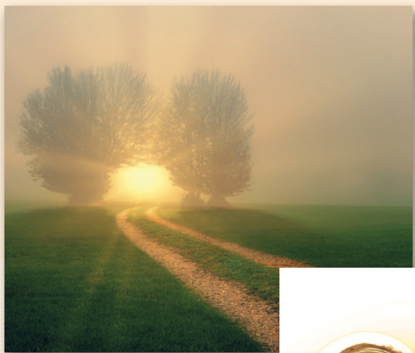


The Roman Catholic Diocese of Oslo

Love is for Life

Marriage Preparation Course



LOVE IS FOR LIFE

Maria Elizabeth Fongen, Fr. Reidar Voith og Fr. Oddvar Moi:
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Introduction

Dear friends! You are now preparing for a life of love together.

Soon you will choose each other once and for all, as the most important person in each other's life; you will establish a community of love, a family of your own. Those of us who have developed this marriage preparation course want you to become even better acquainted, to understand each other's personality and thus be able to know even better what you are doing when you give each other your 'yes'.

Why 'must' you take a marriage preparation course? To get married is one of the most important decisions you will make in life. The Catholic Church wants you to know as much as possible about what you are entering into and the responsibilities you take on. Such an ambition comes to expression in this obligatory preparation course before you get married in the Church. It prepares you to answer the three preparatory questions you will be asked in the marriage ceremony: 1) Are you marrying each other without coercion, freely and wholeheartedly? 2) Do you promise to love and honour each other for as long as you both shall live? 3) Are you prepared to accept the children God may give you? The Church wants you to be as well-equipped as possible to meet the challenges of marriage, and it will support you with prayer, for life consists of storms and sunshine, difficulties and victories.

The themes and contents in this booklet are from the Bible and the Church's most important documents on marriage and family life, as well as from research-based and professional literature on communication and conflict resolution and prevention. We have put emphasis on thoroughly explaining what the Church says about marriage and why. The course is thus also a brief introduction to certain aspects of Catholic faith.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Oslo's marriage preparation course consists of four or five meetings spread over several weeks. This gives you time to work on your relationship with each other during the course period, to engage in a process that will strengthen you in your love for each other and increase your awareness regarding the decision to live together for the rest of your life.

Best wishes – with the course and with your life as husband and wife! Know that you are not alone in this endeavour: God is with you the whole way, in good times and in bad. You may not always 'feel' his presence, but when you reflect from time to time, you will discover that 'indeed, God was with us' in very specific situations.

This book is an abridged and revised edition of similarly-titled course material published in 2005 by the diocesan Family Centre. The material from 2005, which was prepared by Fr. Arne Marco Kirsebom SSCC, Maria Elizabeth Fongen, Elzbieta Schjetne and Ella Hygen, was revised in 2010. The present revision, published in 2021, was prepared by Maria Elizabeth Fongen, Fr. Reidar Voith and Fr. Oddvar Moi.

Oslo, February 2021

The Catechetical Centre, Catholic Diocese of Oslo

1





PART 1:

Called to marriage

*God created man in the image of himself,
in the image of God he created him,
male and female he created them.*

(Genesis 1: 27)

*This is why a man leaves his father and mother
and becomes attached to his wife,
and they become one flesh.*

(Genesis 2: 24)

1. One day you became more than friends. You experienced a love that you understood could last for the rest of your life – a willed and enduring love, independent of feelings and strong enough to withstand adversity. You began nurturing a desire to share everything in life and to grow old together. Reflect for a moment: How did it start? When did you start to understand that the love you shared had the potential to become a lifelong project? By thinking back on how you got together, you can reflect on the role God has played in it.

The wedding – a symbol of God’s love for mankind

2. You have now begun preparations for the wedding celebration – a key symbol in Christian faith. At the start of the first book in the Bible, we read about God giving the first people, Adam and Eve, to each other as husband and wife, and towards the end of the last book, Revelation, we read about the Marriage of the Lamb, at which time the adorned bride, the New Jerusalem – the Universal Church – descends from Heaven to be united with her bridegroom, Jesus Christ. It is significant that the first miracle Jesus performs is at a wedding, at Cana in Galilee (John 2). We can also point to how one of St. Paul’s most beautiful texts presents Christ’s love for the Church as a pattern for the love between spouses (Ephesians 5). In many other Bible texts, God expresses his love for us as a bridegroom longing for his bride.

3. God uses the imagery of a wedding to tell us something about how much he loves us. God is love in his very essence; in himself he lives the mystery of a personal and

loving union. Love must be shared – given and received – in order to have meaning. This happens continuously within the Trinity of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

4. God created us ‘in his image’, with the ability to love such as he loves, indeed, with a *call to love*. When you now, as man and woman, want to live in lifelong faithfulness to each other, you launch into the great project of living as a reflection of God’s faithful and absolute love for us all. At the same time, your union in love points towards the ultimate and perfect union with God, a union towards which each and every one of us is heading.

Marriage as a call

5. In the Catholic Church, we often refer to marriage as a *vocation*. A vocation is a calling, a summons, something ‘said’ to us with the intention that we should follow it. It gives us an orientation and direction when we make important decisions. It is also sometimes referred to as a *life task* – a general purpose to which we feel a deep need to devote our life.

6. As Christians, we assume a call can come from God. This we do based on our belief that God can and wants to tell us something. Throughout history, God has made himself known and has spoken to people in many ways and on many occasions, for instance through the patriarchs and prophets, and especially through becoming human, through his Son, Jesus Christ. Probably very few of us experience that God addresses us directly, but we can nevertheless catch a glimpse of God’s plan by trying to interpret our situation in light of his message to mankind, and by being attentive and open to God’s often-unexpected suggestions.

7. Marriage is willed by God ‘from the beginning’, as Jesus points out in the Gospel of Matthew: ‘Have you not read that the Creator from the beginning made them male and female and that he said: “This is why a man leaves his father and mother and becomes attached to his wife, and the two become one flesh?” They are no longer two, therefore, but one flesh. So then, what God has united, human beings must not divide’ (Matthew 19: 4–6). Since the dawn of time, men and women in diverse cultures have found it expedient to live in lifelong, committed relationships marked by special rituals. God has allowed us to understand that the way of life which is best suited for love in its widest, deepest and most fruitful dimensions is marriage between one man and one woman.

8. The Catholic Church considers marriage a vocation parallel to that of entering the priesthood or a religious order. The seriousness of the responsibility you take upon yourselves, of wanting to live as spouses, is great, and it requires thorough preparation.

9. In this book we invite you to see marriage not only as a way of life which you yourselves have chosen, but also as a life task offered to you by God. This puts a completely different perspective on life than do postmodern patterns such as cohabitation, serial monogamy, non-committed liaisons and so on. God has a very special plan for the two of you in your life together. He implants in you a longing to bond with each other and to start a family together. He allows you to see that it is possible to live a love that does not fail – to become a sign in the world of God’s inexhaustible love for us. He calls you to live in a committed love relationship until death separates you, without reservations of any kind, and without any limitation other than death. He suggests that you invest FULLY in each other and in a future together. In short: God invites you to participate in his all-encompassing project of love – a project in which every person has a task to fulfil in his or her own lifetime.

10. Discovering the call to marriage is a process involving self-examination, recognizing your strengths and weaknesses, finding out how you harmonize with each other and identifying the goals you share and on which you can agree. But it is just as much a process in which God actively participates and challenges you to venture to ask: Lord, what do you want to do with our lives? What is your plan for us? How can we best fulfil your will?

11. Give yourselves ample time to receive the answers which God, through the Holy Spirit, wants to give you. Pray together, gather inspiration from Holy Scripture and, to whatever extent possible, seek Christ himself in the sacraments of confession and communion. It is also wise to seek guidance from a trusted priest. God sometimes lets us wait a bit longer than we like for an answer, sometimes to train up our faith and endurance, other times so that all the necessary pieces in the puzzle of life will have time to fall into place. Eventually the assurance will come: ‘We can begin our life together!’

Marriage is a sacrament

12. In the Catholic Church, we see marriage as a *sacrament* – a sacred and visible sign of an invisible reality instituted by Jesus Christ. A sacrament is an act of grace

which the Church performs in God's name; God creates the inner, actual reality, while the external and visible action refers to this same divine reality. The sacraments are linked to stages in life and fundamental choices. Through them, God gives himself to us. When we receive the sacraments in the belief that God works through them, he gives us his strengthening *grace* – his inexhaustible power of love – adapted to the course of our life.

13. In the marriage sacrament, you as spouses become bound to each other in the most fundamental and indissoluble way. The fact of you belonging to each other is a true picture of the union between Christ and the Church. The grace of the marriage sacrament causes your human love – which can often be self-centred and come up short – gradually to become more perfect. Grace strengthens the indissoluble unity between you and sanctifies you on the path to eternal life (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Article 7, 1661).

What is necessary for contracting a valid Catholic marriage?

14. God wants spouses to make each other happy *in the long term, in fact, with eternity as the goal*. The Church therefore wants you to enter into marriage based on the best-possible preconditions. For this to happen, it is important that you be fully aware of what the Catholic Church means by marriage. Put briefly, marriage is a permanent partnership between one man and one woman; it is grounded on unconditional and mutual love, respect and faithfulness, in good times and in bad, for the whole of life.

15. Marriage has two purposes. The first is to establish a *communio personarum* – a community or communion of persons – ordered towards the good of the spouses – their physical and mental unity in love. The second is to procreate and raise children. A marriage comes into being when a bride and groom voluntarily and mutually consent to give themselves unreservedly to each other in the presence of a minister of the Church and two witnesses.

16. Let us look more closely at what you promise each other in the marriage vows. Look at the wedding ritual (which you receive/download from our website). The priest first asks if you come to the Church to enter into marriage without coercion, freely and wholeheartedly. He then asks if you will live as man and wife and love and honour each other for as long as you both shall live, and if you will lovingly accept any children God may give you, raising them according to the law of Christ

and his Church. If you can answer yes to all this, you then declare your consent in the solemn vows: you take each other as man and wife, promise to love and honour each other, be faithful to each other and stay together in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, until death separates you.

17. In line with the contents of the vows you will make to each other, the Church sets some conditions that must be met in order to declare the marriage valid:

- Because marriage is intended to be a total and exclusive love relationship between one man and one woman, *there must be no obstacles to entering into the marriage – for example, a previous marriage that has not been declared invalid by the Church’s tribunal.*
- Because love, essentially, is something one gives of one’s own free will, it follows that the alliance of love which a woman and a man enter into through marriage *must take place voluntarily and without coercion, fear or external pressure from any person or situation.*
- Because God, ‘from the beginning’, has intended that marriage should be indissoluble, *neither the man nor the woman, on their own or together, can dissolve the marriage; they must enter into it with the intention of being faithful to each other and staying with each other until death separates them.*
- Because the purpose of marriage is that the spouses give each other their full and complete love, *consent to the marriage’s unity requires that the couple is willing to forgo extramarital relationships; the bride and groom must intend to be faithful to each other until separated by death.*
- Because marriage is a life partnership based on love, it is the most secure framework in which to conceive and raise children. *Having a Catholic marriage requires adherence to the two goals of marriage: to form a community of persons based on love, and to be willing to live out a fruitful and responsible love by accepting the children God may give you.*

18. When a man and woman say yes to each other upon this basis, with one of the Church’s ministers and two witnesses present, God creates an indissoluble bond between the two. The vows the bride and groom give each other – *the consent* – effectively create the marriage bond. The marriage bond can only be dissolved when one of the spouses dies. No earthly being or authority can dissolve this bond, not even the Church. This is why the Catholic Church does not recognize divorce. In the case of a couple being unable to live together due to an unbearable level of conflict,

the partners can separate, but the marriage nevertheless remains valid. It is only in cases where one or both partners, from the outset, was or were unable to enter into marriage, or did not do so of their own free will (see the conditions outlined in paragraph 17), that the marriage can be declared invalid through a process administered by the Church's tribunal. (You can find in-depth explanations of the sacrament of matrimony in Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, 11–16, and in his *Letter to Families*, 6–11.)

Doubt can emerge

19. Very few people feel 100 per cent ready to get married. It is natural to question both your own and your sweetheart's personal qualifications for successfully living the rest of your lives together. This is a good kind of doubt; you should use it actively to view the forthcoming marriage from several angles, weighing your motivation in a balance with your ability to take care of each other and the children you might receive. If you sense a strong doubt about whether you should marry each other, talk with trusted persons, with your priest or the course leaders or others. There is no shame in this. The consequences of entering into marriage on a shaky foundation can cause you and your nearest and dearest much suffering.

