

9 Important Things

Dating & Engaged / Relationships

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This past November 7th, Solemnity of Mary Mediatrix of All Graces, my wife and I celebrated our 17th wedding anniversary. Seventeen blissful years that I would not trade with any other stage in my life.

Today, I can say these have been years of conjugal peace and harmony, and I'm not talking about a dead-silence kind of peace. I'm talking about the kind of peace of being with family. A peace conquered by working together. It wasn't easy, because this conjugal harmony is part of the process of holiness through marriage, which is one of the fruits of the sacrament.

This is a "strange" sacrament. In the rest of the sacraments, the elements that constitute them are clear and different. In this sacrament, the spouses are the physical symbols, the ministers and the beneficiaries all at once, and the consent out of free will is the form in which this happens. As much as the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains it, marriage is one of those things you must live out in order to understand it well.

I would have liked for someone to explain this to me in greater depth when I got married. That's why, I list nine elements of married life that I would have liked to better understand before getting married.

1. Plan B doesn't exist. Marriage is for the rest of your life.

It seems that this point is made very clear in marriage prep courses. I've always had good examples of this in my life: my parents loved and respected each other in sickness and in health; in richness and in times of poverty; in the good and the bad times. Being the youngest of 12 children, I considered myself "immune" to spirit of the times: "it will never happen to me" I reassured myself, because after all, I loved that woman who had come into my life like no one else had. It's just as important to know the truth, as it is to understand and love it. Because I only knew the truth, but I lacked understanding and love for it that I found myself in the middle of a conjugal crisis asking myself, "Was it a mistake to get married?" Inevitably, that leads you to think, "is there a more suitable woman for me?" From there, it's only a step away from despising that beautiful person God placed in my life to lead me to holiness. Marriage is a commitment for the rest of your life and what makes this a marvelous adventure is precisely that: marriage is for the rest of your life. When you understand this, the conjugal crisis becomes an everyday opportunity to grow together.

2. Marriage isn't about my happiness.

This is key but often we don't learn this until years later. Especially men. When asked individually why they got married, spouses usually say, "I got married to be happy," but marriage isn't a magic box that we can extract happiness from-there wouldn't be divorces if this were the case. Marriage is about searching for my spouse's happiness with all of my strength. My happiness should be based on making those I love happy: my wife and children. Once you understand this and your relationship begins to revolve around making the other person happy you'll notice your marriage bloom and you'll see the fruits of the sacrament.

3. Communication is more effective than silence...always.

Maybe we should rephrase this truth: silence is a form of communication. Silence usually communicates hostility, disinterest and a bad predisposition that inevitably kills the relationship. The problem is that there is a difference in the way men and women handle communication when they are stressed. When women are stressed they desperately need to speak to with someone, but when a man is stressed, the last thing he wants to do is talk about what stressed him out in the first place. Many times this simple difference makes our wives perceive our silence as hostility and we can perceive the need for females to talk as a threat. Lesson: if my wife is stressed, I listen to her without correcting her or wanting to solve her problems. The simple act of talking about her problems helps her to resolve them. If I'm stressed, she allows me to calm down and then we talk.

4. I benefit from serving others.

Another wonderful truth: marriage is a community of service. If I serve my wife and my wife serves me, we both benefit from this. Us men usually don't understand why our wives serve around the house almost instinctively and us...well, we're very comfortable with the situation. This is where we fail to communicate because our dear wives many times think that if they keep giving, we'll realize it and we'll also want to give. Generally, this doesn't work. Two things were made very clear to me about this truth: the first thing my wife told me in a not so friendly tone, but she told me, was I had not realized everything that she did and everything I didn't do. The second, was when our children were born. During her post operation after having a C-Section, I began to serve her and realized how true our Lord's words are: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35). This is a reality we must remember everyday and offer ourselves to our spouses in an attitude of service.

5. Conflict isn't a sign of a dysfunctional couple.

I would actually say that the opposite is true: the absence of conflict is a sign that you've both given up. A couple that argues is a relationship in which both individuals have differences of opinions, therefore, both have equal dignity. Like I said in the beginning, life is made up of hard work and absolute peace probably only exists in the cemetery. A marriage without conflict is dying. This doesn't mean we have to find a conflict in order to revive our marriages. It simply means that we should be aware that we are humans who make mistakes so eventually a conflict will surface. When conflicts surface we can take this as an opportunity to learn and love more.

6. For a fruitful marriage you need three: God, you and your spouse.

Did I mention that marriage is sacrament? The sacraments are an efficient signs of grace! These must be renewed everyday, but not just with our spouse. These promises should be renewed each day before God so His grace acts. So how do we renew these promises? By doing each of these things: recognizing that marriage is forever; placing our spouses before us; placing ourselves in our spouse's shoes to communicate; serving each other; and understanding that conflict is an opportunity from God for our personal sanctification. This is all possible if God is invited frequently into our marriage. Praying together and with our children, participating of the Holy Mass, and finding an embrace in God's forgiveness each time things don't go according to his plan.

Regularly giving time to God has very tangible outcomes for your marriage. Steve Bollman, in his book *The Choice Wine: Seven Steps to a Superabundant Marriage* shares that the "General Social Survey indicates that couples attending weekly church services have a divorce rate 60 percent lower than those who never attend church services."

7. Children are a gift we're entrusted with by God

Boy, do we know this! Our first daughter died the day after her birth. "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD!" (Job 1:21), but it is one thing to say it and another to believe it. Our mission in life is to lead our children to holiness, not more, not less. That is our mission as parents and with our first child we did just that. After that, our comfort came through Tomás, Matías, and Fransico who will make the longer journey. Our only handle on sanity after our daughter Cecilia's death was knowing that she had reached holiness and happiness, infinite happiness, which is something we would have never been able to give her under any circumstance. So what happens to those marriages who don't receive that gift? These couples are still entrusted by God...either to sanctify other people's children, through adoption, or by being a marriage filled with the fruit of helping out at your parish or apostolic movement.

8. A good marriage is the union of two people who are good at forgiving.

The person who does not forgive in their marriage is like a person who drinks poison but expects not to die. It doesn't make any sense, right? To ask for forgiveness we must be very humble, and to forgive we must be merciful. "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." (Luke 6:26) This is very true in marriage. Forgive us, as we forgive those who trespass against us. We cannot ask God to forgive us if we are unwilling to forgive our spouse! When we forgive we express forgiveness through reconciliation. At the same time, we teach our children to be humble and merciful.

9. Marriage offers the possibility of the ultimate personal fulfillment.

This isn't mentioned a lot, but the reality is that marriage is sensational! "God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). Naturally, it's logical that we look for someone who complements us. "You complete me" is a line commonly used because it's an implied truth. In marriage we can feel personally complete and in harmony. Tertullian says, "How beautiful, then, is the marriage of two Christians, two who are one in hope, one in desire, one in the way of life they follow, one in the religion they practice...Nothing divides them either in flesh or spirit' (ad Uxorem 9). All this highlights great truth: to be fulfilled we must give of ourselves and to give of ourselves we must be in control of ourselves, and that's not something we find in a store, this demands maturity and balance which requires a lot of time and prayer.

Extracted from CatholicLink: <http://catholic-link.org/2015/11/24/9-tips-to-help-your-marriage/>