

Courtship and Matrimony

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I will focus here on recalling some essential principles of Catholic morality that are helpful for encouraging people on their path to holiness and apostolate in courtship and matrimony. Space does not permit me to develop with greater depth other important aspects of matrimony related to the demanding and comprehensive manner in which it can facilitate growth in the spiritual life.

1. Courtship as a preparation for matrimony

a) Remote, proximate, and immediate preparation for matrimony

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, John Paul II describes the different stages of marriage preparation:

“More than ever necessary in our times is preparation of young people for marriage and family life ... Many negative phenomena which are today noted with regret in family life derive from the fact that, in the new situations, young people not only lose sight of the correct hierarchy of values but, since they no longer have certain criteria of behavior, they do not know how to face and deal with the new difficulties. But experience teaches that young people who have been well prepared for family life generally succeed better than others.

Marriage preparation has to be seen and put into practice as a gradual and continuous process. It includes three main stages: remote, proximate and immediate preparation. Remote preparation begins in early childhood ... It is the period when esteem for all authentic human values is instilled, both in interpersonal and in social relationships, with all that this signifies for the formation of character, for the control and right use of one's inclinations, for the manner of regarding and meeting people of the opposite sex, and so on. Also necessary, especially for Christians, is solid spiritual and catechetical formation that will show that marriage is a true vocation....

The religious formation of young people should be integrated, at the right moment and in accordance with the various concrete requirements, with a preparation for life as a couple. This preparation will present marriage as an interpersonal relationship of a man and a woman that has to be continually developed, and it will encourage those concerned to study the nature of conjugal sexuality and responsible parenthood....

The immediate preparation for the celebration of the sacrament of Matrimony should take place in the months and weeks immediately preceding the wedding ... Among the elements to be instilled in this journey of faith ... there must also be a deeper knowledge of the mystery of Christ and the Church, of the meaning of grace and of the responsibility of Christian marriage, as well as preparation for taking an active and conscious part in the rites of the marriage liturgy.”¹

b) Some moral criteria regarding chastity in courtship

In many places, unfortunately, much confusion exists about moral criteria regarding affective relations during courtship, and not only on the part of the interested parties, but also among parents and educators. The strong pressure of a paganized atmosphere means that even persons who have received a good doctrinal formation can end up thinking—perhaps unconsciously—that the moral norms about how to behave while dating or engaged “are not as demanding as they used to be,” or that one has to be lenient towards certain widespread practices that fail to conform to God’s law.

To help persons in this situation to have a well-formed conscience and to sanctify their engagement, preparing them to have the refinement and sense of responsibility needed to create a healthy home, the first thing to note is that the Christian vocation demands that everyone strive for sanctity: there are no second-class Christians. In courtship, as in other areas of life, a coherent Christian has to seek holiness, bringing his or her behavior into accord with God’s law, without any concessions. Only those who decide to live their engagement chastely—struggling with determination against

¹ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, no. 66.

temptations, and never trying to balance on the edge of sin—lay the foundations of generosity on which they can afterwards build a happy and holy marriage.

Therefore, the signs of confidence or of affection between unmarried persons of the opposite sex should not be based exclusively on what one's feelings would suggest, but also on the objective reality of the relation that exists between them. Just as there are expressions of love proper to spouses, and others appropriate for brothers and sisters, there are also distinctions regarding persons who are simply acquainted, or who enjoy a personal friendship, or who are engaged to be married.

The Church teaches that “*lust* is a disordered desire for or inordinate enjoyment of sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure is morally disordered when sought for itself, isolated from its procreative and unitive purposes”.² It is useful to remind young people that any sexual pleasure *directly* procured or consented to, if it is not ordered to the legitimate conjugal act, objectively constitutes a mortal sin. In this area, there is no slight matter.

John Paul II said in a discourse to youth that “*your vocation to chastity is essential to preparing for marriage (...)* Honest sexual “language” requires a commitment to lifelong fidelity. To give your body to another person symbolizes the total gift of yourself to that person. But if you are not married, you are admitting that you might change your mind in the future. Total self-giving would then be absent. *Without the bond of marriage, sexual relations are a lie.* And for Christians, marriage means sacramental marriage”.³ Therefore, “those who are *engaged to marry* are called to live chastity in continence. They should see in this time of testing a discovery of mutual respect, an apprenticeship in fidelity, and the hope of receiving one another from God. They should reserve for marriage the expressions of affection that belong to married love. They will help each other grow in chastity”.⁴

Within this moral framework, which is always valid, it is important to remember that the mutual affection of engaged couples, by its very nature, matures and strengthens gradually over time. At the beginning, the relationship is closer to simple friendship; therefore, during this period the appropriate expressions of confidence and affection should be guided by what is the norm for friendship in general.

There are those who think that once an engagement has taken place, this authorizes the couple to exchange more intimate expressions of affection than those between good friends. They claim that these shows of affection arise from and manifest the love that they profess for each other and that it does not present a direct danger against chastity. To such a claim, one must respond that these manifestations of affection can become a proximate occasion of sin and would constitute, at least, a

² Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2351.

³ JOHN PAUL II, *Address to youth in Uganda*, February 6, 1993, no. 5.

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2350.

grave imprudence, since by this behavior they become habituated to a pattern of intimacy which exposes them to grave temptations, and which, by its very nature, stains the purity of their relationship and often ends up clouding their conscience.

To strongly advise against this type of behavior does not imply thinking badly of someone, nor seeing evil where there is none. Rather, it is to give prudent, realistic warning of the danger of offending God and of letting concupiscence, fed by improper intimacy, take precedence in their relationship, which becomes reductively defined in terms of sexual attraction. Rather than unifying the couple, this leads in the end to distancing them from one another.⁵ By behaving in this way, they can end up seeing each other more as objects to satisfy their desires, rather than as a person to whom love leads them to give themselves.⁶

Thus Christian prudence has always advised a relatively short engagement. This does not mean that the couple should not get to know each other deeply, but rather that this knowledge can be attained through a previous period of interaction and friendship before becoming engaged.

