A Spiritual Workout to Strengthen Your Marriage

Based on
Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan

A Pastoral Letter of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

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Chicago
2011
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Unit One: Week One Exercise

LEARNING GOALS

♫ To understand God's intention in establishing the marriage covenant between a man and a woman and that the human family is a reflection of God's rich, Trinitarian life.
♫ To explore the meaning of marital communion and relationship in relation to the Trinitarian communion of love.

What does it mean to say that man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God?

What does the Pastoral Letter on Marriage have to say?

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. His hand has inscribed the vocation to marriage in the very nature of man and woman (see Gn 1:27–28, 2:21–24). (Marriage: Love and Life, 2)

Through the Sacrament of Matrimony, married love not only is modeled on Trinitarian love but also participates in it. Like all Sacraments, Matrimony draws believers more deeply into the Trinitarian life of God. It was not until the Father sent his Son into the world as man, and the subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that the full identity of God as a Trinity of Persons was revealed. This Revelation not only allowed humankind to come to a definitive knowledge of God—since the mystery of the Trinity is the source of all the other mysteries, the revelation of this mystery sheds light on all the rest. This includes both the mystery that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God and the mystery that is marriage and family life.
As we learn from the mystery of the Trinity, to be in the image and likeness of God is not simply to have intelligence and free will, but also to live in a communion of love. (Marriage: Love and Life, 35)

In the beginning God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness … God created man in his image, in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them.”

Many theologians have considered the “our” and “us” in this passage to be the first reference to the Holy Trinity. God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is a perfect communion of love, a relationship of Persons. God, who needs, desires to create us in order to give us a share in his divine life. Here on earth, we strive to serve, know and love him so as to obtain eternal happiness with him in Heaven for all eternity.

Marriage and the family are not in fact a chance sociological construction, the product of particular historical and financial situations. On the other hand, the question of the right relationship between the man and the woman is rooted in the essential core of the human being and it is only by starting from here that its response can be found.

In other words, it cannot be separated from the ancient but ever new human question: Who am I? What is a human being? And this question, in turn, cannot be separated from the question about God: Does God exist? Who is God? What is his face truly like?

The Bible gives one consequential answer to these two queries: the human being is created in the image of God, and God himself is love. It is therefore the vocation to love that makes the human person an authentic image of God: man and woman come to resemble God to the extent that they become loving people.

Remember the day you exchanged your wedding vows and the depth of your love for each other? On your wedding day, the Lord Jesus transformed and elevated something ordinary and natural (your human love), and made it extraordinary and divine. God did this because you had responded wholeheartedly to his divine love and his call to love. Through your love for each other and God’s grace, you manifested to your family, friends, the Church, and society, the truth about God, yourselves, and marriage, in that, when we love as he loves, we show forth more perfectly his image and likeness in which we were all created. We witness to the beauty of God’s unconditional love and the divine truth that he is love and when we respond to his call to love, we are transformed into the likeness of his being.

God’s Revelation of himself is not only true and good, but also beautiful. The beauty of God’s love is the mystery of reality; it is the true meaning of life, of existence, of being. Just as we are overwhelmed by a beautiful work of art, so God’s love overwhelms us, transforms us, brings us to ourselves, and awakens us to respond to God with love. “Before the beautiful—no, not really before but within the beautiful—the whole person quivers. He not only ‘finds’ the beautiful moving; rather, he experiences himself as being moved and possessed by it.”

Before creating man, the Creator withdraws as it were into himself, in order to seek the pattern and inspiration in the mystery of his Being, which is already here disclosed as the divine “We”. From this mystery the human being comes forth by an act of creation: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27).
The two Creation accounts: What do they say about our relationship with God and one another?

What does the Pastoral Letter on Marriage have to say?

In the first account, God creates both male and female at the same time and in the divine image. This act completes creation, and God judges it to be “very good” (Gn 1:31). In this way, Sacred Scripture affirms the fundamental equality and dignity of man and woman as persons created in God’s image. The second creation account emphasizes that both sexes are necessary for God’s plan. (Marriage: Love and Life, 9)

The LORD God said: “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him.” So the LORD God formed out of the ground various wild animals and various birds of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each of them would be its name. The man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of the air, and all the wild animals; but none proved to be the suitable partner for the man. So the LORD God cast a deep sleep on the man, and while he was asleep, he took out one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. The LORD God then built up into a woman the rib that he had taken from the man. When he brought her to the man, the man said: “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called ‘woman,’ for out of ‘her man ’ this one has been taken.” That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one flesh. (Gn 2:18–24)

As Catholics we do not read this passage in a literalistic way, but rather in a spiritual sense, i.e., allegorical, anagogical, and moral. The spiritual senses of scriptural interpretation enable us to probe deeper into the mystery of marital love and communion by asking basic and fundamental questions: What is God trying to reveal to us about marriage in this passage? What is he trying to say to us about unity and love, communion and covenant?

We discover from this passage that man, although created and sustained by God, is no longer alone. Woman is created from the rib or side of Adam. This does not mean that women are somehow inferior or subordinate human beings. “We know that women are neither the slaves nor the property of men—nor vice versa. God created Eve as a partner fit for Adam, equal in dignity”11 and heir with him to the life of grace, which forbids any right to domination or subjugation over one’s spouse.

