

Forward

We met in English class.

I, Carl, born in the Jewish faith in Austria. And Yamile, Catholic, of Lebanese ancestry.

If my family had not have fled from Vienna because of Hitler, and settled in Colombia, I would never have met Yamile. And if in that English class she had not spoken to me, we wouldn't be married, because I was too shy to speak to her! Love at first sight? Coincidence? God's plan? Our courtship wasn't easy. When we were preparing to marry, my family moved to the United States, and I had to go with them. Our romance continued by mail, and when I joined the Army during the Korean war, our love was put to the test like never before. Yamile thought that she would never see me again, that I had left her. And she almost married someone else. But God had other plans for us. He gave me the gift of eloquence, and I was able to convince Yamile through my letters. I proposed and she accepted! When we finally got married, we hadn't seen each other for over three years.

The beginning of our marriage wasn't easy at all. We thought that we knew each other really well, and that our romance was going to be celestial, eternal. It didn't take long for us to realize that our ideas about each other were different from reality, and that marriage was not the eternal bliss we expected. Despite the years of correspondence, our communication had been superficial. Now we saw each other as we really were, with all our faults and weaknesses. The worst part was that we had no preparation, no training, no guidance to help us deal with the daily frictions - and of ten more than just frictions. And so, despite our deep love for each other, disillusionment set in. And we began to accept disillusionment as a normal part of being married. We weren't happy with this situation, but we didn't know what to do about it. I, Yamile, prayed and asked God not to abandon us. Thanks to our Lord that He listened to my prayers.

We moved to New Jersey. And there we met a couple who invited us to a Marriage Encounter -a Weekend for married couples, created by Father Gabriel Calvo. When we saw the difference between the couples who had made a Marriage Encounter and us, we decided to make a weekend, and to accept what the team couples shared with us. Marriage Encounter is not a religious retreat. Nevertheless, while we encountered ourselves and each other, we found Jesus in our midst. The weekend not only taught us how to fill the void in our lives, but how to find happiness by sharing our lives with others, and to become a spiral of love. In other words, we discovered God's Plan for our marriage. This discovery led us to share with other couples. And despite the sacrifices which this entailed, we volunteered to help with the Engaged Encounter -a Weekend for those who, like you, are getting married- because we thought how valuable such an experience would have been for us before we got married. That's why we are so enthusiastic about this new book that Father Calvo has written for all those engaged couples who are longing to improve the quality of their communication,

to know each other in depth, and to mutually relate in a very special way. That is to say, a book to guide both of you to become a loving couple and a united and open family.

Have courage! Each chapter will take you by the hand. We marvel at the way Fr. Calvo has listed them, based on his 41 years ministering to and with engaged couples, married couples and families. Why didn't we meet him sooner? Oh well, the Lord did lead us to him. We praise God because He is leading you to Himself also.

Carl & Yamile Stark

INTRODUCTION

“Give Me A Place To Stand And I Will Move The World” Archimedes.

I firmly believe there is no peace in society because there is no peace in the homes. The majority of people’s problems -this is scientifically prove and tested by our daily experience -are rooted in the lack of deep, significant and loving relationships within the homes. Why do an increasing number of today’s married couples, who had promised each other eternal love before marriage, find themselves frustrated and unhappy after the wedding? Why do marriages fail? There can only be two reasons. Either the persons concerned showed such poor judgment that they selected partners to whom they could not adjust; or they found acceptable partners, but could not carry through the task of adjustment necessary to make the relationship satisfying. Either way the error was made; but it is an error which might have been prevented. The experts -sociologists, psychologists, psychiatrists and theologians- agree that a lack of preparation for marriage is the common denominator of unhappiness for millions of today’s individuals and couples. But a sound preparation for marriage is a long and hard journey that most couples never even begin. So much should be considered before starting on the road of marriage like, “Who are we?” “Where are we coming from?” “What kind of travelers are we?” “In what conditions are we traveling?” “Where do we want to pause along the way?” “What is our destination?”