A hope for your marriage

20. The two of you probably have many dreams and plans about how you want to face the future as a married couple. These are a very important part of preparing for marriage. Such dreams and plans equip you to face the future with a shared outlook and shared goals. Knowing the values on which you want to build your relationship and the dreams you want to try to realize together is already part of the integration process that an enduring marriage is. You stake out the path you want to travel. To help shape a shared vision for your marriage, you can ask yourselves the following questions:

- Are we willing to give ourselves, mutually and unconditionally, to each other?
- Are we able to accept each other such as we are?
- What intentions do we have with our marriage?
- What thoughts do we have about building a family together?
- How many children do we want?
- Which values are important for us to maintain?

- How will we earn a living?
- What do we want to be for other people?
- How can we help each other continue to develop or to further our education?
- Are there special issues we are passionate about, which we want to work on together?

Prayer

21. As we have seen in this chapter, marriage, from the very beginning, is more than merely a relationship between a man and a woman. It is also a visible and real sign of God's love for us. But God is not pushy. He has given us a free will, so it is up to us to choose whether or not to open up to him. One of the most effective ways to open up to God is through conversation with him – prayer. To pray is to adopt a questioning and trusting attitude to our Creator and Father and to enter into his quiet presence. To pray is to deliberately set aside time for God in our life and to let his grace enrich us. This gives God room to act in our life. At the same time, it takes great trust and openness between two people if they are to agree to pray together. Do the two of you have this kind of trusting relationship? Are you able to be this open? Praying together would give you great strength.

22. A prayer can be extremely simple. You do not need to use memorized prayers or prayer books, even though these can be good ways to get started. When you pray together, you can use spontaneous words or begin with simple prayers, for example, at meal times or when you have an extra need for help. Praying is at the same time an act of mercy – we give other people our heartfelt attention when we pray for them. Similarly, we respond to God's affection for us every time we approach him with a tender heart. We always have Christ's promise that he is present when we pray together: 'For where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them' (Matthew 18: 20).

A prayer

23. God, our Father, here we are.

We love each other because you have put love in our hearts.

Guide us in the time leading up to our marriage,

so we can serve each other ever-more fully,

and thereby show you our thankfulness. Amen.



PART 2:

Interfaith and intercultural marriages

*And people from east and west,
from north and south, will come and sit down
at the feast in the kingdom of God.*

(Luke 13: 29)

24. Today's modes of communication have made it increasingly common for people with different beliefs or cultural backgrounds to enter into enduring love relationships. This always involves challenges. Differences in religious beliefs and cultures can cause great tension in a love relationship. In marriage, which is unifying in the deepest sense, you have received a special vocation to use your differences as means of enrichment and to seek ever-greater unity between yourselves. The unifying nature of marriage, in which love is the reason and basis for your fellowship, points forward to the unity God wants for the great family of all mankind.

Ecumenical and interfaith marriages, and marriages with disparity of cult

25. Marriage between Catholics and non-Catholics can be divided into two categories:

- *Mixed marriage.* One spouse is Catholic and the other belongs to another Christian denomination; both are baptized.
- *Marriage with disparity of cult.* A marriage between a Catholic and a non-baptized person, or a person with no religion.

Since receiving a sacrament requires both partners to be baptized with Christian baptism, a marriage between a Catholic and a non-baptized person is nonsacramental.

26. Another type of marriage disparity to be aware of is that a large number of couples who marry in the Catholic Church consist of one Catholic who considers himself/herself a believing Christian, and a non-Catholic who only, or in great measure, has a nominal or merely cultural relation to his/her church and does not really believe in God. There are also cases in which both partners are nominal Catholics, but one partner considers himself/herself a non-believer or has left the Church.

Conditions

27. Probably the most difficult aspect of the necessary formalities regarding marriage between Catholics and non-Catholics is the rule that both parties must be informed of the objectives of marriage and its basic principles (listed above), and that these cannot be excluded by either party. To obtain the necessary permission to marry a non-Catholic, the following conditions must be met:

1. The Catholic promises to be faithful to his/her Catholic faith, and promises that he/she will do everything in his/her power so that the children from the marriage will be baptized and raised in the Catholic faith.
2. The non-Catholic must be informed of this duty well in advance, such that he/she becomes aware of its contents.
3. Both parties must be informed of the Catholic view of the nature and purpose of marriage, the *communio personarum* (community or communion of persons) and children, which neither of them can exclude.

28. The Church claims that there are basic principles that create the true and perfect image of marriage. As you read in Part I of this chapter, these basic principles relate primarily to the purposes of marriage: to promote love between the spouses, to conceive and raise children, plus the essential aspects of the nature of marriage, namely unity, indissolubility, and, for the baptized, sacramentality. If one of the partners rejects the basic principles relating to the nature of marriage, then the couple cannot be married in the Church. This can be experienced as very painful or difficult for the Catholic, but in some cases, it will be more correct to refrain from entering into a Catholic marriage.

29. It is important to be able to agree on the same basic goals when your intention is to form a life partnership. Take plenty of time to talk properly about this and to look into what this will mean in practice. For example, the Catholic's Sunday Mass obligation and catechism for school-age children may present some challenges,

and you, together, must find good solutions to them. There is something that can have a decisive impact on the whole of your marriage, namely that during the engagement period, you openly and honestly discuss your view of the nature of marriage in relation to your faith and outlook on life. Set up practices that safeguard both partners' right to exercise their religious life and their responsibility in raising children. Feel free to ask a priest for advice.

To live as a sign of unity

30. Even though marriage between people of different faiths can lead to extra challenges, there is also the possibility that through exercising practical love, the couple can live constructively and do pioneering work in building bridges across religious differences. Marriage between a Catholic and a person from another Christian denomination can have great ecumenical value, especially when both partners are faithful in fulfilling their religious obligations. Baptism, which the husband and wife share in common, and God's grace, form the basis for their unity and their ethical and spiritual values. In a marriage between a Catholic and a non-Christian, mutuality and respect can be lived out in exemplary ways, making an impression on others, providing a pattern worth following and ultimately leading to increased *understanding* between different religions or worldviews.

Ecumenism in practice

31. To restore Christian unity is a job we are all called to do on a daily basis. A first step towards this end is to strive to avoid characterizations, value judgments and actions that do not represent the faiths of others in a true and just way. A second step is to engage in sincere dialogue in order to become better acquainted with each other's faith and doctrine. Above all, praying together is important. Prayer – gathering together in Jesus' name – is an expression of the love that drives the ecumenical movement forward. Praying together is also an expression of the bond that already connects Christians from different denominations.

Cross-cultural marriage

32. From our childhood environment we acquire a conceptual apparatus and behaviours that indicate quite a lot about our identity, the values that are important for us and how we relate to others. All of us belong to one or more cultures and any number of subcultures that give us cues about what is fitting, normal and expected.

This concerns not only cultures relating to nationality, ethnicity, language groups and traditions but also cultures for generational belonging, functional ability, social background, gender, political and religious belonging and so on. When we are on the inside of such groups, we know almost intuitively what sort of behaviour is or is not acceptable. For outsiders, it is not all that easy to recognize these codes that are already understood by the in-group.

33. Cross-cultural marriage *can* pose extra challenges, but if you are deliberate about building the greatest-possible agreement between yourselves, then the challenges need not be too difficult to overcome. Here are some common stress factors:

- Language barriers (limited vocabulary, some couples must often communicate in a third language – this reduces the ability of both spouses to understand and explain themselves)
- The families may disapprove of the marriage (prejudice, criticism, ostracism)
- Culturally conditioned attitudes (to gender, relationships, raising children, social interaction)
- Friends or acquaintances may disapprove of the marriage (this often has a greater impact than the negative attitudes of parents)
- Moving and settling far from one's home country (longing, alienation, loneliness)
- Celebrating a double set of holidays or needing to combine different ways of celebrating the same holiday

34. There are, however, several coping strategies. Here are some key ones:

- *Practise communication skills*
- *Build a dialogue in which the contributions of both partners have equal weight*
- *Gain cultural competence*
- *Focus more on what unites you than on what divides you; work towards mutual goals*
- *Seek support from close family members and friends, from your faith and from humour*

35. Being able to communicate well is crucial. To build a community, you need to be able to talk together and ‘read’ each other’s wordless messages. What you say without words – through body language, caresses, good actions and deeds for each other – will be especially important if you do not speak the same language. Similarly, it is essential to know or sense when you should be quiet and let your spouse have peace and quiet to think.

36. Learning each other’s language and social codes is the best investment you can make. We often assume that the person who moves from another country to Norway is the one who must make the greater effort to adapt. But if you both make an equal effort, if you both strive to learn each other’s language better, you will experience an even better outcome. It takes a long time to learn a language well. Our most intimate thoughts are particularly difficult to translate and express. Be patient with each other and use several ways to learn each other’s language.

37. Furthermore, it is important that when talking together, you treat each other’s contributions as equally important. Both persons’ views should be listened to and taken into consideration. It is also important to learn each other’s culture, to take an active interest in each other’s cultural baggage. Visit each other’s homeland and families to the extent that this is possible. Get to know the music, food, art, literature, traditions and so on. While this results in knowledge about each other’s background, it also makes both of you more aware of your own cultural heritage and can result in you both wanting to learn more about your own roots.

38. Sometimes it is necessary to get help to achieve a good intercultural marriage. Such help can be had from family counsellors, professional literature, family and friends. Published research on marriage confirms that religious faith is a very important resource that also provides strength to cope with the difficult aspects of a marriage relationship.

See the assignments and resources for this chapter on the Catechetical Centre’s webpages.

2





PART 1:

Created in God's image

*God created man in the image of himself,
in the image of God he created him,
male and female he created them.*

(Genesis 1: 27)

39. In the first chapter of the Bible, we read that humans are created as man and woman in the image of God. This plays a key role in the Christian understanding of marriage. To be created in God's image means God has given us a unique dignity in the context of all of creation. Furthermore, the specific characteristics of the man and woman enable them to live in a mutually complementary, enriching and fruitful unity.

The theology of marriage

40. At the start of the Old Testament we find two accounts of Creation; both tell us that the role God has given to humans is very special and different from the roles of other creatures. We can be said to be situated between God and the rest of creation. We are called to mediate God's presence to the rest of creation by being created in God's image. All of creation should be able to 'discover' God via our way of serving creation. This is why we have been given a unique responsibility in creation, and the well-being of creation depends on our ability to live in harmony with the likeness we have received from God.

41. We are created as male and female. The likeness with God becomes visible in the man and the woman individually but also in the man and the woman as a couple. The image becomes visible in a special way when the two come together and conceive

a child. Through conception, God's creative power effectively creates. When a man and a woman meet and want to get married and share their life with each other, they can, in faith, ask whether God has not brought them together in a miraculous way. They may feel like they are 'made for each other'. That marriage is a sacrament in the Catholic Church means the two become, for each other, a sign of God's saving love. The love they show each other should point beyond themselves to God. Their love emanates not only from themselves but is rooted in God. In a person's love of us, we also encounter God's love.

42. But spouses are not called merely to live for each other; they are also called to live for the children God may give them in the marriage. Parents are called to be their children's first and foremost contact with faith and with God. Through the parents' example and love for the children, the children should grow in faith. As believing Christians, we see God as the origin and source of all love. Love is God's main characteristic, and everything God does is rooted in love. Since God created us in his image, it is natural that he gave us the ability to love. The accounts of Creation tell us that the man and woman are deeply connected, have a place in creation that is different from that of all other creatures, and that they will unite as spouses.

Who are you? Who am I? Identity and unity

43. Throughout life, we will constantly experience change in ourselves. In this process of development, several basic questions will arise: *Who am I? Why am I here, now? Where am I going? What is the meaning of life? How can I attain eternal life?* These questions can lead us into a dialogue with God, for he has the key to answering them. It is important that you share with each other your thoughts about these questions because they concern not only each of you as individuals but also you as a couple.

44. Each of you is like an undiscovered world with a unique past. Through your childhood you assimilated family traditions, values and ways of interacting that shape how you think, talk and act. Your family background has a huge impact on how you will interact with each other. It is important for you to know about each other's history and be able to tell each other, openly, about both good and difficult experiences. Become well acquainted with each other's families and circle of friends. This will increase your understanding of what has influenced your spouse, and it will give insight into how your future together may develop.

