

Retreat RESOURCE

Seven-Day Virtual Marriage Retreat

Looking for a way to enrich your marriage? Take our seven-day virtual retreat! Each day for seven days, set aside some time for prayer. Read about the theme for the day, reflect on a real-life marriage scenario, and think about ways to strengthen your own marriage. Even better, do the retreat together with your spouse!

The retreat is loosely based on the 2009 pastoral letter of the bishops of the United States *Marriage: Love and Life and the Divine Plan* (www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/marriage/love-and-life/index.cfm).

DAY ONE: Marriage is a Blessing and a Gift

DAY TWO: Marriage is the Unique Union of a Man and a Woman

DAY THREE: Marriage is a Communion of Love and Life

DAY FOUR: Marriage is a Sacrament of Christ's Love

DAY FIVE: Marriage is the Foundation of the Family and Society

DAY SIX: Marriage is a Journey of Human and Spiritual Growth

DAY SEVEN: Marriage is a School of Love and Gratitude

RETREAT DAY ONE

Marriage is a Blessing and a Gift

Breaking Open the Theme

“Among the many blessings that God has showered upon us in Christ is the blessing of marriage, a gift bestowed by the Creator from the creation of the human race” (USCCB, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, 1). The vocation to marriage is inscribed in the very nature of man and woman (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1603). As a natural institution, marriage has certain God-given characteristics. It is the permanent, faithful union of a man and a woman, intended for the good of the spouses and the bearing and raising of children.

So essential is the blessing of marriage that it was not lost by original sin, a point we are reminded of in the Nuptial Blessing of the Marriage Rite. Instead, marriage was redeemed by Christ and elevated by him to become one of the seven sacraments. In this way, Christ made marriage between a baptized man and a baptized woman a sign or visible embodiment of his love for the Church (see Ephesians 5:21-33). Sacramental marriage does not replace natural marriage but, in a marvelous example of grace building on nature, raises it beyond what husband and wife could achieve on their own, allowing them to share in God's own divine life.

Reflection

Many neighborhoods are blessed to have a married couple who are the true community makers. This is the couple on whom everyone counts to generate enthusiasm for the block party or to welcome new arrivals. When this special couple also happens to be Christians, their positive influence gives the Church a good name. People seek their opinion on moral questions or ask them to pray for their loved ones. They seem to enjoy working together in the yard and on church projects. Their dinner table always has room for another teenager. In such a couple, people witness the natural and supernatural dimensions of marriage, in the flesh.

To Think About

(Choose one or more of the following questions to reflect on by yourself and/or with your spouse)

- (1) How has your spouse been a gift to you?
- (2) What would you like to do for your spouse that would express your love in a special way?
- (3) In what ways can your marriage become a gift to other people, not only to each another?

Prayer for Married Couples

Almighty and eternal God,
You blessed the union of husband and wife
So that we might reflect the union of Christ with his Church:
look with kindness on us.
Renew our marriage covenant.
Increase your love in us,
and strengthen our bond of peace
so that, [with our children],
we may always rejoice in the gift of your blessing.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

RETREAT DAY TWO

Marriage is the Unique Union of a Man and a Woman

Breaking Open the Theme

In the beginning, says Sacred Scripture, God created man and woman in his image, “male and female He created them” (Gn 1:27). In his wisdom, God planned that man and woman would be made “for each other”: “they are equal as persons . . . and complementary as masculine and feminine” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 372). In a particular way, when a man and woman come together in marital union, they beautifully and uniquely complement each other.

Although each individual person is irreducibly unique and fundamentally equal in dignity, we should be able to recognize that obvious differences exist between men and women, and that these differences are blessed by God. These differences can be seen not only in biological terms, but also in how we think, express ourselves, and even pray. A most obvious difference can be seen in the distinct gifts a man and a woman bring to sexual intercourse. Together, they jointly hold the potential to unite in the most profound way and to bring new life into the world. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh . . .” (Mt 19:5).