As an engaged couple you have to be idealistic, with well thought out dreams and goals. You also have to be deeply realistic and aware that people do have the capacity to improve themselves. You have the ability to overcome many of the obstacles of life, if you have the will to do so. As humans you are limited. No one is perfect. No one is master of all the ideas and conditions for his/her development and fulfillment, whether they be physical, emotional, intellectual, moral, and/or religious. The grace of God is for everyone. But God doesn’t impose on man and women’s freedom. God invites you to cooperate “voluntarily” to achieve the goal for which each person should strive; to become a complete human being, one that is the true image of God. Man and woman “Created in His image”, according to the amazing revelation of the Bible, have the potential to resemble and reflect God within the limits of their concrete and limited human nature. A man and a woman travel the road together toward marriage and family. Each has the qualities and the limitations characteristic of his/her sex. Each comes from a different family, has had a different education and his passed through different experiences that have marked his/her personality and character.

As an engaged couple, there is in you a profound tendency to love each other. There is a mutual attraction, a longing for true friendship and for happiness together. But at the same time, there are selfish tendencies that can develop into serious obstacles to later growth and love. You’re two different people of different sex, different education, different characters, different family

background, different positive qualities as well as different personal limitations, and maybe, different beliefs. Nevertheless,

- You want to travel together toward the same goal.
- You want to build a strong foundation of communication for your future Marriage and Family.
- You want to find happiness through the achievement of true love and a true marriage that will last a lifetime.
- You want to behold each other as human beings, as man and woman, as husband and wife, as father and mother and as children of God.
- You want to reach for all this, even with all your differences and your personal limitations.

Your task is not easy, but it is the most important task of your life. Your goal is high, but attainable.

God, the Creator of marriage and family, is at your side. Your source, as human beings, may be limited, but His energy of love is inside you. Within both of you there is a mysterious spiral of life and love which needs to be released. A generation of new people is watching you, is challenging you, is waiting for you. Generations of the future depend on how you, now, travel your journey together. This book -really a workbook- has been written to guide and assist you in getting in touch with your “self” with “God” with “each other” and with “other people”, as an engaged couple.

To follow this workbook to your best advantage, and accomplish its goals, requires your joint commitment of:

- * **DAILY**: Personal time to read, reflect, pray and write, and
- * **WEEKLY**: A quality time for sharing with each other.

You have here an abundance of information. Think, share, make your plans and take your time. This could be a unique opportunity for you. Are you ready for a great adventure in your lives? Do not simply nod “Yes.” Do it! Follow this program, and you will experience a human thermonuclear explosion of love that will change your lives for the better. Then it will be the beginning of a new generation of people moving from within you towards the future. You will make a difference in the history of humankind.

ENGAGEMENT TIME

Different Trends

How do today's young adults view marriage? What are their concerns, convictions, doubts, fears, expectations and hopes? How have they changed from couples of the past? Where are they headed?

Once upon a Marriage - not too many years ago - brides were 18, grooms were 20. The husband worked outside the home, the wife within it. They raised a family of five and "lived happily ever after". Today, that simple tale is much more complex. The older marriage model has indeed lost its attractiveness to most young adults. They are searching for a different type of marriage than did couples in the past. To deal with the real situation of today's young people concerning marriage and family, we have to listen to them. Let's do it!

Postponing Marriage temporarily or permanently.

Sandra: "Right now marriage scares me. I am not ready for such a commitment. I am having too much fun being single. Sometimes I wonder if there are others like me."

Rhonda: "I feel no pressure or shame about being and remaining single. It is really great to live in times when women aren't so pressured to marry."

Jay: "I expect that there will be a time when I will be ready to find a bride and marry. Then I will probably look to girls I've known for years with a new interest."

Pam: "Sometimes it seems as if my perfect mate will never materialize. If he doesn't, I guess I have to compromise or remain single."

Paul: "It's too hard to juggle work, school and marriage without exacerbating resentment and bitterness. It would seem as if little incidents could explode into major crises when compounded with pressures from the academy. Why place another obstacle in the path of a potentially successful marriage? It seems smarter to wait."

Is marriage a lifelong commitment? - About divorce.

Scott: "Divorce might be an option for me, but only if nothing else works. If the situation becomes unbearable, then you aren't stuck for life."

Sony: "Both of us agree. If our marriage becomes unsuccessful divorce will be our last resort."

Paul: "Everything has been done to preserve the union. Divorce then? Sure! Why be unhappy?"

Karen: "I think that many couples throw in the towel too soon. A quarrel, a misunderstanding or a bad experience should not be an impetus to end the marriage."

