

Catholic Couples Marriage Strengthening

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What Have You Done for Your Marriage Today? Little actions can mean a lot By Rick McCord

Imagine your marriage as a garden, or a new car, or even as a 401K account. If you didn't devote time and attention to any of these possessions, they would turn to weeds, or develop mechanical problems, or leave you in a financial bind for retirement. So you do a lot, on a regular basis, to avoid these unhappy consequences. What about your marriage? Doesn't it deserve at least equal attention?

Marriage is much more complicated than a garden, or a car, or an investment portfolio. The inter-weaving of two lives and families, the building of trust and intimacy, learning how to anticipate and respond to the needs of a spouse: all these tasks pose difficult challenges and are accomplished only over the course of a lifetime. As the saying goes, some marriages may be made in heaven, but all marriages require work on earth.

Perhaps you've begun to learn this already. Even better, maybe you're taking steps, even small ones, to build up your marriage. If you start in the early years, it will be easier as time goes on. The longer you wait, the easier it becomes to find excuses for not taking even small steps to build up your marriage.

Obstacles to actions

What are some common reasons for not acting? First, there's the fatalistic attitude that looks at the divorce rate and the experience of family or friends who have been divorced. You think "I've got a 50-50 chance of failing or succeeding in marriage. In the end, it's mostly outside my control."

Next, there's the notion that a happy marriage depends heavily on finding your perfect soul mate, the person who will fulfill all your needs and desires. Therefore, if you search hard enough and are lucky enough to find him or her, you will be destined to live happily ever after.

Finally—and this attitude pertains mainly to men— there's the belief that success in marriage is largely the responsibility of women who possess the better-developed relational skills. So, if marriage draws upon such skills as communication and empathy and caring, then maintaining the relationship becomes mostly "her job."

These attitudes are obstacles to fully participating in your marriage. They prevent you from becoming, in a full sense, the sacrament whose beginning you celebrated and consented to on your wedding day.

Grace builds on nature

Adopting such attitudes and falling into the behaviors they represent also contradict an ancient and very wise principle in Catholic theology, namely, grace builds on nature. This insight from our faith tradition means simply that God works with the tools we give him. If we make some effort to develop a virtue, then the gift of grace can help us to achieve it more completely. However, God will not act in place of or in spite of us. We must freely participate.

What have you done for your marriage today?

If you're searching around for answers or ideas, let me suggest three ways to approach the question. First, consider yourself and the changes you need to make in your own life. What bad habits or annoying traits do you have that particularly bother your spouse? What tasks are you always forgetting to do? To what other personal activities do you give more priority than spending time together as a couple? Do something for your marriage by making improvements in the only person you can change, namely, yourself!

Second, focus on your spouse. Hugging, kissing, and saying, "I love you" are good and necessary things. But try to get even more specific. What gifts and abilities does your spouse have that delight you and bring life to your relationship? Name them in specific terms. Pay a compliment or offer an affirmation based on one of these gifts.

Third, turn your attention outward beyond the two of you and do something for the good of your family, your children, or community. Love begets life and produces more love. It's an infinitely renewable source of energy. As you know, the two equal purposes of marriage are to share love and give life. So, when you extend yourselves in service, individually or together, you are expressing the meaning of marriage. You're saying that your commitment to each other is strong enough to include a wider circle of caring.

Later this year the United States Catholic Bishops will begin a campaign of radio and television ads as well as a special website that will take as their theme "What have you done for your marriage today?" These are part of a larger effort to communicate the value of marriage as both a human institution and as a sacrament. Watch for the ads. Visit the website at www.foryourmarriage.org. But, more importantly, remember that grace builds on nature. Do something for your marriage today!

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