When the intention to marry in the near future has been concretized (although there is always the possibility that the marriage might not actually take place), a new situation arises with objective external guarantees of a stable commitment, such as age, professional situation, maturity, etc. In these circumstances, certain signs of mutual affection, refined and pure, which do not involve even implicitly a twisted intention, can be morally correct. However, such signs of love would need to be energetically cut off if they began to be a temptation against purity for either party.⁷ These expressions of affection are not “in part the same and in part distinct” from those proper to spouses, but are rather essentially distinct, just as their commitment is distinct from the marriage bond. Therefore, these expressions have to be governed by the special reciprocal respect of persons who do not yet belong to each other.

Some reliable moralists affirm that, assuming no lustful intention is present, reasonable but not necessary manifestations of affection by an engaged couple which produce an incomplete disorder would be a venial sin, if this disorder were positively rejected, but to continue in this same action, if

⁵ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Discourse*, September 24, 1980, no. 5.

⁶ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Discourse*, July 23, 1980, no. 3.

⁷ One should keep in mind that certain actions can produce, with more or less probability (some almost with certainty) an incomplete or even complete action of the generative faculty. When these actions are carried out without seeking to produce the disordered sexual response, but rather for some other purpose, the objective disorder is said to be sought only indirectly.

In these cases, the general moral norm is clear: it is licit to carry out these actions if there is a proportionate cause or motive, and if the means are used so as not to consent to the disorder that is produced; otherwise, without a proportionate motive, these actions are sinful.

there were a proximate danger of the disorder becoming complete, would be a mortal sin.⁸ A more detailed casuistry is not necessary, but it would not make sense to look for “loopholes” to more or less secretly justify one’s concupiscence. Also, in this area, “stickier than tar”,⁹ anyone who does not struggle with humility and fortitude to avoid even the slightest dangers easily ends up falling into grave sins, or at least into a state of spiritual lukewarmness.

In dealing with these questions it is important to remember that moral norms are not barriers to authentic human love, but rather indicate its proper expressions at each moment for it to be truly love. These norms exalt love’s nobility and dignity as desired by God; they ground love in the gift of self, preserving it from selfishness; they transform it, even before marriage, into a way of sanctification; and they lay the foundation for its future stability and fruitfulness.¹⁰

Those entrusted with the care and formation of young people need to have very clear criteria. It would not be sufficient, for example, to give opportune warnings when one notices that some difficulties have already occurred. Rather they have to anticipate and prevent the problems that may arise, addressing them with timely remedies. In spiritual direction, they have to demand with firmness, facilitating sincerity with opportune and refined questions, so that everyone may live their engagement with great moral rectitude. Often it will be necessary to remind people that to live a clean life in this situation requires strengthening their interior life (through assiduous recourse to the sacraments and the other practices of Christian piety), humbly asking our Lord and our Lady for purity, and being completely sincere in personal spiritual direction.

Young people also have to consider their duty to be a good example for their fiancé, and for their parents, relatives and friends. All Christians are obliged to decisively reject behaviors that could tarnish—even slightly— what is proper to a child of God, avoiding situations that, although

⁸ Cf. A. LANZA and P. PALAZZINI, *Theologia Moralis*, Appendix on chastity and lust, p. 219, no. 3, b.

⁹ ST. JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, no. 131. “Engagement should be time for growing in affection and for getting to know each other better. As in every school of love, it should be inspired, not by a desire to receive, but by a spirit of giving, of understanding, of respect and gentle consideration” (ST. JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, no. 105).

¹⁰ As John Paul II reminded young people: “Chastity—which signifies respect for the dignity of the others, because our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (cf. *1Cor* 4:19)—leads you to grow in love for the others and for God. It prepares you to make the ‘mutual self-giving’ (cf. VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 48) that is the foundation of Christian marriage. And, even more importantly, *it teaches you to love as Christ loves, giving his life for others* (cf. *Jn* 15:13)”.

“Don’t be fooled by the empty words of those who ridicule chastity or your capacity for self-control. The strength of your conjugal love depends on your effort to learn true love, with a chastity that involves abstaining from all sexual relations outside of marriage” (JOHN PAUL II, *Discourse*, February 6, 1993, no. 5; Vid. also IDEM, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 11).

widespread in some places, are incompatible with Christian morals: certain signs of affection, frequenting certain environments, taking trips together, immodest dress, etc.

Parents should be reminded as well of the importance of their role in the formation of their children, and specifically in helping them acquire the virtues essential for living a chaste engagement. Among other virtues, modesty should be stressed, which is taught above all by their own good example at home and which is so important for the dignity of a daughter or son of God.

2. Christian matrimony

a) Matrimony as a divine vocation

Matrimony as a vocation is a specific determination of the Christian vocation and of the divine mission entrusted to all Christians at Baptism.

The call by God to matrimony is a genuine vocation, bringing one to supernaturalize all the rights and duties proper to that state.

“Authentic married love is caught up into divine love and is governed and enriched by Christ’s redeeming power and the saving activity of the Church, so that this love may lead the spouses to God with powerful effect and may aid and strengthen them in sublime office of being a father or a mother. For this reason Christian spouses have a special sacrament by which they are fortified and receive a kind of consecration in the duties and dignity of their state. By virtue of this sacrament, as spouses fulfill their conjugal and family obligation, they are penetrated with the spirit of Christ, which suffuses their whole lives with faith, hope and charity. Thus they increasingly advance the perfection of their own personalities, as well as their mutual sanctification, and hence contribute jointly to the glory of God”.¹¹

“The gift of the sacrament is at the same time a vocation and commandment for the Christian spouses, that they may remain faithful to each other forever, beyond every trial and difficulty, in generous obedience to the holy will of the Lord”.¹²

Spouses should always keep in mind this fundamental fact that gives meaning to all the rights and duties inherent in their state:

“It is important for married people to acquire a clear sense of the dignity of their vocation. They must know that they have been called by God not only to human love but also to a divine love, through their human love. It is important for them to realize that they have been

¹¹ VATICAN COUNCIL II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, no. 48.