John: "If marriage is unsuccessful, the couple must seek ways of loving and understanding each other. How can a spiritual union be broken?"

Premarital sex - the area of controversy.

<Against:>

Tricia: “God reserved this expression of love for marriage. If a couple thinks they are ready for sex, they should ask themselves if they are ready for marriage.”

Scott: “Sex is not the union of two people, but only a physical expression of that union. By engaging in premarital sex, couples are setting themselves up for disappointments and hurt feelings.”

Anne: “Premarital sex is a sin as far as I am concerned, and will not be an option in my life. However, I let others live their own lives and respect their choices.”

<In Favor:>

Joy: “I want no surprises on my wedding night. You don’t buy shoes without trying them on.”

Annette: “After I’ve gone out with a guy for a few months, he expects that we’ll have sex. Even if I say “no”, I know there are a lot of women who are more afraid of losing their boyfriends than of losing their sense of right and wrong.”

Troy: “I don’t see any problem with sex before marriage. It does seem to be the thing to do these days.”

David: “Living together before marriage gives you the opportunity to know your partner intimately. One should really know everything possible about your future spouse before making the commitment.”

Maria: “I don’t believe sex before marriage is as wrong as my parents and the Church regard it. As long as no one is hurt and as long as it is a part of a long - term relationship, I think it’s O.K.”

Religion - a private affair?

Richard: “For me faith is unimportant in my life and probably will not play an active role in my marriage.”

Maria: “Even people of the same religion have quite different interpretations of their faith, which can result in different beliefs. What is really important is that couples share the same basic values.”

Karen: “I hate closed minds but both of us consider it important to find an atmosphere favorable towards religious growth.”

Paul: “giving children early religious guidance is vital. If left to their own decisions they are apt not to find a place for God in their hearts or lives.”

Jana: “Even though I do not have a religious background, we plan to raise our children within a Church. I always felt as if I were missing something. I didn’t have a chance to be raised in a spiritual context.”

STOP, PLEASE!!

Dear Friends:

Few Couples Today long to Return to a “Fairy – Tale” Traditional Marriage, even though the story may have changed in our eyes, the ending - to live “happily ever after” till death do us part - is as attractive and desirable as ever. It is just going to take a little more time, a bit more preparation, and a lot more effort and determination.

Are you ready for that adventure?

Just Keep:

reading, reflecting, writing, sharing and both of you will have the most marvelous experience of your life!!!

Engagement

These days, the word “courtship” is considered old fashioned. The days when a young man would ask his girl friend’s father for her “hand” in marriage are also fading. Nowadays couples are more likely to decide that they want to marry and only then tell their parents of their decision. To describe adequately the engagement period is not an easy task. Among engaged couples there are adolescents and young adults, workers, students and teachers, believers and atheists. Some couples have been going together for a long time, while others are very unsettled. Sometimes intentions are honest and clear, sometimes there are not. The task becomes even more complicated when two persons -different in sex and background- are brought into a close relationship. Often as the intimacy grows, there is confusion, fear, anxiety and conflict.

Let us try to get a global picture of the important and transcendental phenomenon of engagement, and how to deal with it in a very positive and creative way. Today, a time of continuous and fast changes, it is almost impossible to have a definition of what engagement is all about. But we can describe it by realizing that it is:

* **A time for marriage preparation** - an important and necessary time for the engaged couple to search for their own identity by facing their real situation, and to put their marriage future to work now.

* **A time to consciously reach out together** in all the key areas related to today’s Marriage and Family like: the meaning of life; the essence of love; the purpose of Marriage and Family; the psychology of the sexes, their dignity, equality, differences and similarities; responsible parenthood; children’s education; expectations; ambitions; beliefs; needs; morals; human and religious values; financial and social commitment.

* **A process of interpersonal communication and dialogue** for a dynamic, progressive and loving relationships by giving and receiving with mutual respect, listening, knowledge, understanding, acceptance, trust, confidence, support, self-fulfillment, openness and faithfulness to God.

* **A readiness to share with each other**: examining one’s past, present and future with honesty and simplicity to get to know each other more thoroughly and more intimately, so as to discern the possibility of a successful marriage, a guarantee of a healthy and happy life together.

* **A period of study** for those engaged couples who, having discovered marriage as a vocation, want to deepen God’s Plan about Marriage and family, prepare themselves to become ministers of the Sacrament of Marriage, and consequently

freely decide to get married “in the Lord.”