Reflection

She proudly thinks of herself as a multitasker, able to juggle many things at once. Her husband might counter that he likes to concentrate on one thing at a time, focusing his attention on the task at hand. She may need to share her worries; he may be surprised to find that she isn't expecting him to fix them. He discovers that she needs to talk and relax into feeling romantic; she wishes he figured that out sooner. The beauty of marriage is that spouses have a lifetime to understand and appreciate their differences. *Vive la difference!*

To Think About

- (1) Name one or two ways your spouse approaches problems that differ from the way you like to do things.
- (2) As a man or a woman, what unique qualities do you bring to relationships, at work and in your family?
- (3) How does being a man (or a woman) impact how you approach your relationship with God?

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RETREAT DAY THREE

Marriage is a Communion of Love and Life

Breaking Open the Theme

In creating man and woman for each other, God made marriage to be love-giving and life-giving. We call these two purposes or “ends” of marriage the unitive and the procreative. They are inseparably connected and are ordered to each other. The two purposes cannot be separated “without altering the couple’s spiritual life and compromising the goods of marriage and the future of the family” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2363).

When a man and a woman exchange marital consent, they establish a partnership for the whole of life. They mutually vow an exclusive fidelity that is open to the procreation and nurture of children. In participating in God’s love, husband and wife are empowered to make a total gift of self to each other. As spouses, husband and wife not only exist side by side to each other, but also mutually for each other.

Reflection

When they were newlyweds, both were sure that this was the one person who completed their world. They thought they could never love each other more. When they found they could not have biological children, they adopted their little girl and discovered a new dimension to their love. The day they first held her in their arms, they suddenly saw each other in a new light—Mom and Dad. In becoming parents, they began to understand something new about why God had brought them together. Their feelings of great joy were accompanied by feelings of overwhelming responsibility; they knew they would need God’s help.

To Think About

- (1) If you are a parent, how has your child (or children) been a blessing to you? How have you changed for the better since becoming a parent?
- (2) If you do not have children, how do you expect that having a child would change your marriage?
- (3) How can couples continue to strengthen their marriage when they become parents?

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RETREAT DAY FOUR

Marriage is a Sacrament of Christ's Love

Breaking Open the Theme

Jesus heals marriage and restores it to its original purity of permanent self-giving in one flesh. But the Lord does not stop there. Christ generously invites husband and wife to participate in his spousal love for his Church. Christian spouses are invited to model their love on God's inner life and love in the Blessed Trinity. In this way, the marriage of two baptized Christians becomes a living symbol—a sign which makes present the union of Christ with his Church (see Eph 5:22ff.).

Jesus is truly present in his followers and in their marriages. Practically, this means that when life's difficulties press in on husband and wife, they are not alone. Though they remain fallible and weak human beings, Christian spouses can rely on Jesus to help them to continue in love even when it seems impossible. This is what is meant by the grace of the sacrament. In every moment of their married lives, Jesus is present to give Christian spouses the strength to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another's burdens, and to love one another even to the end.

Reflection

She had felt that the world was crashing around her when she learned of her husband's affair. Still, she was determined to fight for her marriage, and he wanted desperately to heal what he had damaged. Popular wisdom was not on their side, and people let her know it, too. After tears and late-night talks, some angry exchanges, and lots of counseling and prayer, she and her husband reconciled. She would say it was faith that made the difference, but mostly they don't explain their decision to others. They just say, "We're married." That was ten years ago, and new friends would never guess what they went through. Most couples will not be so severely tested, but a failure to be forgiving can make even

small faults—leaving the cap off the toothpaste, poor hygiene, or weak cooking skills—destructive to a marriage.

To Think About

- (1) How has the grace of the sacrament of marriage sustained you in difficult times?
- (2) What are some of the joyful things about being married? What are some of the challenges? Can something be both joyful and challenging?

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RETREAT DAY FIVE

Marriage is the Foundation of the Family and Society

Breaking Open the Theme

The early Church understood the Christian family as an *ecclesia domestica*, or domestic Church. This idea recognizes that the smallest expression of the Church is not the parish, but the Christian family. The family, our first community, is the basic way God gathers us and forms us. Christian families not only draw sustenance from the Church; their daily life is a true expression of the Church. They manifest Christ's presence to the world and share in the same mission that Christ gave to the entire Church. The domestic Church rests on the foundation of a baptized husband and wife. They establish a communion of love into which children are welcomed.

By creating a home where love, care, and growth in the faith flourish among family members, married couples reflect the life of the Church in the world. In the family, parents teach their children how to pray, how to embrace God's loving commandments, and how to grow in virtue and holiness. The Christian family that celebrates the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, establishes a reciprocal relationship between the family and the entire Body of Christ that is the Church.