¹² JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, no. 20.

chosen from all eternity to cooperate with the creative power of God by having and then bringing up children. Our Lord asks them to make their home and their entire family life a testimony of all the Christian virtues”.¹³

b) Some moral criteria regarding chastity within marriage

Because “marriage and married love are by nature ordered to the procreation and education of children”¹⁴, there exists the corresponding right and duty to the conjugal act. This act has to be exercised virtuously (governed not only by the virtue of chastity, but also, among Christians, by faith, hope and love), without forgetting a profound theological reality: that the body is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit (cf. *1Cor* 3:16-17; 6:19-20).

There is no *per se* obligation to ask for conjugal relations, although a spouse must consent to relations always and whenever the other spouse asks *serie et rationabiliter*,¹⁵ even though it may entail a personal sacrifice. This is so for a grave reason of justice, in virtue of the marriage bond, which includes this aspect, among others. As Sacred Scripture says: “The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband” (*1Cor* 7:3).

There are situations in which the obligation to fulfill the marital debt may not be grave matter. For example, if there is some reason (even if a light reason) for saying no, and this does not pose a proximate danger of incontinence for the other spouse. The obligation does not exist if the other spouse asks with the intention of abusing the act.

Some basic moral principles should be kept in mind regarding the use of matrimony:

- spouses who intentionally deprive the marital act of its procreative possibility break the natural law and commit a grave sin *ex toto genere suo*;¹⁶

- a conjugal act made voluntarily unfruitful, and therefore intrinsically sinful, cannot be justified by an otherwise proper conjugal life;¹⁷

¹³ ST. JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, no. 93. At the same time we have to remember that celibacy is—theologically, not in the order of sanctity—superior to the married state. “The Church, throughout her history, has always defended the superiority of this charism to that of marriage, by reason of the wholly singular link which it has with the Kingdom of God” (JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation. *Familiaris consortio*, no. 16).

¹⁴ VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 50.

¹⁵ For there to be a true obligation in justice, the request must be serious and reasonable. Serious: not simply a desire from which one may desist without difficulty when a slight objection is raised. Reasonable: as corresponds to a human act, realized in its proper form; not, for example, in an unnatural way, or in a state of drunkenness (cf. PRÜMMER, *Manuale Theologiae Moralis*, III, no. 695).

¹⁶ Cf. PIUS XI, *Casti connubii*, December 31, 1930: AAS 22 (1930) p. 559; PAUL VI, *Humanae vitae*, no. 11.

- all acts which, in anticipation of the conjugal union, have as their end or as a means the prevention of procreation, are intrinsically and gravely illicit. The ensuing union is equally illicit as long as the effects of those acts continue or, if these acts are temporarily or permanently irreversible, until there is true repentance for the evil committed;¹⁸

- any act which during or after the conjugal union itself voluntarily deprives this union of its generative capability is also gravely illicit;¹⁹

- and finally, the direct interruption of the generative process once life has begun is the gravest of crimes: an abortion directly desired and provoked, even if for therapeutic reasons.²⁰

As in any other matter, formal cooperation (that is, accompanied by internal or external approval of the sin) is always illicit.

In some circumstances, faced with the moral obligation to avoid very grave evils (for example, the rupture of the family, or to prevent the proximate and certain danger of adultery by the other spouse), *material* and *passive* cooperation in the sin of the other spouse may be licit:

- The materiality of this cooperation consists in not approving externally or with internal consent to the other's sin, although the innocent spouse should not be troubled in conscience by enjoying what is natural to the union as such. The innocent spouse should show the appropriate disapproval of these acts according to the situation in each case;

- Passivity does not refer to the union as such. It means that the innocent spouse cannot contribute to causing the action that deprives the marital union of its ordering towards procreation, not even indirectly: for example, complaining about the inconveniences another child would bring, etc.²¹

Regarding the possible licitness of material and passive cooperation:

- the cooperation of the woman in the marital act can be licit when she knows her husband has the intention of practicing onanism;²²

¹⁷ Cf. *Humanae vitae*, no. 14.

¹⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Cf. PIUS XI, *Casti connubii*, AAS 22 (1930) p. 560.

²⁰ Cf. PAUL VI, *Humanae vitae*, no. 14. One also must clearly explain the very serious sin involved in the use of contraceptive pills which are abortifacients.

²¹ Cf. PIUS XI, *Casti connubii*, AAS 22 (1930) p. 561.

²² Cf. *S. Poenitentiarum*, April 3, 1916.

- cooperation can also be licit for very grave reasons when the other spouse has been temporarily or permanently sterilized, either by surgery or by non-abortifacient pharmaceuticals, or tries to carry out the conjugal act using instruments to avoid procreation, as long as these are not potentially abortifacient;

- one may not cooperate when the other spouse tries to perform sodomy.²³

To reiterate, the licitness of material and passive cooperation in the other spouse's sin requires a grave and proportionate reason. When these dangers are especially acute, the innocent party may even licitly ask for relations, even while knowing that the other spouse is almost certainly going to abuse the marital act.

Nevertheless, as is deducible from the established moral principles referred to above, these reasons are never sufficient to justify the cooperation of the man when the woman has previously taken an abortifacient drug or made use of mechanical means that could have an abortifacient effect (for example, an IUD that impedes the implantation of the fertilized ovum), since he would not only be cooperating in a conjugal act which is gravely sinful for the woman, but also in a possible abortion, a most serious crime and totally disproportionate to the evils one would avoid through passive material cooperation.