* **A final testing period before marriage.** Young people see engagement as the last stage in the increasingly intimate relationship between two unmarried persons. They aim to determine whether or not they can or want to make a lifetime commitment in marriage.

* **A time of grace and blessings from God** for those who open their relationship to Him and follow faithfully His inspirations.

Stages

What happens when a boy and a girl “fall in love”? Let us go through the definite “stages” in the process of the Engagement.

Dating

The **First Stage** in the process of engagement. The “falling in love” starts with an erotic attraction and a strong desire to be together that initiates a need for dating - in one or both. When we talk about dating we are talking about relationships between a man and a woman who feels an attraction for one another and not just for “a date”. We could say there are three kinds of “dating” relationships.

Casual Dates - “Take it or leave it.” Superficial.

Special Dates - “Desirable and longed for.” Interesting.

Steady Dates - “Committed and exclusive.” Very serious.

The purpose of dating is for getting out of the house and having a good time - casual and special dates; or for knowing each other’s likes and dislikes, interests, personalities, beliefs, needs, values and each other’s families, relatives and friends - steady dates.

Becoming close friends

The **Second Stage**: Time for building a strong and deep friendship by:

- Mutual respecting and listening
- Knowing and understanding each other
- Accepting and confiding
- Supporting and helping

Sharing with each other one’s Past, Present and Future, and doing things together is “the key” to this important stage. Becoming true friends is the necessary basis to become “something more.” This step cannot be skipped. Without it marriage will die.

Getting Engaged

The **Third Stage** or Courtship starts when both parties realize they are true friends and yet they want to become “something More.” Courtship is a time to discern between “true love” -essentially selfless, by being interested both in giving and receiving- and “infatuation” - basically selfish, by being only interested in getting, not giving. Courtship is also a time for the engaged couple to decide to make a serious commitment to get married.

To guide you in this decisive discernment - the most transcendental decision of your lifetime - read and share with each other the next pages of this book.

Crises

Engagement is not always as idyllic and harmonious as it is depicted to be. Movies and other modes of advertisement portray false impression that leads many young couples to expect to 'Live Happily Ever After' without conflict.

As the intimacy grows and real differences in one another are faced, the period of engagement - dating, friendship, courtship - becomes a time of crises: routine, tension, confusion, loneliness, disillusion, dissatisfaction, frustration, doubt, fear, anxiety and even conflict. When this time arrives it is important to remember that love crises are not the death of love but their proof. As gold is proven in the crucible, love is proven in crisis. Frequently engaged couples get to the bottom of their selfishness, but not the bottom of their love. Most love affairs usually go through three rather distinct Phases:

First Phase: Romance. Illusion - a time of dreams and expectations. This phase is characterized primarily by senses and feelings, not reason and spirit. Your romance is God's gift to get you out of being self-centered and becoming you-centered, and we-centered.

Second Phase: Crisis. Disillusion - a time of grief and heartbreak. This phase is originated by a childish idea of happiness through becoming aware that:

- "I'm not what I thought I was..."
- "He/she is not what I expected he/she was..."
- "We are not as happy as we are supposed to be..."

As each of you has looked for your own "self" in your partner, you both feel "cheated" in your mutual promises. You have the sensation that your love is like a lamp, whose light gradually leaves the room, leaving you in darkness.

Third Phase: Discovery. Decision - a time of joy and peace. During the time of crisis many couples break up because they are not aware of the tremendous energy of love that is dormant within each one of them, waiting to be released. How can this important discovery be made? By realizing that love is not a "feeling", of being a circle of two, but a "decision" to become a spiral of three: Man, Woman, and God! Let us sit down and listen carefully with our minds, our hearts and our souls to God's Word:

"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.' God created man in his image... male and female He created them. God blessed them, saying: 'Be fertile and multiply!'"

(Genesis 1:26-28)

Definitely, Marriage - created by God - is not a circle of two but a spiral of three.

***Have you made a conscious decision to love your partner? When?
Be specific and explain.***

Keys to a Healthy and Successful Engagement

Many of today's engaged couples realizing the high rate of married couples who are breaking up, worry about their future. They wonder:

- "What will happen to us if we get married?"
- "What will we be like?"
- "Will we be able to overcome all difficulties?"
- "Will we succeed as a married couple?"
- "Will we survive as a family?"