The golden potential of difference

45. You are man and woman, each with traits given by your biological sex, not only physically but also mentally and emotionally. The feminine and masculine characteristics create the natural tension and attraction between a man and a woman. Allow yourselves to be fascinated by the differences; explore and discover how your differences can give you a more complementary and expanded perspective. Use each other's insights and patterns of reaction to learn something about yourselves and to find new ways of expressing yourselves as human beings, to become more human. In a marriage, it is important to *accept that you are different and to use the differences constructively, for the benefit of your unity and community.*

Created for equality

46. Christianity's view of how sexual differences can best be dealt with is imbedded in the concept of equality. God has 'designed' us as men and women, as persons with different characteristics and roles, yet we are equally necessary for each other and for the perpetuation of mankind. Since the very beginning, God has intended that the man and the woman should be *mates – equal partners* with all the rights belonging to human beings. Christ substantiated this view of the equality of persons, and St. Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, writes that 'there can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither slave nor freeman, there can be neither male nor female – for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3: 28). Christ frees all people from the shackles of sexual difference, ethnicity and social status, and he restores our equality *as human beings created in his image*. As Christians, we are obliged to confront cultural patterns that devalue persons based on their sex, examples being the macho culture, of which there are many variants, and types of feminism that make men objects of hate. Instead, we should work to promote mutual respect between the sexes.

Have I found 'the right one'?

47. Each of you will surely ask yourself this. We recommend that you turn the question on its head: Am I willing to be the right one for my beloved? With this as the starting point, it will be easier to understand that you can become the right one, in a slow process in which you gradually and voluntarily change yourself to fit as well as possible with the one you love, instead of demanding that he or she should adapt. It is a matter of breaking away from ingrained habits, building positive ways of approaching each other and seeing the possibilities you carry within yourselves.

Change the focus – from a critical view of your future spouse, to a constructive view of yourself in interaction with him or her. The goal is to make each other happy.

48. Mass media feeds us daily with the myth of ‘the perfect couple’ – two people who always look fresh and on top of things and enjoy boundless success. There are, however, completely different criteria by which you should assess each other: Is my sweetheart a warm and loving person? Do we share the same values? What can we provide each other with on a spiritual level? Does my sweetheart value me as a whole person, or am I being assessed based on external conditions or circumstances (appearance, status, financial situation)? Is he/she responsible and considerate? What will we do together in 20 years? In 40 years? The truth about you as a couple lies in your hearts, not in whether you experience success in your working lives, are physically beautiful or are wealthy. You will become the perfect couple to the extent that you give generously of yourselves.

How do two individuals become one?

49. One goal of marriage is to grow in unity and become one. Both of you will naturally have your own unique qualities and peculiarities – special talents, temperaments and so on. The challenge is to let such aspects enrich your life together rather than divide you. One strategy that can help you in this respect is to make allowances for each other’s unique qualities and to soften your own sharp edges. Spouses who have been together for many years often resemble each other! This tells us that two completely different people, through many years of sharing experiences, events, habits (both good and bad), interests and values have become one in many areas. Your personalities have grown together, and out of your partnership of love, an internal zone has emerged in which you think and act as a single unit. This is the scenario we want you to experience. Think long-term – let your goal be to grow old together. To become one is not a matter of erasing your personalities but rather of adapting them to each other in a balanced and respectful way.

50. How can two individuals establish a community of persons based on love? How can you become one in your actions, disposition and mind? How is it possible to establish marital unity? There are many strategies you can use to succeed in such a large project. Here are a few:

- Let your starting point be that you now will create a new future together; do not remain locked in patterns of action and habits from the time before you got married.
- Establish your own rituals, mutual game rules internally in your home, and a unified front externally.
- Cultivate mutual interests and hobbies.
- Use the abilities God has equipped you with in interaction with your good will. Think as a team: serve the partnership by drawing on each other's complementary (in the sense of completing) abilities.
- See each other with God's eyes, with his good will: acknowledge each other as infinitely valuable; try to recognize Christ in each other.
- Share your religious and philosophical thoughts and feelings with each other. Being able to communicate well about your 'internal treasure chests' is an investment for life.
- Give up your hobby horses; they will ultimately wear down your partnership.

51. Through your mutual will to realize your life project together, through the Holy Spirit's gift that is given to you in the wedding ceremony, you will, day by day, make progress on the path towards an ever-richer unity on all levels – bodily, in your personality, heart, intelligence, will and soul. In this way, you yourselves will become a living image of the love relationship within the Trinity.



PART 2:

Eternal values in a new era

*Love your God and follow his ways,
keep his commandments.*

(see Deuteronomy 30: 16)

52. God has created everything in infinite goodness. He has created us with free will and sincerely wants us to choose what is good. But he gives us the freedom to make our own choices, also to choose what is bad or wrong – choices that can damage us or others, spiritually or materially. When we act counter to the law of goodness, it is because we are damaged by what is called original sin, man's first breaking of God's commandments, at the beginning of time, in what we call *The Fall*. Throughout history, God tries to tell us what we must do to live in harmony with his goodness. Jesus Christ, God's own son, shows us with his own life the path of love for our fellow human beings. God's eternal law in combination with natural law, the Old Testament commandments, the new commandment to love our neighbour and advice from the Gospels are given to us to help us choose what is good, both as individuals and with consideration to the human society of which we are a part.

The Fall

53. The Fall is described in Genesis 3: 1–24. While The Fall is mankind's breach with God, it is also a breach between individual human beings. Chapters 2 and 3 of Genesis describe the situations both before and after The Fall. Life in unity with God in the garden is now only a distant possibility which mankind once had. The breach is final and affects our relationship to God, to other humans and to the rest of creation. The equality of the man and the woman is also damaged.

What is sin?

54. When we read about The Fall, we see that mankind's original sin consisted mainly of *disobedience*. In our conscience and with our free will, we turned away from God, rejected his sovereignty and chose to distinguish between good and evil on an independent basis.

55. The ultimate consequence of sin is eternal death, eternal separation from God. But God wants to preserve us from this at any cost. He therefore sent his son, Jesus Christ, to show us the path of obedience, truth and goodness. Christ conquers death precisely through his complete obedience to the Father. In the story of the rich young man, Jesus explains the close connection between eternal life and obeying God's commandments. He tells the young man: 'But if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments' (Matthew 19: 17).

Eternally valid moral norms

56. It is important to understand how we make choices and how we act – towards ourselves and others. There is a natural, innate moral law imbedded in everyone, a certainty regarding what is good and evil, which each and every person can arrive at with the help of reason (read this statement about reason in the context of paragraphs 57–71). We can see it in the similarities between the norms we find in a number of cultures. This is an expression for the human nature that is willed by the Creator, and we often call it *natural law*.

57. The Catholic Church emphasizes that our faith requires obedience to God's commandments. This obedience is not always easy. As a result of original sin and the devil's involvement, we are constantly tempted to turn our gaze away from the living and true God and instead direct our attention to idols, thus exchanging the truth about God for a lie.

58. There is also a connection between how we practice the moral law as individuals and as a society. A society that, on one hand, upholds values such as justice, peace and the dignity of persons, but on the other hand, allows or tolerates in several ways the devaluation or violation of human life, especially where life is weak or marginalized, ends up undermining itself.

The Ten Commandments

59. God has set up rules for us to live by – the Ten Commandments. If these are broken, there will be very negative consequences for the one who breaks them and those who are affected by the action. It is quite obvious that killing, stealing and adultery are serious violations of other people's integrity and domains.

60. The first three commandments demonstrate the importance of acknowledging God as our only and supreme Lord. The next seven commandments underscore the significance of not doing anything that can damage the relationships to our fellow human beings or to ourselves. The commandments, abbreviated, are as follows:

1. I am the Lord your God. You shall have no gods other than me.
2. You shall not misuse the Lord your God's name.
3. Keep the Sabbath day holy.
4. Honour your father and your mother.
5. Do not murder.
6. Do not commit adultery.
7. Do not steal.
8. Do not give false evidence against your neighbour.
9. Do not covet your neighbour's spouse.
10. Do not covet anything that belongs to your neighbour.

61. God's commandments are a summary of our obligations to God and our fellow human beings; they show us the path of life, what we must do to preserve our own and others' earthly life and reach the ultimate goal – *eternal life in fellowship with God*. They constitute the fundamental conditions for loving our neighbour and are a first step on the path to genuine freedom. They are universally valid. If you want a more thorough explanation of each commandment, we recommend that you read *YOUCAT*, 348–468, or the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2052–2557.

62. In the *Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew 5–7) and on several other occasions, especially through the example of his own life – Jesus gives us the commandment about love: we are to love God with all our heart and our neighbour as ourself. He even asks us to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors. In Jesus' description of the Final Judgment (Matthew 25: 31–6), he gives examples of times when we act out of love for our neighbour and times when we fail to do so; what we will be judged by on the last day, he says, is the love we have shown to our fellow human beings. In this way, Christ confirms and expands on the Ten Commandments. Everything the

Church teaches regarding moral questions is rooted in God's law – the natural law, the Ten Commandments and the commandment to love our neighbour, which Jesus formulates in the New Testament.

When faith and the world's opinions collide

63. As people living in the world, we are influenced by our surroundings. We live in a given historical period in which prevailing thought patterns and views of society are contingent on the times. Some of these views and thought patterns are to our benefit while others conflict with God's Holy Spirit and our human dignity. Certain currents of thought damage or reduce the view of humanity more than do others. *Materialism* and *utilitarianism* in particular have erased or twisted the image of God in human beings, paving the way for attitudes that turn the individual into a functional object, while *relativism* has blacked out people's recognition that there are rules to live by which are objective, absolute and universally valid.

64. Christians will experience that the commandment to love our neighbour will often face resistance from prevalent attitudes in society. Part of the explosive power of faith in Jesus Christ is to show with our lives how we can create room for more love in our relationships and in our social structures. This will require courage to swim against the tide.

Our conscience and God's law

65. From the beginning, God has equipped us with a conscience, with the ability to reflect over the degree of goodness in our thoughts, words and deeds. *Our human dignity lies in listening to our conscience and following it.* The conscience is 'the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths' (Vatican II's document *Gaudium et spes*, 16).

66. *Our conscience is thus inextricably linked to God.* It is a serious misunderstanding to think that the human conscience is independent of God. Innermost within us God will always be speaking to us, regardless of the conditions under which we live. Nevertheless, *our conscience can be in error.* It is not the case that we are born with a fully developed conscience – it must be trained, enlightened. Throughout life, we must therefore actively seek truth and justice, gain knowledge and give ourselves time to assess our thoughts, words and actions in light of God's law.

What is truth?

67. In order for our conscience to choose God's way, we must learn to see the difference between truth and falsehood, good and evil. When we define something as true, we must have an absolute standard on which to base the judgment, just like the precise length of a metre is based on the prototypical metre standard in Paris. God – whose nature is love – presents himself as the definition of truth. Christ speaks of himself as 'the way, the truth and the life' (John 14: 6), and the Holy Spirit is spoken of as the 'Spirit of truth who issues from the Father' (John 15: 26). The Triune God is thus the sure measure for all truth, the 'instrument' for evaluating everything in our search for truth. This provides enormous relief to us as human beings, for we do not need to relate to human measuring instruments for truth, which constantly change in relation to time and place.

Freedom and responsibility

68. God has, since creation, equipped us with free will. This means we ourselves choose our actions. Our freedom reaches perfection when it is directed towards God, our ultimate goal. This means that along the way, we have the opportunity to choose between good and evil, that is, either to grow in perfection or do wrong and thus sin. The more we choose the good, the freer we become. To choose disobedience to God leads us into the 'slavery of sin', to become slaves to the structures of evil.

69. Freedom causes us to be responsible for our actions *when they are deliberately chosen*. Our freedom does not give us the right to say or do everything we want. Our freedom must be weighed in the balance with God's will and what is best for our fellow human beings. Perfect freedom means complete freedom from sin. The more attentive we are to the Holy Spirit's inspiration, the greater the gift of grace we receive, in the form of an inner freedom that gives us security in trials.

