comes first. Charity above all things. You can be an otherwise "perfect" Catholic couple—earning a decent living, setting up a home, having children and educating them well—but if you fail to recognize the importance of loving your spouse with self-giving love, you are failing. At the most important thing. None of that other stuff matters.

We aren't all perfect at self-sacrifice, of course, and in a healthy marriage there is plenty of room for mistakes, mercy, and forgiveness. The fundamentally important call to hear, however, is the call to love one another and to fully find yourself through a "sincere gift of self" to your spouse. That kind of love isn't just "nice if you can find it"; it's what marriage is.

3. We misunderstand the importance of vocation.

Vocation is a tough concept for many of today's younger generations to understand. The idea of a calling—not a job, but a calling—to marriage, priesthood, or religious life is a foreign one to many. When we fail to recognize marriage as a calling, however, we belittle it. Culturally, it becomes a hobby or something nice to do “if you're into that kind of thing.” It certainly isn't something you would sacrifice your career for. But our culture lets young people know that career goals can trump marriage. Travel plans can take precedence. There's no hurry.

The sad result is that when people get married later in life, there is less likelihood that they will meet their spouses when both are ready to make a commitment, and there are fewer marriage-ready men and women in the dating pool even for those who are looking seriously for a spouse.

If marriage is a vocation, that means it's your life's work; it's not a job and not something you do on the side. It's something you do first, and then build to rest of your life around, not something you try to fit in later, once you've saved up enough money and you've accomplished “more important” things.

The saddest part of cultural obstacles to healthy marriage is that they negatively affect a lot of innocent people who desperately want to answer a call to marriage. They want to find their spouse, get married, begin a life-long commitment, and practice self-giving love. But our culture sometimes gets in the way.

The good news, though, is that our God is an awesome God. The power of an anti-marriage culture may be great, but God is greater and He works with what we give Him. All of us, married, single, divorced, widowed, dating, or something in between, can pray every day for the grace we need to live out Christ's call to perfection in an imperfect world.

Let's support marriage. Let's pray for each other. Let's encourage each another.