It is important to recall that an essential end of marriage is the procreation and education of children. The Second Vatican Council teaches that "among married couples who thus fulfill their God-given mission, special mention should be made of those who after prudent reflection and common decision courageously undertake the proper upbringing of a large number of children"²⁴. And the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has underlined that "Sacred Scripture and the Church's traditional practice see in large families a sign of God's blessing and the parents' generosity"²⁵.

"For just reasons, spouses may wish to space the births of their children,"²⁶ limiting the use of matrimony to the woman's infertile periods.²⁷ Periodic continence is the only licit means for exercising the conjugal union while avoiding generation, in conformity with the nature and dignity of the human person. This method is objectively and essentially distinct from contraceptive means.²⁸

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 50.

²⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2373.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 2368.

²⁷ Cf. *Discourse of PIUS XII to midwives* (December 20, 1951), and PAUL VI, *Humanae vitae*, no. 16.

²⁸ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 32.

In any event, it is clear that simple licitness is insufficient to assure moral rectitude here. In addition, one must ensure that the desire to delay having children “is not motivated by selfishness but is in conformity with the generosity appropriate to responsible parenthood”²⁹. Indeed, if periodic continence is practiced with a contraceptive attitude and mentality (that of rejecting life), it would corrupt the spouses’ behavior at the very heart.

The licit use of periodic continence is rooted in the intention and motives of those who decide to practice it.³⁰ It is understood that these motives necessarily have to be serious so as to be proportionate to what is excluded: the transmission of a human life, one of the greatest goods in creation, and to which love and conjugal union are by nature oriented.³¹

Also, it is important to remember that “in relation to physical, economic, psychological, and social conditions, responsible parenthood is exercised, either by the deliberate and generous decision to raise a numerous family, or by the decision, made for grave motives and with due respect for the moral law, to avoid for the time being, or even for an indeterminate period, a new birth”³².

A general principle in this area is to urge souls to be generous and to have confidence in divine Providence: to live gratefully and uprightly their participation in the power of God, and not to want to block the sources of life. They should be helped always to receive joyfully the children God wants to send them, and never to forget the demands of the Christian faith or to lose a supernatural outlook regarding their role in transmitting life. It is not up to the spiritual director to decide whether, in the circumstances described by those who seek his advice, periodic continence is in fact licit. The spiritual director should limit himself to explaining the general criteria about the need for just and proportionate motives for its use. If he knows the case well, he can give advice, but leaving it very clear that the judgment and decision has to be made by the spouses themselves, who in turn have to realize that they are not the ones “in charge” here, but rather that they have to exercise their responsibility before God.

c) Safeguarding fidelity in marriage

Marriage is a covenant of conjugal love between one man and one woman for life. By it, “the man and woman ‘are no longer two but one flesh’ (*Mt 19:6*) and they are called to grow continually in

²⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2368.

³⁰ Referring to these reasons, Pius XII uses the phrases “cases of greater weight,” “sufficient and sure moral reasons,” “grave motives,” “serious reasons, grave reasons that are personal or derived from exterior circumstances,” “serious and proportionate motives,” “major obstacles.” Later, Paul VI uses the expressions “serious causes” and “just motives.”

³¹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, General Audience September 5, 1984, which comments on *Humanae vitae* and deals expressly with this issue.

³² PAUL VI, *Humanae Vitae*, no. 10.

their communion through day-to-day fidelity to their marriage promise of total mutual self-giving”³³. This requirement of unity, which is deeply rooted in human nature³⁴, is taken up by God in Christ, who “confirms it, purifies it and elevates it, leading it to perfection through the sacrament of matrimony: the Holy Spirit who is poured out in the sacramental celebration offers Christian couples the gift of a new communion of love that is the living and real image of that unique unity which makes of the Church the indivisible Mystical Body of the Lord Jesus”³⁵. This sacrament is a “sacred sign that sanctifies in cooperation with Jesus Christ. He fills the souls of husband and wife and invites them to follow him. He transforms their whole married life into an occasion for God’s presence on earth”³⁶.

Marriage is characterized not only by its unity, but also by its indissolubility, since “as a mutual gift of two persons, this intimate union and the good of the children impose total fidelity on the spouses and argue for an unbreakable oneness between them”³⁷. “Being rooted in the personal and total self-giving of the couple, and being required by the good of the children, the indissolubility of marriage finds its ultimate truth in the plan that God has manifested in his revelation: he wills and he communicates the indissolubility of marriage as a fruit, a sign and a requirement of the absolutely faithful love that God has for man and that the Lord Jesus has for the Church”³⁸. This comparison between matrimonial fidelity and the fidelity of God’s love shows that marriage establishes such a powerful natural bond between the spouses that its disintegration would be comparable to the dismembering of a living body.³⁹

Unity and indissolubility are willed by God, and are a precious gift that spouses have to zealously guard day by day, “beyond every trial and difficulty, in generous obedience to the holy will of the Lord: ‘What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder’ (*Mt 19:6*)”⁴⁰. Moreover,

³³ JOHN PAUL II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 19.

³⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ ST. JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 23.

³⁷ VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 48.

³⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 20.

³⁹ The Ritual for this sacrament reflects both the radical nature of the commitment the spouses undertake, for their own good and for the procreation and upbringing of the children God chooses to send them, and the existence of a bond that transcends the human will. Thus, in the first formula provided by the Ritual, each of the contracting parties says: “I, [NO.], do take thee, [NO.], to be my lawful wedded [husband/wife], to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part.” Afterwards the priest says: “You have declared your consent before the Church. May the Lord in his goodness strengthen your consent and fill you both with his blessings. What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.”

⁴⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 20.

as Pope John Paul II goes on to say: “To bear witness to the inestimable value of the indissolubility and fidelity of marriage is one of the most precious and most urgent tasks of Christian couples in our time. ... I praise and encourage those numerous couples who, though encountering no small difficulty, preserve and develop the value of indissolubility: thus, in a humble and courageous manner, they perform the role committed to them of being in the world a ‘sign’—a small and precious sign, sometimes also subjected to temptation, but always renewed—of the unfailing fidelity with which God and Jesus Christ love each and every human being”⁴¹.