The Holy Spirit – the heart's light

70. Just before Jesus died and rose again, he promised his apostles he would send them his Holy Spirit. 'It is for your own good that I am going, because unless I go, the Paraclete [the advocate] will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you' (John 16: 7). On Pentecost, the apostles were gathered together in a room, afraid and discouraged. God allowed his Holy Spirit to come as a violent wind, and tongues as of fire appeared on the head of each apostle. In a split second they were transformed into courageous spokesmen for Christ; they no longer hid themselves away but went

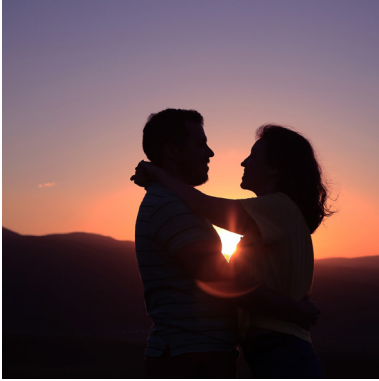
out and admonished the people of many nations who were staying in Jerusalem to repent and be baptized. Miraculously, everyone understood the apostles in their own language, regardless of being Arabs, Cretans, Romans and so forth (see Acts 2: 1–13). Three thousand people were baptized that day, when they understood that Jesus, who had been crucified slightly less than two months earlier, was no other than the Lord himself, the promised Messiah.

71. Through the sacraments of baptism and confirmation, we too receive the Holy Spirit. This is a gift to us from God, but we ourselves must want to open up for the gift. When we allow the Holy Spirit to enter our soul, he lets us see our actions in God's light. He enlightens our conscience so that we are able to discern the good and the evil, and he helps us find the path to true love. We discover that Christ's death on the cross concerns us personally. We can experience a new feeling: remorse, a strong urge to be reconciled with God and our neighbour. But the strongest experience is our encounter with God's infinite mercy, to experience assurance that God, our Father, awaits us with open arms and forgiving love in the sacrament of reconciliation (confession).

See the assignments and resources for this chapter on the Catechetical Centre's webpages.

3





PART 1:

Love and honour each other

Love one another as I have loved you.

(John 15: 12)

72. From the day you give each other your ‘yes’ and solemnly vow to be faithful to each other, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, to love and honour all the days of your life, you establish a sacred pact of love. When a man and a woman who are in love meet, their hearts rejoice: ‘I love you!’ If love is to be lived out long-term, if it is to grow to become mature and patient, it must be constantly nourished and strengthened. The hard work of love lies ahead of you. This chapter gives you some of the tools you will need along the way.

About loving and honouring each other

73. What is love? We are faced with a concept that has become our most commonly used cliché, often emptied of meaning when it becomes the name for everything from superficial feelings to deepest affection. One of the most beautiful Christian expressions for the essence of love is in I Corinthians 13: 1–13. In chapter 4 of Pope Francis’s apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, we find a beautiful explanation of this text.

74. Love means giving and receiving something that cannot be bought or sold; it can only be *given* freely and mutually. In a partnership of love, the spouses will coordinate their individual lives for the benefit of the other and for the happiness of both. Love in marriage is a *willed action*, a deliberate choice to be good to the other person. To accept your mate’s weaknesses with magnanimity and friendliness, also over time – this is love.

What does 'to honour' mean?

75. To honour each other is often overshadowed by the promise to love each other, but it is an equally important part of the marriage vows, and it is a necessity for building a good relationship. The verb 'to honour' means to respect a person, to regard him or her highly, to respect his or her choices and to give praise and positive feedback. You honour each other when you declare your love to each other, when you value, admire and respect each other.

76. Faith in Christ obliges us to practise love of neighbour in our relationships and patterns of communication: 'This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you' (John 15: 12). All science-based communication theories confirm that we perform much better when we receive positive and supportive feedback than when we are scolded and criticized. *One negative message should be offset by at least five positive messages.* This is a general principle to follow throughout the whole of life. Practise always listening to each other and talking together in a friendly, patient and respectful way. Every day, give your partner generous praise and positive feedback about his or her behaviour and the work he or she has done well.

77. Some modes of speech are extremely harmful to love relationships. Ridicule, belittlement, distrust, ironizing and jealousy stand in stark contrast to the love you promise each other. *Have as an unbreakable principle that you will not speak disparagingly about each other, especially in front of others.*

Strengthening friendship

78. The love between you needs constant nourishment. A good investment is to add joy to your relationship in an active and deliberate way when things are going well. This does not need to cost money; it could be a matter of doing each other services, giving each other extra attention, setting aside time to do something fun together, sharing tenderness, paying compliments or giving small gifts you have made, supporting each other and giving each other possibilities to develop. Imagine a 'coatrack of happiness' with lots of hooks; the more 'happiness hooks' you can hang your relationship on, the more you strengthen the love you share. Do not underestimate the power of an unexpected flower, written note or other small forms of attention; they can prevent your relationship from becoming routine or stale.

79. Depending on personality, people often have different preferences as to the expressions of love they most appreciate. Practise specifying and talking about

which types of attention you like. Some people have an outstanding need for physical attention, others care more about spending time together and yet others experience much happiness from good words. Explore which expressions of love give your partner the greatest happiness, and give the type of loving attention your partner understands best – it is not necessarily what you yourself prefer!

80. Sometimes one partner has a stronger need for physical contact than does the other. Tell each other about your expectations and wishes in this area and learn to distinguish between sexual and non-sexual touching. The man often interprets touching as an invitation to have sex, whereas the woman can have a great need for forms of physical contact that merely confirm her value in the man's eyes. Meet each other's needs with mutual sensitivity.

Service and sacrifice

81. As Christians, it is our job to serve others before we think of ourselves. Marriage is one of the ways of living that gives the greatest opportunity to practise this aspect of service. God has created the two of you as different yet equal in value, two people who are to serve each other reciprocally. Never view your spouse as your servant; rather, your basic attitude should be to stand always at the ready to serve your spouse.

82. Women have often one-sidedly played the role of servant in the home, perhaps because they, more intuitively than men, are inclined to be helpful and caring. This role pattern can ultimately lead to serious conflicts. It is therefore smart to come to agreement early on as regards a role pattern you both can thrive with and which will strengthen your equality. Both of you are able to do the laundry, make food, shovel snow, paint walls, change nappies or take the car to the mechanic. Try to coordinate your abilities and male/female-specific advantages in order to serve your partnership in the best possible way. Once again: think of yourselves as a team and establish a work partnership in which both of you contribute to getting all the tasks done smoothly.

83. The concept of love contains a dimension that has almost fallen into oblivion in our culture. This dimension is called *sacrifice*. Christ illustrates it for us with these strong words: 'No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends' (John 15: 13). When the two of you get married, it is your relationship that is the most important thing, and eventually also your family. Everything else is less important: living standard, career, committees, charity work, free-time activities

and so on. There will be times when you must sacrifice your own desires for the sake of your spouse. As spouses, your deepest call is *to give your life for each other* and help each other live holy lives. In this way, you realize, with your lives, the mystery in Christ's atoning sacrifice and love for the Church, as St. Paul writes in Ephesians. (If you want to know more about the Church's understanding of human love, you can find a beautiful explanation in Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Deus caritas est*, 1–18.)

On the same wavelength

84. One of the most important things for you as a couple is to communicate well! In order to become one, you need an effective understanding of each other's thoughts, feelings and opinions. You need to develop a shared apparatus of concepts and be able to interpret each other's signals. Many books have been written on the theme of interpersonal communication. You can find a comprehensive and practical review in the book *Fighting for Your Marriage* by H.J. Markman et al. (2010). The *PREP-Course* developed by Modum Bad also serves as a good overview. (See the suggested reading list at the end of this booklet for a complete reference.) In the following, we present some basic concepts with elements drawn from these sources.

85. At the start of a love relationship, you are often on each other's wavelength in an intense sort of way. Over time, however, you may fall back into your 'ordinary selves', behaving and talking in the way you became accustomed to during your formative years and through individual development. You now need to take a closer look at these learned patterns. Are there patterns you should change?

You are both senders and receivers

86. Between a man and a woman who love each other, there is a steady stream of signals. You are senders and receivers, and the messages you send to each other can be completely wordless but nevertheless heavily charged with emotions. Words, facial expressions, voice inflection, gestures, actions and physical signs of affection speak volumes about what you think and feel. There are several aspects which both of you, as senders, should reflect over:

1. *What do I say with the words I use?* Have I reflected over how big a difference my choice of words can make?

- How can I deliberately use words to make my beloved feel valued and welcome?
- Do I avoid accusatory, degrading and suspicion-raising statements?

2. *What does what I say sound like?*

- How do I use my voice, its tone and volume?
- What is the mood of my voice? Is it sour, whining and complaining or happy and encouraging?
- Am I deliberate about avoiding negative statements? (*No*-sentences can be replaced with statements telling the receiver what he or she should do instead.)

3. *What do I say with my body language?*

- Do my facial expressions harmonize with my words?
- Do the words I use harmonize with what I in fact feel?
- Practise making your body language and facial expressions express the same thing as your words. Remove all your masks.

A good receiver has the ability to listen

87. When we talk together, we alternate between being senders and receivers of messages. In marriage, *being a good listener* is paramount. To listen is a matter of ‘seeing’ each other with your ears. Good listeners receive what is said, let it sink in and give the speaker confirmation that they have understood what the other person has said by repeating the message in their own words – even though they may disagree. To listen actively involves empathy – putting yourself in the other person’s situation – and at the same time trying to understand the other person based on your own frame of reference, often by asking follow-up questions.

88. Oftentimes we do not understand what we hear in the same way as it was intended by the sender. This is because we ‘wear communication filters’, as some experts put it. These filters are external or internal barriers that hold back part or all of the meaning of a message. External filters can be noise from our surroundings (children screaming, engine noises, etc.) or disturbing interruptions, while internal filters have to do with inattention, certain expectations, ideas, presuppositions, our mood, defence mechanisms and so on. All people have communication filters and are subjected to those of others. The challenge is to remove as many as possible. Find a place where you can converse without disturbance. Try to listen with an open

mind, remove the stress factors, listen for the essential content in statements, yet without being disturbed by the form or mode of expression.

The Eucharist – love’s power centre

89. The Church receives its life from Christ in the Eucharist (Holy Mass); through Christ, the Church is nourished and enlightened. In the Eucharist, Christ shares himself and his Holy Spirit with us. God indwells us, and we live in God. If you as a couple have the possibility to go to communion together, you will become one in God. The unifying power of Christ’s body gives you the strength to withstand discord and conflicts. Outside of Mass times, it is possible to go to church and sit in quiet worship before the tabernacle where the living Christ is present. Even in cases where one of the spouses is not a Catholic, ‘resting’ in Christ’s love in front of his presence in the tabernacle gives invaluable strength: the trust you show Jesus by coming to him with everything you have on your heart opens ‘channels’ for him. Through these channels, he can shower you with power and grace, enabling you to live through all the everyday challenges in unity with him.



PART 2:

In good times and in bad

*No one can have greater love
than to lay down his life for his friends.*

(John 15: 13)

90. Sooner or later in marriage, you will encounter 'bad times'. When reflecting over how marriage relates to Christ, it is important not to overlook the fact that he was crucified. The path to our own resurrection is also via a cross. In times of difficulty, it is the crucified Christ whom we meet. The Lord did not suffer so that we could escape suffering, but to save us, that is, liberate us from death. His work of salvation means that death as the ultimate end is overcome, and that mankind is given the opportunity for eternal life in heaven. Nevertheless, suffering will continue to exist in the world.

The cross is part of life

91. Human experience shows that suffering does not need to result in a final defeat; quite the contrary, it can be an opportunity to grow and mature as human beings. What we go through can therefore be turned into something positive. Many crises and difficulties pass after a time, but it may be that a cross must be born for the rest of our life. It is important for us to remember that our Lord has not promised us any other destiny than his own, a destiny which, after suffering, led to the glory and joy of the resurrection. Christ does not leave us to struggle on our own; he helps us carry our cross if we let him into our life and our experiences.

92. Some forms of suffering relate to specific phases or transitional periods in life, examples being a midlife crisis, children leaving home or serious illness in the family. Some couples are then tempted to doubt whether they made the right choice about

the marriage they entered into 20 to 30 years earlier, and some feel they have ‘grown apart’. To prevent this, it is important that you as a couple always find time for each other along the way and that you nurture your partnership. There are times when it takes sheer willpower to live in love and faithfulness. The decisions we made in our 20s are still right in our 40s, even though they may not feel that way. One aspect of becoming a mature adult is to continue walking the path we initially chose. Support each other in the difficult phases in life and seek to grow in even greater unity.

