

Making a Case for Marriage What Promotes A Happy and Lasting Marriage?

Part of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishop's National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage

The Situation

- Happy and lasting marriages require building “multiple marriages” throughout common life-changing experiences, by adjusting to new situations and renewing commitment. (*The Lifecycle Stages of a Marriage*, Sr. Barbara Markey, ND, www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/Markey.pdf)
- Transitional times of adjustment include the first years of marriage, becoming parents, having adolescent children, life after children move out, retirement, and aging. (Ibid.)
- A study of newly-weds found that time, sex, and money are high stress factors in the early years of marriage. (*Time, Sex, & Money: The First Five Years of Marriage*, 2000, Center for Marriage & Family, Creighton University, www.creighton.edu/MarriageandFamily/index.html)
- Annual surveys of teens and young adults suggest that they place a high value on marriage and family life. Although young generations emphasize the importance of personal commitment, which is needed to sustain a marriage, they often fail to consider the significance of community support, such as that which is received from religious and social institutions. (*The State of Our Unions, Annual Reports 2001-2006*, David Popenoe & Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, The National Marriage Project, <http://marriage.rutgers.edu>)

Social science findings

- The three most common reasons given for divorce are “lack of commitment,” “too much conflict and arguing,” and “infidelity.” (*With This Ring...A National Survey on Marriage in America*, 2005, National Fatherhood Initiative, www.fatherhood.org)
- On the contrary, the most common reasons couples give for long-term marital success are commitment and companionship. They speak of hard work and dedication, both to each other and to the idea of marriage itself. (The Top Ten Myths of Marriage, Popenoe & Whitehead, <http://marriage.rutgers.edu>)

- Couples who know what to expect during common transitional periods in a marriage are less likely to be blindsided when changes occur. Couples can acquire proactive resources to prepare for relationship shifts. (*The Lifecycle Stages...*, Markey)
- Qualities that a couple can acquire and/or strengthen in order to save or improve their marriage include: positive communication styles, realistic expectations, common attitudes concerning important issues and beliefs, and a high degree of personal commitment. (*What Factors are Associated with Divorce &/or Marital Unhappiness?*, Scott Stanley, www.prepinc.com/main/docs/what_factors.html)
- Complementing personal commitment is the need for a “normative commitment to marriage.” This entails support for marital childbearing, openness to children, and a belief that marriage is for life. Such commitment results in high levels of intimacy and marital happiness. (*Seeking a Soulmate: A Social Scientific View of the Relationship between Commitment & Authentic Intimacy*, Brad Wilcox, www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/Wilcox.pdf)
- Couples who stay married and happy have the same levels and types of disagreements as those who divorce. The difference stems from how they handle disagreements. “It’s about behaviors – or best practices.” (*The Emerging Field of Marriage Education*, Diane Sollee, *Coalition for Marriage, Family & Couples Education*, www.smartmarriages.com/fish.html)

Church teaching and pastoral practice

- It often seems difficult or impossible to bind oneself for life to another person. With God’s grace, given through Christ, couples are made sharers in divine love, which is stronger than our human weakness and enables us to bear each other’s burdens with forgiveness and kindness. (*U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults*, USCCB, 2006, p.285-287)
- Pope Benedict XVI speaks of a couple’s handling of conflicting temperaments as a critical point in their marriage. He offers hope by noting that couples can insert themselves into the suffering of Christ on the Cross, which leads to the Resurrection. Benedict speaks of the beauty and strength of a love that has been tested and renewed through the trials of marital life. (*Benedict XVI, To Priests of the Diocese of Albano*, 8/31/06, www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/august/index_en.htm)

- The U.S. Bishops speak of the challenges of married love: “An enduring marriage is more than simply endurance. It is a process of growth into an intimate friendship and a deepening peace. We urge all couples: renew your commitment regularly, seek enrichment often, and ask for pastoral and professional help when needed.” (*Follow the Way of Love*, www.usccb.org/laity/follow.shtml)
- In a June 2003 working paper, the U.S. Bishops’ Committee on Marriage & Family Life stated that “Sustaining a marriage over a lifetime means cultivating and blending gifts of nature and grace. The effort, considered both from the viewpoint of a couple and from the viewpoint of those who minister to them, involves four inter-related areas in which growth must continually occur. These are: Maturity (personal and social growth patterns), Vision (of marriage itself and for marriages specifically), Skills (learned behaviors), and Community (supportive social and religious context). (*A Renewed Pastoral Effort to Sustain Marriages for a Lifetime*, www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/propmar.shtml)

Conclusion

We are called to enter into God’s grace through a “training in holiness” which includes prayer, the Eucharist, and Reconciliation (Novo Millennio Ineunte #30-41). Our faith proclaims that Christian marriage is a specific “training ground” for holiness and encourages couples to incorporate the findings of social science, specifically regarding the manifold practices that can increase marital joy and permanence, enabling them to enter more fully into loving communion with each other, society, and God.