St. Josemaría has reminded the world of the sanctifying and apostolic value of the quest for sanctity within the marriage vocation. He taught that marriage is:

“a real supernatural calling ... Husband and wife are called to sanctify their married life and to sanctify themselves in it. It would be a serious mistake if they were to exclude family life from their spiritual development. Family life, the marriage union, the care and education of children, the effort to provide for the needs of the family as well as for its security and development, the relationships with other persons who make up the community, all these are among the ordinary human situations that Christian couples are called upon to sanctify.

They will achieve this aim by exercising the virtues of faith and hope, facing serenely all the great and small problems which confront any family, and persevering in the love and enthusiasm with which they fulfill their duties. In this way they practice the virtue of charity in all things. They learn to smile and forget about themselves in order to pay attention to others. Husband and wife will listen to each other and to their children, showing them that they are really loved and understood. They will forget about the unimportant little frictions that selfishness could magnify out of proportion. They will do lovingly all the small acts of service that make up their daily life together”⁴².

The daily life of those who follow their vocation to marriage is interwoven with sacrifices and joys, pleasures and renunciations: “The realization of the meaning of the conjugal union, by means of the mutual self-giving of the spouses, becomes possible only by means of a continuous effort, which also includes renunciation and sacrifice. The love between the spouses must in fact be modeled on the love of Christ who ‘has loved us and given himself up for us, sacrificing himself to God as a fragrant offering’ (*Eph* 5:2; 5:25)”⁴³. “Matrimonial unity and family stability involve the effort not only to maintain but also to bring about a constant increase in love and self-giving. Those who think that a love wearily maintained is sufficient for marriage are mistaken. Rather, the reverse is true: spouses have the

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Christ is Passing By*, no. 23

⁴³ JOHN PAUL II, *Address to the Roman Rota*, February 5, 1987, no. 6.

grave duty—undertaken on their wedding day—to strive continuously to increase their conjugal and family love”⁴⁴.

Daily fidelity to conjugal love, which is inseparable from a positive and generous attitude to the good of human life, certainly demands effort and sacrifice. However, it must not be forgotten that Christian spouses have God’s grace, which is bestowed upon them (as upon all Catholics) in the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist; they also have the sacramental grace of Matrimony, which strengthens them so that in all circumstances, even the most difficult ones, they are able to maintain and increase the love that led them to respond to the divine calling to marriage. Also to be borne in mind are recourse to prayer and the help that comes from spiritual direction.

As in all life’s problems, difficulties in married life are overcome by God’s help and by love. Thus the trials of marriage serve to strengthen and increase the affection of the spouses for one another.

“As long as we walk on this earth, suffering will always be the touchstone of love. If we were to describe what occurs in the married state, we could say that there are two sides to the coin. On the one hand, there is the joy of knowing that one is loved, the desire and enthusiasm involved in starting a family and taking care of it, the love of husband and wife, the happiness of seeing the children grow up. On the other hand, there are also sorrows and difficulties—the passing of time that consumes the body and threatens the character with the temptation to bitterness, the seemingly monotonous succession of days that are apparently always the same. We would have a poor idea of marriage and of human affection if we were to think that love and joy come to an end when faced with such difficulties. It is precisely then that our true sentiments come to the surface. Then the tenderness of a person’s gift of himself takes root and shows itself in a true and profound affection that is stronger than death (cf. *Song* 8:6)”⁴⁵.

In general, the most serious obstacles (whether objective or subjective) to marital happiness stem from pride. Besides, it is not uncommon to find that the straining of affective relationships between spouses is also provoked or followed by extramarital sentimental relationships, which offer the false hope of a new happiness, or of a serenity that over a longer or shorter period of time has been lost.

Whatever their cause, difficulties have to be resolved by applying the human and supernatural means, but “without ever falsifying or compromising the truth”⁴⁶. In situations in which the promise of conjugal happiness seems to fade away, the temptation could arise of thinking, mistakenly, that it is not possible to preserve unity today and now, or that it won’t be possible in the future; or that the whole of

⁴⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Homily*, April 8, 1987.

⁴⁵ ST. JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 24.

⁴⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 20.

one's previous married life was based on mistaken presuppositions, tracing the root of one's current difficulties back to the very beginning of marital commitment. This leads to the idea that the "remedy" for present difficulties will be the breaking off of matrimonial relations, and that there "probably" never was any true matrimonial bond in the first place.

In this scenario, as in other similar ones, if one's personal dispositions are not totally honest, if there is no real struggle against all that threatens matrimonial fidelity, if one is not humble and sincere with oneself, then it is very easy to find arguments and reasons for falsely reinterpreting the true nature of one's own marriage. Stress is laid, in a biased way, on all that suits one's own passions, and anything that one doesn't want to take into account is forgotten. In this way, even though a person's conscience may initially have led him or her to acknowledge the need to preserve the true good of marital fidelity (because that is what God wants, and what they freely accepted in contracting the bond), nevertheless they can end up preferring the apparent good of a "solution" which runs counter to marital fidelity.

Anyone going through this sort of situation would need to be helped to consider once again that, for a married person, maintaining and defending the bond which they freely assumed is not a burden, but is precisely the sure foundation on which to build their life. Fidelity is the only way to respond to the vocation to marriage and to find true happiness, both eternal and here on earth. The alternative of apparent happiness and peace outside the plans of God, which can appear highly attractive in times of difficulty, is radically false and illusory, and soon leads to deep unease, fragility, and (as experience shows) the proliferation of unions contrary to marriage, based only on sentiment. Among the evils produced by these unions is the very serious harm caused to children and to the whole fabric of society.⁴⁷

Apart from the abuses that may be perpetrated in specific cases, this misguided manner of proceeding also brings with it another very great social evil: it encourages many faithful to think, wrongly, that it is lawful to have recourse to the ecclesiastical tribunal to seek a declaration of nullity when there is only a suspicion that the marriage may have been null and without taking into account the grave duty of safeguarding matrimonial fidelity, or of removing the obstacles that make a marriage

⁴⁷ Among the first signs of the de-christianisation of any society are laws and practices favoring divorce (which are always presented in a fallacious way, as alleged solutions to unsustainable marital situations). These bring in their wake devastating consequences for individuals and families.