93. Just as Jesus sought solace in prayer when he was in fear of death in Gethsemane, we too can find solace and power in God. Together with the Lord, we can learn to say: ‘Nevertheless, let it be as you, not I, would have it’ (Matthew 26: 39b). The certainty that Christ has overcome death fills us with the hope of sharing in his resurrection.

Common challenges

94. Thinking through challenges before they arise is in itself a valuable preparation. In the paragraphs up to and including 101, we briefly summarize the principles for conflict prevention and resolution which we have drawn from the afore-mentioned *Fighting for Your Marriage* and the *PREP-Course* developed by Modum Bad. The following areas can often be difficult for married couples to cope with:

- Communication
- Conventional gender roles and division of labour
- Sex life
- Jealousy and anxiety regarding infidelity
- Pregnancy and childbirth
- Child-rearing
- Relationships with in-laws
- Finances
- The use of time and resources on education and work
- Moving or building a house
- Hobbies and the use of leisure time
- Different circadian rhythms (sleep-wake cycles/body clocks)
- Long-term illness or the death of close family members and different ways of dealing with bereavement
- Violence and the misuse of drugs

95. With respect to violence and the misuse of drugs:

- If there are signs of the misuse of drugs by one of the partners (alcohol, other drugs or pills), it is often necessary to seek professional help.
- Violence amongst close family relations is more common than we tend to think. Seek help from a doctor, the Familievernkontor (the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs – Bufdir), a crisis centre or the police if you feel threatened or abused by your sweetheart/spouse. Violence in marriage is a complete rejection of the love which the spouses have promised each other. No one benefits from remaining in such a situation, especially if the couple have children. It is inadvisable to get married if the problem of violence already exists.

Take time to do the assignments you will find on the Catechetical Centre's webpages dealing with issues that trigger conflict as well as conflict-resolution and coping strategies.

Conflict prevention

96. Even in difficult situations, there are growth opportunities for each of you individually and as a couple. What you do to resolve the conflicts is decisive for your future together. Small conflicts can soon grow large if you lack strategies for dealing with them. The most important form of conflict prevention in marriage is to *actively build your friendship*. All the pleasant things you do together, all the fine and good things you do for each other and all the positive experiences you share are valuable 'capital' which you can draw on in harder times. Never stop giving time and love to each other, also in difficult circumstances.

97. Conflict prevention also involves looking for danger signs. Examine yourselves and reflect over how you react when feeling anger, fear or frustration. Dangerous patterns of communication (see *Fighting for Your Marriage*, parts one and two) should be broken as soon as you are aware of them:

- Conflict escalation – you provoke each other with statements that cause the conflict to intensify more and more, the result being the threat of break-up.
- *Depreciation* – you say or do things that make the other person feel of little worth or not taken seriously (e.g., taunting, making ironic or sarcastic comments).

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- *Negative interpretations* – one or both of you interpret the other person's statements or actions in the worst possible way.
 - *Withdrawal/persecution* – a pattern in which one partner shies away from difficult conversations while the other plays the role of persecutor.

98. All married couples need to be able to share opinions about complicated or emotionally charged topics. Create safe discussions by finding a form of conversation that helps you to be *impartial, fair-minded, able to stick to facts of the matter and oriented towards finding a solution*. Agree upon an equal amount of time to talk, use a friendly tone and do not allow insulting words, accusations and negative body language. Talking together is just as much about listening to and understanding the other person as it is about presenting your own opinions. There are techniques for talking and listening that you can practise in order to slow down the tempo in a discussion (for instance, the talking-and-listening technique in Modum Bad's *PREP-Course*), in which the partners take turns repeating, in their own words, what the other person has said, before they themselves are allowed to express their opinion. This makes it possible to really tune in to each other's arguments.

Problem solving

99. As spouses, you are meant to solve the problems you face *together*, as a couple. In some families, the spouses give each other a big bear hug before tackling big challenges! For Christians, it is always wise to pray together, to ask for the Holy Spirit's inspiration and wisdom. When you face really big challenges, try to keep the following thoughts in mind:

- The two of you are a love partnership, a *team*. Preserve unity.
- Have a lifelong perspective. Remember: love is for life!
- Mutual game rules: you are two people with equal value.

100. It can be smart to discuss difficult issues with the help of a pre-determined structure (see *Fighting for Your Marriage*, part two). Start by defining and clarifying what the discussion will be about. Use a conversation technique that allows you to alternate between talking and listening to what the other person has to say and gives you equal time to talk. Conduct a solution-oriented brainstorming session and come to agreement on solutions or compromises that serve the best interests of your partnership. Finally, make a plan for implementing what you have come to agreement on, and divide responsibilities and tasks. Schedule follow-up discussions to review

what you have done and evaluate how the solutions have worked. A structure such as this creates security and predictability when you need to talk about difficult issues.

101. Not all differences of opinion can be resolved. Most couples have one or several areas over which they fundamentally disagree. In such cases, it is important to limit the disagreement: acknowledge that it exists but take care that it does not ruin or destroy all the good things you share in common. ‘Park’ such disagreements outside your relationship and leave them in God’s hands.

Forgiveness and reconciliation

102. Life can lead us into situations in which the culture of therapy that we have become accustomed to falls short; and answers must be sought in faith. Some marital conflicts can reveal aspects within ourselves that we must change. We must acknowledge that we do not have the power to control everything in our environment. We must admit our mistakes and confess the sins we have committed against God and our neighbours, have the courage to give up destructive behavioural patterns and instead practise love for our neighbours, hope for more than what is humanly possible and dare to believe that God can intervene directly in our life.

103. Christ has given us an extremely effective ‘weapon’ against all interpersonal conflicts: *forgiveness*. Forgiveness has an underestimated yet potent effect on major and minor disagreements. Forgiveness is rooted in being generous enough not to retaliate or play ‘tit for tat’ but to repay evil with good. Forgiveness may require great spiritual strength and moral courage, both in granting and in receiving it. It requires *humility* – the most fundamental of all virtues, because it opposes the most fundamental sin, which is arrogant pride. Humility is effective because it operates on two levels: the spiritual and the interpersonal. When we dare to make ourselves small in our own and others’ eyes, no forces of evil can dominate us.

104. God offers us tools which no therapist has at his or her disposal. The supernatural power of God’s love can penetrate even the most tightly shut hearts. We have access to this loving power through the sacraments of *the Eucharist* and *confession*: Christ is present in the Eucharist with all his mercy and solace and cleanses us from minor sins. The grace we receive through confession and the forgiveness of sin strengthens us such that we do not so easily fall back into old habits but see new ways to behave.

-
- Be quick to ask each other for forgiveness every time you have said or done something that has hurt the other.
 - Dare to admit your own shortcomings and mistakes! The words ‘you are right’ can be more important than ‘I love you’.
 - Be generous in forgiving each other. Do not go to bed without having settled things.

The saving power of suffering

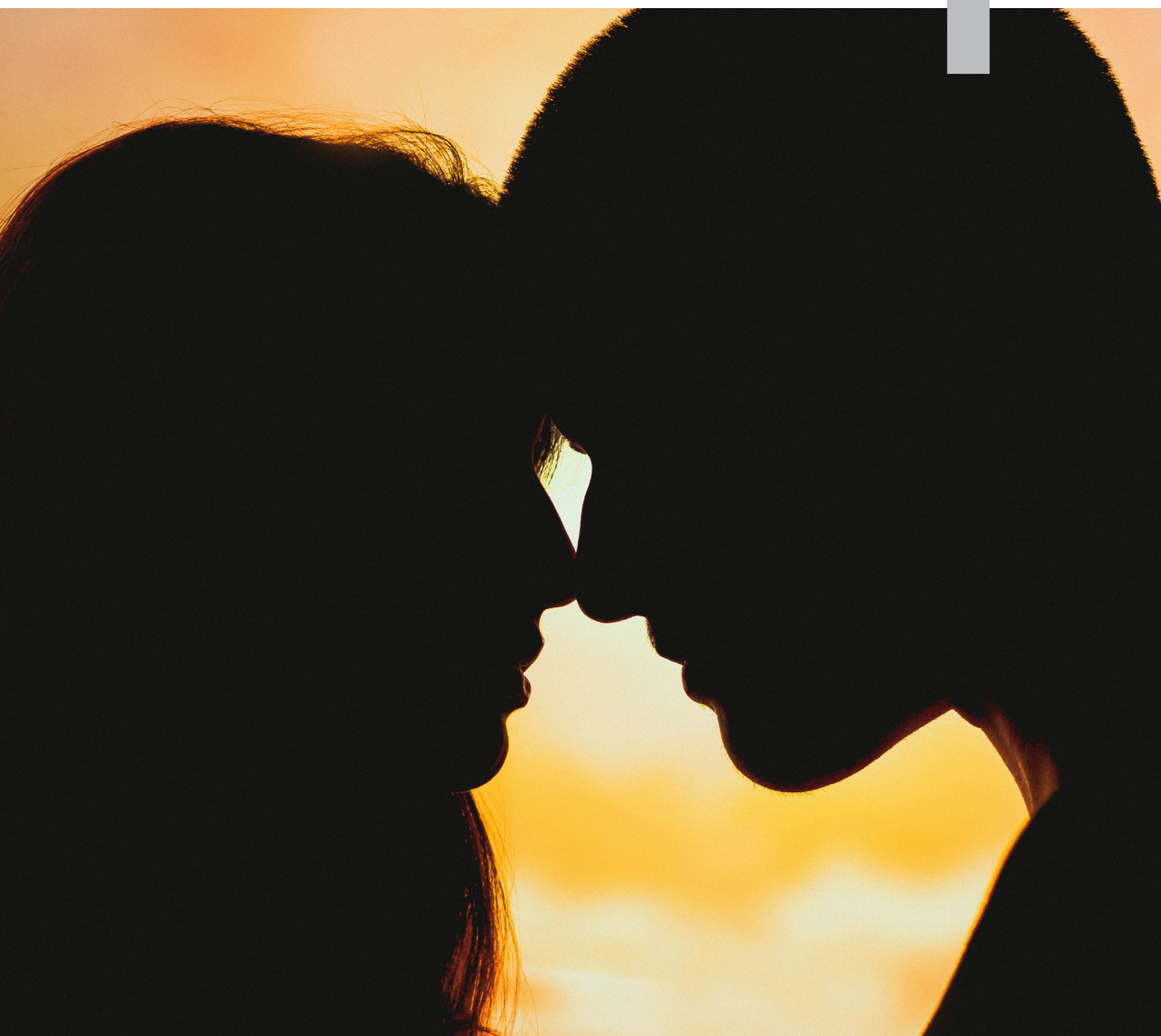
105. Sometimes we face challenges that are so large or painful that they exceed our human capacity to cope with them. When we dare to collaborate with the pain, like a woman in labour, God can create something completely new; he can allow something unexpectedly good to result from it. We glimpse some of the mystery of the Resurrection. The logic of suffering is the opposite of the world’s logic: the blows we receive on Earth are transformed into signs of honour in Heaven; we partake in the promises of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5: 1–11).

106. The following thoughts are drawn from an apostolic letter by Pope John Paul II (*Salvifici doloris*): When we experience great suffering and ask ‘Why?!’, we discover that ‘the one to whom [we] put the question is himself suffering and wishes to answer [us] from the Cross, from the heart of his own suffering.’ And Christ says: “Follow me!” Come! Take part through your suffering in this work of saving the world, a salvation achieved through my suffering! Through my Cross.’ And when we ‘spiritually unite [ourselves] to the Cross of Christ, the salvific meaning of suffering is revealed’. [26] We understand that the suffering we endure here on Earth is in the service of ‘the salvation of [our] brothers and sisters’. [27] In this way, we will also ‘pay ever greater and closer attention to the sufferings of [our] neighbour, seek to understand those sufferings and deal with them with ever greater skill’. [29]

107. But sometimes it is just painful. It is not always the case that faith transforms suffering into something positive. It is important to be aware that God’s grace is not a kind of ‘insurance’ against suffering, sorrow and pain, but a help to be able to endure it. We do not fully control our lot in life, and sometimes there is the risk that life will be difficult and give us many heavy blows that may seem unfair. Although it may seem like poor consolation, it can be a relief to know that the Lord stands with us, even though we may feel alone in our sorrow and pain.

See the assignments and resources for this chapter on the Catechetical Centre’s webpages.