As soon as Adam meets Eve, Adam says with delight: “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.”12 As in the first creation account, this passage also reveals the fundamental equality of each person in the eyes of God. “But equal partnership does not mean sameness. Rather, it is the complementarity of man and woman that makes each of them perfectly suited to be the answer to the other’s deepest needs, to make each other complete.”13

So the second creation account not only reveals God’s intention in establishing the marriage union between man and woman, but also reveals the genuine one flesh union by which man is no longer alone, he has his wife as a lifelong companion, helper, and bride.

When we read this passage through a Christological lens, we gain an even deeper insight into the mystery of marital love, the mystical or intimate connection between Christ and his Bride, the Church.

When Christ was hanging from the Cross, the soldiers pierced his side with a lance and out flowed Blood and water. From the rib or side of Christ came forth Blood which symbolizes the Eucharist, and water,
which symbolizes Baptism. The Eucharist and Baptism are two of the three Sacraments of Initiation; Sacraments that sanctify the soul and give it new life in Christ Jesus. Just as Eve came forth from the side of her husband Adam as helper, bride, and lifelong companion, so too, the Church came forth from the side of Christ as his Bride, companion, and helper in the work of salvation. This is God’s “marriage” with humanity. Therefore, WE ARE NOT ALONE!

How does this understanding of communion translate to your marriage here on earth? What are two ways to see the Trinitarian image in marriage and family life?

What does the Pastoral Letter on Marriage have to say?

First, like the Persons of the Trinity, marriage is a communion of love between co-equal persons, beginning with that between husband and wife and then extending to all the members of the family. Pope John Paul II teaches, “The family, which is founded and given life by love, is a community of persons: of husband and wife, of parents and children, of relatives.14 This communion of life-giving love is witnessed within the life of the family, where parents and children, brothers and sisters, grandparents and relatives are called to live in loving harmony with one another and to provide mutual support to one another. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that “the Christian family is a communion of persons, design and image of the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit.” (Marriage: Love and Life, 37; CCC 2205)

The Trinitarian image in marriage in family life can be seen in a second way. Just as the Trinity of persons is a life-giving communion of love both in relationship to one another and to the whole of creation, so a married couple shares in this life-giving communion of love by together procreating children in the conjugal act of love. (Marriage: Love and Life, 37)

A child was once asked, “Why do we go to Mass?” The child responded, “To show respect and give worship to God.” “And what happens to us when we do this?” asked the teacher. The child said, “It makes us more united to God and to one another; it gives us grace to love God and others more and more each day; and it enables us to live in communion with God kind of like living in a family here on earth.”

Essentially, what this child had articulated was the nature of the Trinity and how the family mirrors our relationship to God in three Persons. The communion of love, the relationship that exists within the Trinity, consists of the Father, the Lover who begets and loves the Son; the Son, the Beloved who returns the Father’s love; and the Holy Spirit, who is the Love that proceeds from the Father and the Son.

It was from within this overflowing communion of love that each of us received our existence. At the moment of conception, God’s image and likeness is made manifest in the human person. The very presence of the new child evangelizes to the world that the imprint of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is the source of all life and that divine and human love bring us into this world so as to share in the communion of love in Heaven with the Lover, Beloved, and Love.

What does the Pastoral Letter on Marriage have to say?

Here one can see that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit give themselves entirely to one another in a life-giving exchange of love. Thus, the Trinity is a loving and life-giving communion of equal Persons. The one God is the loving inter-relationship of the Father, the Son, and the
1. What words have I spoken to you today that express our human need for union?

2. How does our marital union help our community?

3. In what ways are we the living image of the beauty of God's love?

4. Reflect privately on the memory of moments when you saw your spouse with delight as Adam first did for Eve. Name three of these and describe how you felt and how you saw the goodness in him or her.

5. Express the love you felt at the birth of your first child. If you do not have children, share with one another some of the ways you have brought joy and happiness into the lives of others, i.e., in-laws, friends, co-workers, etc.

Let us Pray

Eternal Trinity, you have made the blood of Christ so precious through his sharing in your divine nature. you are a mystery as deep as the sea; the more I search, the more I find, and the more I find the more I search for you. But I can never be satisfied; what I receive will ever leave me desiring more. When you fill my soul I have an ever-greater hunger and I grow more famished by your light.

I desire above all to see you, the true light, as you really are.

By this light I shall come to know that you, eternal Trinity, are Table and Food and Waiter for us. you, eternal Father, are the Table that offers us food, the Lamb, your Only-Begotten Son.

He is the most exquisite Food for us, both in his teaching, which nourishes us in your will, and in the Sacraments that we receive in Holy Communion, which feeds and strengthens us while we are pilgrim travelers in this life. And the Holy Spirit is a Waiter for us, for he serves us this teaching by enlightening our mind's eye with it and inspiring us to follow it.

When we come up into your presence, these many things we talk about now without understanding them will cease, and you alone will remain everything in everyone, and then we will sing as one an eternal hymn of praise and we too will become one with you.24