The erroneous application of canonical provisions reflects a mentality that at root considers any marriage to be null which has failed, humanly speaking. The proponents of such a view would say that Christian marriage is certainly indissoluble, but when it fails, it could mean that it was null, because one of the parties lacked sufficient psychological maturity to assume the obligations of marriage, and so on. From such a starting-point, it is relatively simple to "discover" incapacity in one or both of the parties, making use of fallacious psychological or medical explanations of various kinds.

null, if it can be regularized for the sake of the authentic good of the spouses, of the children born from this union and of society as a whole.⁴⁸

If one bears in mind that marriage “represents a true vocation for the great majority of the human race,” it is logical to conclude that “in assessing the capacity or the act of consent necessary for the celebration of a valid marriage, one cannot demand what it is not possible to require of the majority of people.” It is a question of a realistic view of the human person, “as being always growing, called to make responsible choices with his inborn abilities, continuously enriching them by his own efforts and the help of grace”⁴⁹.

This presumption in favor of the validity of the conjugal union, i.e. that the marriage always has to be assumed to be valid, until the contrary is proved,⁵⁰ is not merely the application of a general principle of law, but is also a consequence perfectly in keeping with the specific reality of marriage, because it answers to the truth of the human person, man and woman, and to the natural inclination to their union in matrimony. The good of the spouses themselves, the good of the children in a very special way, and the good of the whole of society and the Church, steer the conscience in the direction of saving the conjugal union, and, where appropriate, bringing it to the fullness of a valid marriage. There is a duty (at all times, and particularly when difficulties arise) to use all permissible means not only to maintain conjugal life when there is a valid marriage.⁵¹ In an analogous way, there is a duty to

⁴⁸ Such an approach fails to distinguish properly between the essence of marriage (the parties united by the bond) and its full existential fulfillment (matrimonial life). The latter is seen as a constitutive element of the existence of marriage, so that a breakdown of conjugal life is considered to indicate a disappearance of the matrimonial bond, or as a sign that the bond never really existed. In this connection John Paul II has stated that “the breakdown of a marriage union is never in itself proof of incapacity on the part of the contracting parties. They may have neglected or used badly the means, both natural and supernatural, at their disposal. Alternatively they may have failed to accept the inevitable limitations and burdens of married life, either because of blocks of an unconscious nature or because of slight pathological disturbances which leave human freedom substantially intact, or finally because of failures of a moral order. The hypothesis of real incapacity is to be considered only when an anomaly of a serious nature is present which, however it may be defined, must substantially vitiate the capacity to understand and/or to consent”. (JOHN PAUL II, *Address to the Roman Rota*, February 5, 1987, no. 7).

⁴⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Address to the Roman Rota*, January 27, 1997, no. 5.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1060: “Marriage enjoys the favor of law. Consequently, in doubt the validity of a marriage must be upheld until the contrary is proven.”

⁵¹ The declaration of nullity of marriage given by an ecclesiastical tribunal has nothing to do with a sort of “divorce in disguise”: the tribunal does not break the matrimonial bond, but declares that it never existed. No authority inside or outside the Church can dissolve a sacramental, ratified and consummated marriage. If the bond between Christian spouses was initially valid (ratified), and the marriage has been consummated, no authority can “annul” it or dissolve the union before God.

seek to remedy an irregular marital situation that is capable of validation.⁵² This spirit corresponds to the most elementary common and Christian sense.

Spouses who are going through serious difficulties in their married life need to be helped to have a proper Christian perspective on their situation, and to use all the human and supernatural means to fulfill the will of God—in other words, to remain faithful to their matrimonial vocation. Specifically, they should be advised:

- to strengthen their spiritual life, by frequenting the sacraments, praying, and receiving the help of spiritual guidance;⁵³

- to consider once again the Christian meaning of marriage and the value of marital fidelity;⁵⁴

- to examine the causes of their difficulties (selfishness, pride, etc.) and the means needed to conserve, increase and make more mature their conjugal affection, overcoming the obstacles that may have arisen against this love;⁵⁵

- to try to reject the idea that separation or breaking up would be the answer to their difficulties, since they have been called by God to be saints through fidelity to their matrimonial union, and they have the grave duty of making every effort to achieve that. To depart from the path chosen by God would mean putting at risk both their earthly and their eternal happiness, in exchange for, at best, a passing satisfaction;

⁵² Therefore, as a general rule, except when serious reasons impede it, one has to do everything possible to urge *the parties concerned to validate their marriage* (cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1676).

⁵³ “Couples have the grace of the married state—the grace they receive in the sacrament of Marriage—which enables them to live all the human and Christian virtues in their married life: understanding, good humor, patience, forgiveness, refinement and consideration in their mutual relations. The important thing is not to give up the effort, not to give in to nerves, pride or personal fads or obsessions. In order to achieve this, husbands and wives must grow in interior life and learn from the Holy Family to live with refinement, for supernatural and at the same time human reasons, the virtues of a Christian home.” (ST. JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, no. 108).

⁵⁴ “It is important for married people to acquire a clear sense of the dignity of their vocation. They must know that they have been called by God not only to human love but also to a divine love, through their human love. It is important for them to realize that they have been chosen from all eternity to cooperate with the creative power of God by having and then bringing up children. Our Lord asks them to make their home and their entire family life a testimony of all the Christian virtues” (ST. JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, no. 93).