4





PART 1:

The two shall become one

*They are no longer two, therefore,
but one flesh.*

(Mark 10: 8)

108. To be created in God's image leads to an understanding of human sexuality in a wider perspective, to see it in both a physical and a spiritual context. God wants you to discover the beauty in the way he has organized human union and procreation. He invites you to love each other as whole persons, so you can make each other perfectly happy.

The theology of sexuality

109. Over time, as the love between you grows stronger, the sexual side of your relationship will become increasingly important. This is a natural development that should lead to the total encounter which sexual intercourse is. Sexuality is one of the benefits of creation, part of being created in God's image, and in its positive sense, one of the most beautiful and strongest aspects but also the most intimate. It is therefore not always easy to handle. To give oneself sexually to another person is the most meaningful and significant way in which we can show our love. We should therefore only give oneself to the one we really love and with whom we want to share our life.

110. During our life on Earth, this longing for a perfect love relationship becomes a driving force for seeking a partner with whom we can live in *as perfect a union of heart and mind as possible*, in addition to the physical union. At its deepest level, this is a longing which God has imbedded in us, the ultimate goal being union with God himself.

111. Human sexuality has deeply religious meaning because through it, God calls a man and a woman to deepen their love for each other and to participate actively in the process of creation. Spouses should therefore never view their sex life as anything inferior or as a negative aspect of love, but accept their sexuality as good and learn to adapt it to the framework God has set, so it can result in the greatest possible mutual joy.

Human sexuality in the eyes of the Church

112. When we read what is written and said in mass-media channels, we can easily get the impression that the Catholic Church has a negative attitude to everything having to do with sexuality. This is a serious misunderstanding. Sexuality is a fundamental part of our identity. The Church is glad the spouses have physical desire and pleasure during intercourse, quite simply because the feeling of pleasure is given by God. The spouses' naturalness towards each other's biological sex is completely in line with what God wants for human beings. In the account of Creation, we read about the time before The Fall: 'Both of them were naked, the man and his wife, but they felt no shame before each other' (Genesis 2: 25). The spouses are to realize precisely this original natural state. God wants you to enjoy how your bodies complement and respond to each other. He wants you to rejoice in being seen and accepted without reservation, in being able to give yourselves to each other with warmth and intimacy and to experience moments of perfect union that also, in glimpses, allow you to experience God.

The purposes of our sexuality

113. God has given us the sex drive for two important purposes. First, so that the man and the woman will become one in love. Intercourse should function like 'glue' – it should be a personal encounter binding the two ever-closer to each other, not just in a physical sense but also in order that they, over time, may come to know each other's feelings and spirit more fully. The two shall 'become one flesh' (Genesis 2: 24b), melt together, give of themselves and receive each other unconditionally and totally. The sex life should thus function as a factor that strengthens union and love in the marriage.

114. The sex drive's second purpose is even more obvious: it enables the man and the woman to be physically attracted to each other in order to sustain the human race and give life to new persons and new families, in harmony with God's words: 'Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it' (Genesis 1: 28). Sexuality is inseparably tied to human existence; it has a literal existential meaning.

115. *The two purposes are equal in value.* It is very important that the two of you find a balance between them throughout your marriage. Couples who neglect or de-prioritize their sex life can quickly lose sight of each other in other areas too. Couples who focus excessively on sexual pleasure lose sight of intercourse as a gift – to be there for the sake of the other – and instead reduce each other to the status of objects. Couples who exclude the possibility of having children over a longer period miss out of an essential dimension of their love, namely the fascination of experiencing sexuality’s fruitfulness and the deeply meaningful task of becoming parents.

116. From God’s perspective, intercourse is intended to be an extremely meaningful moment for the two of you. As spouses, you perform, through intercourse, a *sacred act*, you exchange a *mutual gift* – the deepest proof of your love for each other. The sacredness of intercourse lies in the fact that God invites us to love each other with our whole body and person and to become his co-creators of a new life. These are the two aspects according to which an instance of intercourse should be valued – the unconditional and mutual giving of oneself to the other, and the infinite value of a human life. In our day and age, this perspective can perhaps change one’s view of sex: *from* being a means to satisfy an instinct *to* becoming an act performed out of the deepest devotion to one’s spouse and in reverence for life, as God’s co-workers and co-creators.

God sets the framework

117. Each and every instance of sexual intercourse involves a great responsibility – both for the person we love and for the possibility to conceive children. It is therefore obvious that life is considerably simplified by living in a stable and committed relationship. God has instituted marriage in order to give people a secure framework for their sexuality and for their possibility of having children. The binding promises of love and lifelong faithfulness render marriage the most solid foundation upon which to build a fruitful and enriching sex life. For children, the safest situation is to be born into a family in which the parents have promised each other lifelong commitment and unconditional love.

Self-control

118. In contrast to animals, we humans have the ability and possibility to control our instincts. We can train ourselves to control our sexual reactions and to steer them deliberately, such that we prioritize the needs and desires of our spouse more than our own at-times egotistical desires. Sexuality becomes humanized when we live it out in sincere love, in deep recognition of our spouse’s equal value and personal

integrity. This is why the Church maintains that a truly humane sex life can only take place within a framework that guarantees each person's free will, full trust, equality, lifelong commitment, total devotion and openness to accepting small and needy human lives. These conditions are best met in a sacramental marriage.

Chastity in marriage

119. When we hear the term 'chastity' nowadays, we usually think of abstinence from all sexual activity, strict asceticism, perhaps also fear of sex and the body. When the Church uses the term, however, it thinks quite differently and with far greater nuance. The function of chastity is to liberate love from utilitarian thinking, from each and every egoistical motive and instead to promote the intrinsic value of persons. Chastity entails meeting the opposite sex with 'transparency', with the *loving goodness* that does not pursue self-centred motives. Chastity, from the Church's perspective, means we direct our sexual energy towards goals that are consistent with our life tasks and God's will for us. For priests, monks and nuns, chastity means they do not bind themselves physically to any individual person but instead use their energy on loving God and all their fellow human beings. For unmarried persons, chastity means living in sexual abstinence and meeting persons of the opposite sex with loving goodness and without sexual desires or demands.

120. Within marriage, chastity means you live out your sexuality with respect and consideration for your spouse, with a non-self-serving desire to be and do good to each other and with a tenderness that has '*the ability to feel with and for the whole person, to feel even the most deeply hidden and spiritual tremors*' in the soul of your beloved (Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993, p. 207, our emphasis; originally published in Polish in 1960). Chastity involves training yourselves to control your instincts, in order to grow in love, thoughtfulness and consideration for your spouse. Using pornography to stimulate the sex drive stands in stark contrast to the dignity of the person and is a deeply offensive act against your spouse. Pornography is a variant of prostitution (cf. *YOUCAT*, 412) because it turns sexuality into a commodity rather than keeping it as part of an exclusive, binding and loving relationship between the spouses.

121. Chastity also means the two of you remain faithful to each other for the rest of your life, just as you promise each other in the wedding ceremony. Out of loyalty to your spouse and children, you reject any impulses that may awaken your interest in a third party, regardless of how much more attractive that third party may seem in relation to your spouse.

122. The sexual chastity which God requires of couples before marriage has several useful functions in the long term:

- To learn to show each other non-sexual attention and devotion
- To become better at interpreting each other's moods and sharpening your interpersonal communication
- To strengthen your longing for each other and make yourselves precious in each other's eyes, instead of taking each other for granted
- To develop the aspects of love that are less obvious than those based on instinct, for instance, the awareness of God's presence in your love for each other, the discovery of the life tasks he calls you to do, and to communicate with God in prayer

123. There will be many times in your marriage when you will find this form of self-control useful: in connection with a complicated pregnancy, during the first weeks after a child is born, at times when the woman's health would indicate that she should avoid pregnancy, and when financial conditions, housing conditions or long periods of absence require you to moderate your sex life.

What about those of us who cohabit?

124. First and foremost, the Church is very happy that you now want to dedicate yourselves to one another with the vows and commitments of a Catholic marriage. Cohabitation often involves two aspects – the opportunity to end the relationship, and fear of having children – that are incompatible with the kind of love God wants for men and women. At the same time, those of us who are writing this marriage-preparation course challenge you to try to live the last period before your wedding in sexual abstinence, both in order to practise this form of self-control and to build the expectation of reuniting in conjugal love after the wedding, with a love blessed by God. (The Swedish Dominican Sr. Sofie Hamring has made a website with a large selection of material about the Church's view of the body and sexuality. If you read Swedish, check out www.kroppensteologi.se)



PART 2:

In the service of life

*God blessed them, saying to them,
'Be fruitful and multiply'*

(Genesis 1: 28a)

125. The love-meetings between the man and the woman, expressed in intercourse, touch the very core of life. Our God is the God of Life. He *wants* life. He alone can create life, and he alone is allowed to determine when it will end. In your vocation to marriage, there is an extremely meaningful and beautiful life task: God invites you to become his co-workers in the perpetuation and development of creation by giving life to new people. To have children is the happiest and most valuable thing that can happen in a relationship between a man and a woman. It is one of the greatest responsibilities you can be entrusted with because there is nothing more precious than a human life. The task is at the same time a *service*. As *stewards of life*, you place your abilities and powers in the hand of the Creator, in humility and wonder.

Human life – infinitely valuable, holy and inviolable

126. Every single person's life is, from the start, part of God's plan. We are all wanted and loved by God, even before we were born. To understand concepts such as 'human dignity' and 'the right to life', we need to know what it is that gives life its absolute value and inviolability. The starting point for our human value is that we are created in God's image, that we carry within ourselves his life. Furthermore, Christ became human and gave his life on the cross for us. He loves us so much that he has united with each of us and given his life for each of us. The Son's willingness to be sacrificed and God our Father's love for us, even to the point of giving his only son as a sacrifice, demonstrate how infinitely valuable each of us is to God.

127. Since a human life is so precious to God, God tries to give us some guidelines for how we should take care of it. The Ten Commandments clearly state the principle of the inviolability of human life. First and foremost, the fifth commandment implies

the prohibition of murder: 'You shall not kill' (Exodus 20: 13). But as later enshrined in the laws given to the Children of Israel, the fifth commandment also implies a prohibition against all violations of our neighbour. Jesus confirms and emphasizes this in the affirmatively-phrased commandment to love our neighbour with the same love that he himself has for each individual: 'This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you' (John 15: 12). The deepest level in God's commandment to protect human life is ultimately the requirement to revere and love each person and each individual life: 'All these: you shall not commit adultery, you shall not kill, you shall not steal, you shall not covet, and all the other commandments that there are, are summed up in this single phrase: you must love your neighbour as yourself. Love can cause no harm to your neighbour' (Romans 13: 9-10a). God's commandments give us a way to safeguard *life* in all its phases and forms, and they set absolute boundaries we cannot allow ourselves to break.

Giving life to new people

128. In your new life as spouses, God invites you to launch into the most fascinating life project a man and a woman can have: to give life to new people, to children in whom you will recognize something of yourselves, yet who are just as fully unique and independent individuals. You become his co-workers in the process of creation that has been going on since the origin of the universe. The entire biological process underlying the unique masterpiece that every baby is- that the strongest sperm cell finds the egg cell's only entry point, that a division of cells begins to make specialized cells (nerve cells, blood cells, bone cells, skin and so forth, all of which find their right place is the formation of the human body), that the mother's body is perfectly adapted to give the foetus optimal growth possibilities, and that the process ends when a new child is born, live, wet and warm - is a testimony to God's unspeakably joyful creativity.

When does human life begin?

129. The answer to this question is crucial for which ethical choices we make at the start of life. The Church gives a very clear answer: human life begins the moment a sperm cell fertilizes an egg cell. At this time, the complete and unique DNA code for a new individual is established. The fertilized egg cell is a living, fully coded human subject, and the Church considers this human to be a full-fledged and unique *person* who is entitled to *special protection*, precisely because it is so fragile and defenceless. *In the eyes of the Church and in accordance with God's commandments, life and human dignity are inviolable and absolute from the moment of conception.*

130. From this perspective, all violence, all acts that psychologically or physically harm others, each and every form of intentional killing, in particular provoked abortion and euthanasia, are impermissible. Even more importantly: human life should not only be saved but also embraced with loving care. The meaning of life is to give and receive love; it is this that gives human sexuality and reproductivity their true and full meaning. (If you would like to delve deeper into the Church's understanding of the sanctity and inviolability of human life, we recommend that you read Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Evangelium vitae*.)