Reflection

Whenever he heard an ambulance siren, he offered a prayer for those involved in the accident or medical emergency. When the family pet passed away, she took care to bury it lovingly in the garden. Their Catholic faith was evident in the artwork on the walls and in the simple prayers offered at table and at bedtime. They celebrated the anniversary of their child's baptism with ice cream sundaes, and always managed to pull together a group of neighbors for Christmas caroling. Their children saw and treasured these rituals of family life.

To Think About

- (1) What does your family do that brings you together?
- (2) What opportunities for passing on your faith are uniquely present in family life (that you don't usually see at church)?
- (3) In your home, identify some reminders of God's presence. What can you add to or change about your home to increase your awareness of God in your daily life?

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RETREAT DAY SIX

Marriage is a Journey of Human and Spiritual Growth

Breaking Open the Theme

Each stage of marriage has its own joys and sorrows, opportunities and challenges. When understood in the light of Christ's own journey, they can contribute to human growth and spiritual maturity. That is, a couple grows in holiness by journeying with Christ through the mystery of his life, Death, and

Resurrection. This movement through life to death to new life is called the Paschal Mystery. It is the basic model for Christian living and, therefore, for married love.

The Paschal Mystery unfolds again and again through the stages of marriage. There are Holy Thursdays, times of loving service, when couples put their own needs in second place. There are Good Fridays, times of suffering, tragedies, even death. There are Holy Saturdays, times of waiting and uncertainty, when all seems dark and the couple wonders if their marriage will survive. Then there are Easter Sundays, when the marriage of a child or the birth of a grandchild brings new hope.

These high, low, and ordinary moments of marriage are the raw material from which a life of holiness is fashioned. Holiness is not superimposed upon the couple, rather it arises from within the marriage. This is why couples often have such a strong sense of becoming holy together, of leading each other to God.

Reflection

When he returned from his tour in Iraq, the baby was nine months old. He felt like an outsider in his own family. There was no way he could fully explain what his past year had been like, and he had missed so much at home. The baby didn't know him and certainly didn't seem to need anyone but Mom. His wife was thrilled that he was home, but she resented that his return had thrown a wrench into her well-established routine. They felt a great distance between them. Memories of the happy days when they were first married helped to give them faith that God meant for them to be together, and they looked with hope to better days ahead. She found support from other military spouses; he found sound advice in his talks with their pastor. Now, their baby is four years old. Their marriage and their family bond are strong. They volunteer as a mentor couple to support other military couples struggling with similar transitions.

To Think About

(1) Think of a time from the past when your marriage went through a transition. Describe life before, during, and after the transition. What got you through? How was God present to you?

(2) How has surviving a time of trial, either personally or in your marriage, better equipped you to support others who are suffering or struggling?

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RETREAT DAY SEVEN

Marriage is a School of Love and Gratitude

Breaking Open the Theme

As Adam recognized Eve as God's gift to him, likewise spouses should recognize each other as God's gift in their lives. Through life's journey, sometime a husband or wife may need to reflect on the gift of the other, especially when misunderstandings or difficulties arise. To remember how this person came to offer love so unexpectedly or how one recognized the other as "made for you" is to be humbled by the divine gift you have received. In those moments of remembering, thankfulness should fill one's heart. Spousal gratitude is linked to conjugal charity. It will help husband and wife to persevere in fidelity, kindness, communication, and mutual assistance.

Reflection

Watching her husband reading to their young children one evening, her heart swelled in gratitude for the tender and loving man that God had made for her. Catching her look of love, he paused and looked deeply into her eyes, returning her smile. He savored the moment of peace and the warmth of his family surrounding him, thinking that he certainly had so much to be grateful for. Later, after the children were tucked in bed, she embraced him and told him how grateful she was to have him. He wondered aloud, "God has given us so much, I've been feeling lately like we certainly have a lot to offer another child . . ."

To Think About

- (1) List five ways that you show gratitude toward your spouse. Which two ways does he/she like best? Resolve to do those two more often.
- (2) What good thing did your spouse do recently that you could have thanked him or her for, but didn't? Make a note to remember next time.

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