⁵⁵ “It is possible to live happily together when everyone tries to correct his own defects and makes an effort to overlook the faults of others. That is to say, when there is love which cancels out and overcomes everything that might seem to be a motive for coldness or disagreement. On the other hand, if husband and wife dramatize their little differences and reproach each other for their defects and mistakes, they put an end to peace and run the risk of killing their love” (ST. JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, no. 108).

- even though the situation may be extremely difficult, and the parties may already have separated, they should seek, through effort and sacrifice, to achieve reconciliation, and to recommence their conjugal life—especially if there are children involved.⁵⁶

If spouses who are going through serious difficulties have already thought about the possibility of asking for a declaration of nullity, then apart from what has already been said, the following would also need to be done:

- they should be helped to consider that, even though there can exist situations in which an apparent marriage can in all truth be declared null by the ecclesiastical tribunals in accordance with what the Law of the Church establishes, nevertheless it is difficult to imagine how they can honestly and reasonably start to “doubt” the validity of their own marriage after years have gone by, and precisely in moments of difficulty, unless serious new facts or circumstances have come to light which were not previously known;⁵⁷

- they should be warned of the real possibility that their feelings (passions, self-love, etc.), stemming from the difficulties they are experiencing, can easily cloud and deform the judgement of their own conscience. Therefore they should ask God for humility so that they can see, clearly and truly, the real history of their marital relationship. They should take as long as they need to for this, because it is a very serious matter, and they have to avoid deceiving themselves by projecting their present feelings back to the moment of consent;

- it should be pointed out to them that, even where the doubt as to the validity of their marriage has arisen legitimately, the line of conduct required by Christian morality is:

- to use all the means to recover and maintain their uprightness of conscience, which has doubtless been affected by the difficult situation they find themselves in;

- to maintain marital fidelity;

- where appropriate, to seek validation of the marriage, bearing in mind that the obligations of charity and justice between the spouses are very serious, as are those pertaining

⁵⁶ It is true that the *Code of Canon Law* envisages the possibility of separation in certain cases, such as that of adultery (cf. can. 1152 §1). However, this is not always the best solution, and the Code itself strongly recommends that the parties should not separate, out of Christian charity and taking into account the good of the family. The Code also praises the innocent spouse who readmits the other to conjugal life (can. 1155).

⁵⁷ As has already been mentioned, the mere presence of difficulties, even though they may be serious and enduring, is not a reason for starting to doubt the existence of a marriage, nor does it demonstrate an incapacity to give marital consent.

to the good of the children; without forgetting the common good involved and the danger of scandal;

- if, after all these things have been duly considered, the parties still want to go to the tribunals, apart from acknowledging their legal right to challenge the validity of the marriage before the tribunal,⁵⁸ they would need to be given the following moral advice:

- because of the special and serious nature of the matter, the personal decision of an individual to have recourse to the nullity process requires that he or she be convinced in conscience that objectively it is at least probable that there is true nullity;⁵⁹

- it is necessary to seek advice from people who are not only technically expert in this field, but are also deeply imbued with the Christian spirit regarding the truth of marriage and its indissolubility. This is because the right to ask for a declaration of nullity cannot be thought of as a faculty that can be exercised without careful assessment of the requisites for its use;

- the person concerned must be prepared to accept the judgement of the Church, without trying to anticipate that judgement. Even where there is subjective moral certainty regarding the nullity of a marriage,⁶⁰ the individual in question is also required in the external sphere to submit to the tribunal's decision, and cannot enter into a new marriage until such time as the Church authorises it;

- even in the case of a declaration of nullity, the commitments a person has acquired towards spouse and children cannot be disregarded: the declaration of the tribunal does not "annul" those duties.⁶¹

In personal spiritual direction, apart from taking into account all the above, it may also be necessary to give "imperative" advice (that is, advice which expresses and helps make plain something that in itself constitutes a moral duty, commanded by the law of God and the right conscience of the

⁵⁸ Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1674.

⁵⁹ Naturally this conviction needs to be the fruit of the judgment of an upright conscience, which means that the person concerned needs to have considered, before God and with the help of grace: 1) whether he or she contracted marriage with clear knowledge and willingness regarding what he or she was doing and wanting; 2) whether or not the present difficulties, distressing and serious as they may be, are being unjustifiably turned into causes of nullity; 3) the real reasons behind the desire to start nullity proceedings; and 4) the potential harm that could be caused to the other spouse, the children, and society itself.

⁶⁰ In this case, it should be borne in mind that such subjective certainty would also in some way prevent the person from continuing a conjugal relationship with the other spouse.

⁶¹ This is another reason why, before initiating a nullity process, all the means for validating the marriage should have been tried.

individual in question) with a view to getting them to abandon their decision to go to the ecclesiastical tribunal to seek a declaration of nullity, making them see very clearly their duty in conscience not to go ahead with the process, or to use all the necessary means to oppose a declaration of nullity which the other spouse is unlawfully seeking, or to achieve validation and reconciliation.

Those who are involved in the spiritual direction of a person in such circumstances, while taking exquisite care of the respect due to the intimacy of each soul, need to be very united as regards the basic criteria: any inconsistency can seriously upset a person who is already confused and is generally looking for support in order to find a solution to his or her difficulties. Great patience and understanding have to be combined with all the necessary fortitude, in order to offer guidance from the very start geared towards rebuilding matrimonial life and achieving full reconciliation between the spouses. This is demanded by the sanctity of marriage, the good of the sacrament, the stability of the family, the good of the children and of the spouses themselves, and the good of the Church and of society.⁶²

Certainly, the spiritual director cannot forget that there are some circumstances (and they are not rare) in which the spouse who wants to live his or her Christian vocation faithfully finds himself or herself in a situation in which it is authentically impossible to remove the obstacle that has made the marriage null: genuine psychological barriers which may be such as to make impossible even a minimally authentic conjugal union; the absolute unwillingness of the other spouse to remove an obstacle that excludes the formation of the conjugal union (for example, when the other spouse exclude the possibility of having children and is unwilling to change this decision). In these cases, the just and prudent solution may be to begin a process of nullity.