Parents – visible signs of God's love

131. Becoming a parent is one of the most meaningful experiences you can have in life. When you decide you want to get married, it is important to talk about how the two of you view the possibility of becoming parents together, how you want to live in a future parental relationship and what you want to pass on to your children. As parents, your main task is to be *a visible sign of God's love*. This may often require you to stretch beyond what you think you have of strength, but it is possible by drawing inspiration and strength from God himself. The child's most basic need is to be received with unconditional love, to be wanted and welcomed into the life of the parents and family.

132. To receive one child or more surpasses all other experiences if you wholeheartedly allow yourselves to become involved in the marvellous universe of childhood. As parents, you will experience that children give and teach you far more than you could have imagined, both about yourselves and about the world the children explore with curiosity and unexpected perspectives. Rarely is it possible to encounter persons who are more Christ-like. Because children come so helpless and innocent into the world, like baby Jesus in Bethlehem, they arouse in the people around them a tenderness and an urge to show care. In everything you do for your children – nourish, clothe, provide a home, pay attention to and help them – you perform in practice the acts of mercy which Jesus described when talking about the Last Judgement: 'In truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me' (Matthew 25: 40).

The body's true language

133. 'The essential element for marriage as a sacrament is the language of the body in its aspects of truth', as Pope John Paul II put it in 1983, in one of his weekly audiences (in the series on the *Sacramentality of Marriage*). Love's truth cannot be separated

from the body's language. In other words: the Creator's loving plan is built into our natural body functions. From a purely physiological perspective, both reproduction and the intimate union between a man and a woman have their starting point in one and the same action, namely intercourse. This shows us that marriage has an overarching goal: life-giving love.

134. Specifically, this means the love the spouses show each other is intended to be total and to include their fertility, which obviously involves the possibility to have children. To give oneself to the other in sexual intercourse is meant to be an unconditional gift. To withhold or say no to the aspect of the spouse that can give life will be a denial of a significant part of her or his person. At the same time, it is an exclusion of God's life-giving presence in the spouses' deepest form of relationship.

Know your fertility

135. The bodies of men and women are amazingly and precisely geared towards reproduction. A woman's fertility follows a biological pattern with identifiable fertile and infertile periods. A man's fertility pattern is less obvious and less important in this context. Diet, sleep, physical activity and mental stress are factors that can also have a major impact on a couple's fertility.

136. It is very useful to spend time learning about the finely-tuned processes in the woman's natural pattern of fertility. Together, you can follow the physiological and emotional changes the woman undergoes through several menstrual cycles and learn to map them systematically with the help of various methods of observation. The man is wise to show sensitivity and lively interest in the knowledge the woman gives him about her body. For the woman, it is important to be willing to be open about the processes her body regularly undergoes and to explain them. Being comfortable about and used to talking together about your fertility, interpreting symptoms and making joint decisions about how you will relate to them, can considerably strengthen your intimacy and union. Moreover, such cooperation can give the man a unique opportunity to steer his sexual instinct with respect for the woman's fertile and infertile periods and give the woman a clearly defined space for any needs arising in connection with her cycle. The outcome can be that you both experience a better and more fulfilling sex life.

Responsible parenthood

137. It is a misunderstanding to think that all Catholics must have as many children as possible. The Church encourages married couples to exercise *responsible parenthood*. Conceiving a child should be a well-thought-through and deliberate act. Married couples have a sovereign right to decide how many children they want to receive. This is something that neither governments or other authorities have the right to decide for married couples. For some couples, it will be right to receive many children, for others, it will be both necessary and right to limit the number of childbirths.

138. When spouses, for reasons of health, finances or other serious concerns, find it necessary to avoid or postpone pregnancy, they can use methods of natural birth regulation that safeguard and respect God's commandments as well as the integrity of persons. In practice, this means regulating the number of pregnancies by allowing the faculties of reason and will to steer sexual instincts and feelings and to use birth-regulating methods that are compatible with the body's natural processes. This allows for God's participation and conforms with the ethical norms he has given us.

How is it possible to practise natural birth regulation?

139. The term 'natural birth regulation' denotes methods that make it possible to postpone or achieve pregnancy at the same time as safeguarding the regular pattern of the natural reproductive functions. The Church can safely recommend these methods for the deliberate planning of family size. At the same time as safeguarding the spiritual dimension of the sex life, they are also health-preserving and ecological. Natural birth regulation allows parents to adjust the time between pregnancies based on health, the ability to support the family and other compelling circumstances.

140. The principle behind natural birth regulation (or Natural Family Planning, NFP) methods is that the spouses take note of the stages in the woman's fertility cycle and have sex on the fertile or infertile days, depending on whether they want to increase their family or have more time between pregnancies. This *requires close collaboration between the spouses*, and in this way, promotes the *equal responsibility of spouses* for family size and interpersonal communication. Both spouses have an equal amount of responsibility for their joint fertility. If a couple wants to postpone pregnancy, the partners practise sexual abstinence on the woman's fertile days. This can often be experienced as difficult to master over time, because sexual attraction between the spouses is naturally strongest on the woman's most fertile days. Sensitivity, patience and a shared focus on what is best for the family will be necessary.

141. Medical science has come up with several methods that, with great reliability, can be used to determine the woman's fertile and infertile periods. These methods can be divided into three measurement principles: observation of vaginal secretion, measurement of body temperature following from hormonal changes in the woman's menstrual cycle, and mapping of the hormone level in urine. The first method requires no technical aids but can take up to half a year to become reasonably adept at using; the latter two methods require the use of specially-developed measuring devices.

The Church's view on contraception

142. Love's *totality* is the main argument for why the Church cannot accept the practice of setting up a distinction between the unifying functions of sexual intercourse and those functions geared towards reproduction. When the two of you unite in intercourse, the intention is that you should give yourselves mutually to each other without reservation. Pope Paul VI writes about this: 'If they further reflect, they must also recognize that an act of mutual love which impairs the capacity to transmit life which God the Creator, through specific laws, has built into it, frustrates his design, which constitutes the norm of marriage, and contradicts the will of the Author of life. Hence to use this divine gift while depriving it, even if only partially, of its meaning and purpose, is equally repugnant to the nature of the man and of woman, and is consequently in opposition to the plan of God and his holy will' (*Humane vitae*, 13).

143. All forms of artificial birth control can also disturb or hinder the deepest sexual communication that should take place between a man and a woman in sexual intercourse. Most serious, however, is that several means of contraception are *abortive*, that is, they either hinder a conceived embryo from becoming attached to the uterine wall, with the consequence that it dies due to lack of nutrition, or they contain substances that directly kill the embryo. Very little is said about this in the product information, but it applies to all types of contraceptive pills, injections, patches, 'morning-after' pills and intrauterine devices. Hormone-based contraceptive means, moreover, have some serious and long-term side-effects, both for the woman's health and for the earth's ecosystems. The woman's body often needs several years to regain its natural fertility after the use of hormonal preparations, and some women struggle for many years afterwards to become pregnant.

Childlessness

144. About one-sixth of all couples experience difficulties in becoming pregnant, and a smaller percentage of these are unable to have children. For couples who experience infertility problems, it is important to seek professional medical help to discover what

the problems actually are and how to deal with them. For most couples, there will be natural forms of effective fertility treatment. For others, it will never be possible for them to have their own children. This can cause great sorrow, and it may take a long time to be reconciled to such a fate. The Church understands the pain of those who are childless and tries to give them a new perspective of the situation: parenthood can be practised not merely biologically; it is just as much a spiritual reality. For some, it will be right to look into the possibility of adoption or to become foster parents for children in difficult family situations. For others, the surplus of time and energy can open up possibilities to serve others in society, to bear witness of Christ to others. The sorrow of not being able to have one's own children – which can be greater, more profound and longer lasting than others can often understand – can lead to the happiness of finding other areas in which to use one's abilities and one's love.

Assisted fertilization

145. Is assisted fertilization an alternative solution to fertility problems? In assisted fertilization, two or more egg cells are removed from the woman's ovaries. These are fertilized with sperm – either from the partner or from a donor. Once the cell division has started after some days, one or two of the fertilized eggs are implanted in the woman's uterus. Unused fertilized egg cells are frozen and preserved for later use or are destroyed or donated for research.

146. Based on the Church's firm conviction that the fertilized egg cell is a new human being, the Church does not find that fertility clinics and research communities show sufficient respect for either the fertilization process in itself or for the further handling of the embryos. To put a human embryo on ice – literally – for an indefinite period, is a violation of its right to life and development. The Church also holds that conception should not be detached from sexual intercourse, which is exclusively reserved for the man and the woman and excludes the participation of other parties to engage in actions aimed at replacing the man's and woman's union. Forms of treatment before or after sexual intercourse, with the aim of promoting fertilization, are of course permitted.

See the assignments and resources
for this chapter on the Catechetical Centre's
webpages.

5





PART 1:

Family and domestic church

*How blessed are all who fear the Lord,
who walk in his ways!*

(Psalms 128: 1)

147. To establish a family is your greatest joint project. At the same time as you say yes to sharing your life with each other, marriage usually also involves the life task of starting a family. With the promise to accept the children God may give you, you take on the responsibility to raise them in love, to care for them, convey the Church's faith to them and be their most important supporters and role models.

The family – a community of love

148. The family has always been considered the first and most important expression of the social nature of human beings. It is a community of persons founded on love. In the family, we can glimpse a reflection of the love within the Trinity: 'Seen this way, the couple's fruitful relationship becomes an image for understanding and describing the mystery of God himself, for in the Christian vision of the Trinity, God is contemplated as Father, Son and Spirit of love. The triune God is a communion of love, and the family is its living reflection. Saint John Paul II shed light on this when he said, "Our God in his deepest mystery is not solitude, but a family, for he has within himself fatherhood, sonship and the essence of the family, which is love. That love, in the divine family, is the Holy Spirit"' (Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, 2016, 11).

149. The family is intended to be a community of people who love each other. Each member lives *in communion* with the others, *united* in love. *Everything we do in this community of persons is intended to have love as its guiding principle.* It is wise for you to spend time reflecting over this. It is common today to enter into relationships without thinking carefully through how we will live in them. We allow ourselves to be led by our feelings, which are constantly changing and thus often an unreliable compass. Alternatively, we allow ourselves to be led by the ever-changing circumstances of life.

150. Now, as you stand on the threshold of starting your own family, it will be of great benefit to you to find out how, in practice, you want to allow love to guide the way you receive your children, how you live out the parental role, how you ensure that each and every family member feels loved and valued and how you can protect the unity between yourselves from egoism's ever-lurking dangers.

151. Throughout life, the community of love, which a family is intended to be, will face several challenges. It therefore needs to draw its power from the God who is himself Love, by regularly doing as the apostle Paul writes in Ephesians: 'This, then, is what I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every fatherhood, in heaven or on earth, takes its name. In the abundance of his glory may he, through his Spirit, enable you to grow firm in power with regard to your inner self, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love' (Ephesians 3: 14–17). To 'grow firm in power' through the Holy Spirit, which Paul prays for, is a necessity in all family life, especially at critical moments when the love which the man and the woman express is challenged. Make an effort to pray together regularly, as spouses, for the benefit of your family community, in deep trust that God knows your needs and listens to your prayers.

152. To raise children is to teach them what is necessary to get along well in life. Through the love the parents show the children, through their prayer life and active involvement in the Church, the children should learn to believe that God exists and be helped to enter into a personal relationship with God. In this way, the parents can show their faith to the children, and the home can become a church in miniature, a *domestic church* where God can have his rightful place. In the domestic church, new generations experience the love that originates in God and learn to live the faith in practice. God looks with special favour upon the domestic church and sanctifies it through the presence of his Holy Spirit.

The social network of the extended family

153. The extended family is the first and most important social network into which a person is born. All generations should therefore be treated with reverence and respect. The younger and more needy the children are, the more they are entitled to be respected for their personal dignity. The older generations are entitled to be respected in light of their increasing need for care and on account of the life experience and knowledge they possess. Today, it is often the case that the youngest and the oldest members of society suffer due to the way in which working life is organized. One-year-olds are in kindergarten all day because the parents need to go to work, and our oldest citizens often suffer loneliness in their own home or in a nursing or retirement home.

Changes in society that affect the family

154. The traditional understanding of the family – a unit consisting of a mother, father and children – has changed dramatically over the last 50 years. In Norway, about half of all families are affected by divorce. There are now more children living with unmarried and cohabitating parents than with married parents. We have got a less stable and partly traumatized society with a significant amount of abandoned spouses, broken families and combined families. Most of us are not only witnesses but also victims of the most comprehensive crisis ever to affect the family.

The Church's concept of the family

155. For the Church, the concept of the family is much more than a random combination of persons; essential to it is the quality of the relationships between the family members. These people are intended by God to *live in a community of love, the aim of which is to protect, reveal and share love*. This means the family members are committed to each other throughout life, and that they treat each other with love as the criterion. The family, moreover, is characterized as a double exchange of love: first, between the family members, and second, between the Triune God and the family.

The family – society's fundamental unit

156. The family is society's most important building block. It is an independent and more original community than any other type of group or state formation. Through its service on behalf of life, the family continuously adds new members to society, and

it is within the family that citizens receive their first social training. It is self-evident that societies that consist of families characterized by inner stability and harmony become viable and self-sustaining. If the families are torn apart from within, the society will crumble. (If you want to read more about the Church's understanding of the family and its role in society, we recommend you read Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, written in 1981 after the synod on the family, and his *Letter to Families* from 1994.)

Attempts to redefine the concept of the family

157. The Church defines the smallest family unit as a mother (a woman) and a father (a man) who are married, and their children. This is how God has intended it to be 'from the beginning'. Today, various pressure groups try to equate the marriage between a man and a woman with relationships between non-married persons or between persons of the same sex. The Church sees this as problematic because such relationships do not give children and adults optimally binding and complementary (in the sense of completing) conditions for their relationships. Loving feelings are insufficient on their own – commitment and biological complementarity are also necessary. Furthermore, the children's nature-given right to a childhood with care and love from their own biological parents must be respected and given priority.

New gender roles

158. Many places in the world, especially in Western countries, traditional patterns for gender roles have been broken. Traditional and culturally determined roles for men and women have been replaced by an ideal whereby both men and women should carry out all types of tasks in the areas of care giving and supporting the family. On one hand, it is positive that greater equality has been achieved between the sexes, but on the other hand, a woman's work as mother and care giver has been downgraded in relation to paid work.

159. Children's need for care and love from their own parents must be prioritized when the spouses organize their working life. No one is initially better equipped to take care of children than the children's own parents who know and love them. To raise children is the most important and most socially useful service that exists, and parents must be given the possibility to fulfil this task in accordance with their children's needs.

The domestic church – room for Christ in family life

160. From the moment you enter into marriage, God invites you to be a church in miniature in your everyday life. God himself is with you always, but it is up to you to let him give you his inspiration and his mercy in your life as spouses and parents. How can you become a domestic church?

161. The most important strategy is to set aside a fixed time – every day or a few days a week – when your attention is primarily directed to God. Pray together if the two of you share Christian faith, read a daily Bible text, pray before meals, pray the Rosary together, and so forth. Spouses with different worldviews or religions can try to create occasions in everyday life when they pay attention to the beliefs of both persons. For example, the non-Christian can share his or her thoughts, music or a picture that means something to him or her, while the Catholic spouse could, for example, share a Bible text, a prayer or religious music.

162. For couples with different religions or worldviews, it is crucial for the relationship that both spouses fully accept the way the other spouse practises his or her faith or beliefs. The friendship between you should be so secure and flexible that neither of you are ever made to feel ashamed of your convictions.

163. In the domestic church, the children are gradually introduced to faith in Christ with the help of the parents' example. Taking the children to Mass on Sunday as often as possible, Bible reading, morning and evening prayer, praying before meals, praying the Rosary, celebrating religious holidays and children's baptism days are all easy rituals that can be incorporated into family life. Stories about the lives of saints can help both children and parents to find inspiring examples for living in a personal and loving relationship with God. A good support for you as you pass your faith on to your children is to enrol them in the parish catechesis for children and young people and by sending them to the Catholic summer camps organized by Norges Unge Katolikker (Norway's Young Catholics).

164. There where it is geographically possible, you can let the children attend a Catholic school. In this way, both you and your children can meet other Catholic families and strengthen each other in practising a living faith. Furthermore, it is important that you participate actively in preparing the children to receive the sacraments that come some years after baptism: confession, (first) communion and confirmation. Eventually, you can take the children along to Eucharistic adoration and on pilgrimages, which can be decisive experiences for growing in love for Christ.

The family's churchly role

165. In church contexts, the family has the following tasks as a participant in Christ's roles as prophet, priest and king:

- To be a believing and evangelizing community
- To be a community in dialogue with God
- To be a community in the service of human beings

166. Throughout your whole life, you need to grow on the spiritual level by accepting and proclaiming the Word of God to others and by understanding new connections in God's plan for the two of you as new events are woven into the tapestry of your life. *The family is the most important mediator of faith and values to new generations.* The family, moreover, is the most important 'greenhouse' for new persons to enter religious vocations. Future evangelization depends on the domestic church, especially in places where anti-religious laws, aggressive secularization or the widespread lack of faith hinder children from being raised in faith and make religious growth difficult. The greatest challenge you will face as a Christian family will be to help your children live as strong Christians in all contexts, not just within a 'safe' Catholic framework or context.

167. As spouses, you participate in *Christ's priesthood* when you gather your family together for prayer. Praying together, as a couple or as parents and children, is a natural precondition for the spiritual unity which baptism and the sacrament of marriage give you. Jesus himself promises you: 'In truth I tell you once again, if two of you on earth agree to ask anything at all, it will be granted to you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them' (Matthew 18: 19–20).



PART 2:

The wedding

*Set me like a seal on your heart,
like a seal on your arm.
For love is strong as death,
passion as relentless as Sheol.
The flash of it is a flash of fire,
a flame of God himself.*

(Song of Songs 8: 6)

Now it begins!

168. We have almost reached the end of this course. Only the final preparations remain. Soon the day will arrive when you say yes to joining your lives together. For many couples, the wedding day may appear as a long-awaited finish line. But the wedding day, to a far greater extent, is a starting line, the beginning of a completely new existence. God will fill you with his Holy Spirit and give you power and courage to succeed in this task, regardless of how big it is.

169. The wedding day is first and foremost your day, and the church ceremony is the most important of all the rituals on this day. It is best if the wedding is simple and dignified. Use this last course day to gather as much information as possible in order to plan a wedding liturgy with your personal touch. The priest will be able to inform you of what criteria must be fulfilled in order for this to happen according to the Church's formal requirements.

Think through how you want your wedding to be

170. See if there are any questions you want to ask the course leaders, but you yourselves must do the main part of the work at home. Set aside ample time to do this, preferably several weeks. Collaborate with the priest who will perform the wedding ceremony. *Use the basic wedding ritual, the liturgy, and the suggestions for readings that will be handed out to you.* Make decisions on the following:

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1. Will the wedding be combined with a Mass? It is a good idea to make a programme/booklet for your guests.
 2. Choose readings from a list that will be given to you as a separate attachment. Which readings speak especially to you, can function as a life motto or say something about you as a couple? Choose also the intercessory prayers that you want to include, or get friends to formulate these.
 3. Choose the form of the wedding ritual that you want to use – either to declare the vows in full or simply answer ‘yes’ to the priest’s questions.
 4. Choose hymns and, if you want, other music (performed by family/friends who want to sing, a choir, an organist, etc.).
 5. Think about whether you want to include symbols or actions that are particular to your homeland or culture in addition to those that are part of the basic wedding ritual.

Symbols of the wedding ritual

171. The wedding ritual is relatively simple, yet filled with strong and beautiful symbolism – vows, the shaking of hands, exchanging rings and the confirmation of validity. In the presence of God and witnesses, you solemnly declare that you want to love each other for the rest of your life. With this public declaration of your love, the vows become binding. By saying ‘yes’, the vows you make come into effect and God bestows on you the grace of the sacrament of marriage. The handshake clarifies – to both of you as the wedding couple and to your witnesses – the lifelong pact concluded between you. The rings are a sign of the lifelong faithfulness you promise each other; the closed ring and precious gold metal symbolize the marriage bond’s imperishable nature. The priest confirms that the marriage covenant has been validly entered into in front of the Church and its faithful. If both of you are Catholics, to celebrate the Eucharist together and receive Christ in the sacrament as spouses will be especially meaningful; you share in the love-sacrifice of Christ as groom, who marries his bride, the Church.

Other symbols

172. Local customs often include symbolic rituals that are not essential but serve to express more clearly the deeply human and religious significance of the wedding. In some countries, it is customary for the bride and groom to lay the bridal bouquet in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary, as a sign that they entrust their future to her intercessory prayer. In other cultures, the bride and groom are ‘crowned’. Wedding

clothes since ancient times have been imbued with meaning; red and white, for example, have signified love and purity respectively. A white bridal gown is also a symbol of the baptismal garment, which shows that the believer is 'clothed in Christ'. The bridal bouquet and floral decoration on the bridegroom's lapel can be traced back to fertility symbols from the Roman era. Your priest can tell you what can be included of other culturally-rooted customs as well as what does not belong in the Church.

The opportunity for confession

173. For Catholics, going to confession before receiving a new sacrament is a way to prepare ourselves for the gift of grace that God will give us in the sacrament. Going to confession before you get married is a good opportunity to start the new life as spouses with a 'clean slate', as it were, guiltless and forgiven for what you may have done in the recent or distant past. Reflect over whether there are unresolved issues between the two of you for which you want to ask each other forgiveness before the wedding. This is a good thing to do even if both of you do not go to confession. Your priest can explain to you more in depth about the meaning and effects of confession.

Wedding rehearsal

174. A day or two before the wedding, you can rehearse how you will walk down the aisle, where you will sit, stand and kneel, what you will say, how and where the bridesmaid and best man and others will be seated. It can be of benefit to ask those who will play an active role in the ceremony to attend the rehearsal.

See the assignments and resources for this chapter on the Catechetical Centre's webpages.

Suggested reading

While reading this booklet, you will have come across references to several Church documents. First and foremost, these show that the booklet's presentation of the Catholic Church's understanding of marriage and its ethics is not merely something that one author or a committee has formulated, but that it is the whole Church's shared understanding and teaching. Due to space constraints, we make do to list the Church documents and recommend that you study them more carefully because they can help you deepen your knowledge of the Church's understanding of marriage and the ethics of life.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM Article 7. The Sacrament of Matrimony, 1601–1666.

YOUCAT – Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015 (12th edition). The sacraments in general, 172–178 and the sacrament of marriage, 260–263.

Pope Paul VI, Encyclical letter on the transmission of human life, *Humanae vitae*, 1968. http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html

Pope John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation on family life, *Familiaris consortio*, 1981. http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html

Pope John Paul II, 'The Language of the Body in the Structure of Marriage' (1983, pp. 270–273), in *The Redemption of the Body and the Sacramentality of Marriage* (1979–1984). https://d2y1pz2y630308.cloudfront.net/2232/documents/2016/9/theology_of_the_body.pdf

Pope John Paul II, Letter to Families, *Gratissimam sane*, 1994, especially 6–23. http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_02021994_families.html

Pope John Paul II, Encyclical on the value and inviolability of human life, *Evangelium vitae*, 1995. http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html

Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical, God is love, *Deus caritas est*, 2005, especially 1–18. http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html

Pope Francis, Apostolic exhortation on the joy of love, *Amoris laetitia*, 2016, especially chapters 1–5, 7 and 9. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html

One additional suggested book to read:

Markman, H.J., Stanley, S.M., and Blumberg S.L. *Fighting for Your Marriage*, 3rd edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.

Love is for Life is a marriage preparation course which the Catholic Diocese of Oslo offers to all couples who want to be married in the Catholic Church. It explains the Church's understanding of marriage from the perspective of the Bible and the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, supplementing this teaching with selected strategies for strengthening interpersonal communication and preventing conflicts. With this tool, parishes will be able to prepare couples for marriage in accordance with the intentions outlined in Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, and in line with the writings on marriage by Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis.

The booklet gives a thorough introduction to several themes: the call to marriage, marriage between people with different cultural backgrounds and beliefs, God's original purpose for marriage, sexual complementarity, strengthening relationships, sexuality, the perpetuation of life, natural family planning, the parenting role and family life, conflict resolution, reconciliation and the planning of the wedding itself.

Internet resources are available at <https://katekese.no>. Here you can find assignments that challenge you to reflect over ethical and moral questions. You can also find a summary of each chapter and assignments that encourage you as a couple to think through the decisions which you as spouses will need to make and how to further develop your relationship.

This publication has been prepared by the Catechetical Centre in Oslo and is a revised and abridged version of a course book by the same name from 2005/2010.