Thus when offering advice as to the licitness of introducing a cause of nullity of the marriage, one has to take into account the person's real situation. For example, the situation of a believer who, having entered into a second stable union (and with children), has undergone a process of conversion and getting closer to the faith. It would not be unusual for such a person to come up with real reasons that bring him to question the validity of his previous marriage. Given the objective circumstances of his current life (a new union, with children), one could recommend to him—without creating false hopes and explaining very well the meaning of nullity—that he consult a canon lawyer with clear doctrine and expertise to advise him and help him see whether there are motives for introducing a cause of nullity.

In any case, in conversations in the context of spiritual direction, one must foster the disposition to accept with docility whatever the ecclesiastical authorities determine. Therefore, when the nullity of

⁶² Obviously the situation is different in the (somewhat rare) case of a marriage which is found to be invalid and cannot be validated (for example, because of bigamy or another impediment due to natural law, given that there is no possibility of receiving a dispensation from these impediments).

the previous marriage bond is not recognized, and the objective circumstances make it impossible to cease living together, the director has to help these faithful to struggle to live their relationship according to the law of God, abstaining from the acts proper to spouses.⁶³

d) *The education of children*

The education of children is one of the natural ends of marriage: “The right and duty of parents to give education is essential, since it is connected with the transmission of human life; it is original and primary with regard to the educational role of others, on account of the uniqueness of the loving relationship between parents and children; and it is irreplaceable and inalienable, and therefore incapable of being entirely delegated to others or usurped by others”⁶⁴.

In order to raise their children well, in first place it is necessary for the parents themselves to have good human and spiritual formation, and to try to improve this formation all the time. Children learn more from the living example of their parents than from words that are not backed up by deeds. Therefore, “husbands and wives must grow in interior life and learn from the Holy Family to live with refinement, for supernatural and at the same time human reasons, the virtues of a Christian home”⁶⁵.

In addition, there should be an atmosphere of peace and cordiality in the home: “The family atmosphere should be one of peace between husband and wife because peace is a necessary condition for a deep and effective education”⁶⁶.

Parents should introduce their children to the life of piety so that what they learn by example becomes deeply rooted in them: “Experience shows in all Christian environments what good effects come from this natural and supernatural introduction to the life of piety given in the warmth of the home. Children learn to place God first and foremost in their affections. They learn to see God as their Father and Mary as their Mother and they learn to pray following their parents’ example”⁶⁷.

They should be educated always in an atmosphere of freedom, rightly understood: “Parents have to be on guard against the temptation of wanting to project themselves unduly on their children or

⁶³ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis*, no. 29, and JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, no. 84.

⁶⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Familiaris Consortio* no. 36.

⁶⁵ ST. JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations* no. 108.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 103.

of molding them according to their own preferences. They should respect their individual God-given inclinations and aptitudes. If their love is true, this is easy enough”⁶⁸.

It is especially important to respect the freedom of one’s children when the moment arrives for them to choose their own path in life, and specifically, if they should decide to give themselves to God: “Parents can, and should, be a great help to their children. They can open new horizons for them, share their experiences and make them reflect, so they do not allow themselves to be carried away by passing emotional experiences. They can offer them a realistic evaluation of things ... But advice does not take away freedom ... there comes a moment in which a choice has to be made and then no one has the right to force a young person's freedom. ... After giving their advice and suggestions, parents who sincerely love and seek the good of their children should step tactfully into the background”⁶⁹.

Some other suggestions to help parents in raising their children:

- Learn how to put themselves on their children’s level and really be friends with them: “I always advise parents to try to be friends with their children. The parental authority which the rearing of children requires can be perfectly harmonized with friendship, which means putting themselves, in some way, on the same level as their children”⁷⁰.

- Show them, little by little, new horizons: “Even amid the difficulties of the work of education, difficulties which are often greater today, parents must trustingly and courageously train their children in the essential values of human life. Children must grow up with a correct attitude of freedom with regard to material goods, by adopting a simple and austere life style and being fully convinced that ‘man is more precious for what he is than for what he has’”⁷¹.

- It is particularly important that parents be the ones to instruct their children with respect to the origin of life: “This friendship, this knowing how to put oneself on the children's level, makes it easier for them to talk about their small problems; it also makes it possible for the parents to be the ones who teach them gradually about the origin of life, in accordance with their mentality and capacity to understand, gently anticipating their natural curiosity”⁷².

- Provide guidance to their children with regard to their friendships, helping them to look for friends in healthy environments;

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 104.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 100.

⁷¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 37.

⁷² ST. JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, no. 100.

- Particular care is needed in the choice of schools. Parents have to use the freedom they have in this area with prudence, ensuring that their children receive a Christian education. They have a permanent obligation to be attentive to what they are learning in school, using appropriate remedies if needed: “If ideologies opposed to the Christian faith are taught in the schools, the family must join with other families, if possible through family associations, and with all its strength and with wisdom help the young not to depart from the faith”⁷³.

On the other hand, if Christian spouses are not able to have children, despite having used all the means, “they should not regard themselves as being thwarted. They should be happy, discovering in this very fact God's Will for them. Often God does not give children because He is asking more. God asks them to put the same effort and the same kind and gentle dedication into helping their neighbors as they would have put into raising their children, without the human joy that comes from having children. There is, then, no reason for feeling they are failures or for giving way to sadness”⁷⁴.

Finally, parents “mustn't forget that the secret of married happiness lies in everyday things, not in daydreams. It lies in finding the hidden joy of coming home in the evening, in affectionate relations with their children, in the everyday work in which the whole family cooperates; in good humor in the face of difficulties that should be met with a sporting spirit; in making the best use of all the advantages that civilization offers to help us rear children, to make the house pleasant, life more simple, and formation more effective”⁷⁵.

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⁷³ JOHN PAUL II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 40.

⁷⁴ ST. JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, no. 96.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 91.