As the proverb says: "It is better to prevent than to cure." That, applied to the situation of today's engaged couple, could be paraphrased: "It is better to encounter each other today than break up tomorrow." Following are some of the major keys to a healthy, loving and successful engagement:

Self-Encounter

The first key to a healthy, deep and successful premarital encounter is an encounter with "self". A true encounter with the partner begins within oneself. After the two partners have accomplished this, and only then, will they be ready for one of their most meaningful and rewarding experiences: to share their personal lives with one another.

Mutual Openness and Honesty

It must be obvious that there can be no healthy and growing relationship during the engagement unless the two persons are willing to know themselves, and to make themselves known to each other, fully for what they really **are**, without defense or pretense. How can a relationship ever survive in an atmosphere of evasiveness and deception? The foundation of a good marriage is a continuing state of free and open communication. But a serious obstacle must be faced.

The process of courtship is an elaborate attempt to impress the other person, combined with a willingness to believe the best about the other person. This is the "blindness" of romantic love, and it is also an effective means of bringing people together.

Therefore, marriages based only on romantic love have normally no power to survive. The illusions appear to be beautiful. But marriage cannot survive upon a basis of illusion. It must be rooted in reality. That means the acceptance of the principle of openness and honesty as the basis of a healthy and successful engagement.

Premarital Love

Most philosophers and theologians agree on love as the essence of marriage. But certainly they do not agree on one definition of love. Later on in this book we are going to discern the very nature of premarital love. Meanwhile let us advance some descriptions:

- Love is a decision, an act of the will, not just a feeling.

- Love is a mysterious human energy created by God within us.
- Love is an active and conscious tendency that, rooted inwards pushes outwards towards the beloved one, looking for his/her Good.
- Love is something wonderful and deep that everybody carries inside.

Marriage Vocation Awareness

The word “vocation” means that one is being called or summoned. It is generally understood that the call is from God. Vocation is like an internal light that stirs us not only to dream of what we might make of our human potential, but to strive to make our dreams come true. In the secular culture the concept of vocation is usually applied to life work, This is natural, because today’s culture puts great emphasis on achievement and tends to judge a man by what he does in the world, rather than by what he becomes as a person. But no less important surely, is what the person achieves in the quality of his or her relationships with others, and in particular, in the most intimate relationships he or she has in his experience of marriage and family life.

In the Bible, the concept of vocations is clearly recognized. Note the history of Noah, Abraham and Sara, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Raquel, Joseph, Moses, the prophets and so on. Notice how the stories are saturated with the simple faith that God is the one who calls. Today, the concept of vocation has many implications. Let us realize how some married couples apply each one of them to them to their marriage.

- Obedience: “We believe marriage is God’s Will for us, therefore we accept marriage as God’s call for us.”
- Dedication: “Because it is God’s Will that we should share our lives as loving companions, we accept the commitment to make every effort we are capable of in order to achieve a good marriage.”
- Example for others: “In our marriage, we must try to demonstrate how two people can live together in love and peace.”
- Spirit of service: “God is calling us to unity not just to bring joy and gladness to one another, but essentially to work for the good of others, especially for the good and true happiness of our children.
- Holiness: “We firmly believe that God calls us to holiness by loving and serving Him throughout our marriage and family life.”

***Are both of you aware that god is calling you to get married,
according to His Plan?***

Spiraling Openness

Another essential key for a healthy, loving a successful engagement is openness to others, as a couple. True openness is the test of genuine love and of a balanced relationship. True love is a reaching out from the loved one to the world. It is not a trance but a transformation, not merely a focusing, but fanning-out, not a barrier that divides the lovers from the world, but a bridge that unites them to it.

Love is essentially not a private relationship but a social one. It is the human counterpart of God's outreach to all Creation. It is impossible to love one person and not see that everyone else shares, to some degree, in the qualities that makes this person lovable.

Without openness an engaged couple becomes a "circle" of pride, selfishness, possessiveness, lust, vanity and hate. In fact, real love is like a fire; if it is not shared it becomes extinguished; if it is shared, it grows and spreads around. The natural tendency of many of today's engaged and even married couples, is to become isolated; to be together and to possess the maximum degree of privacy and intimacy just for themselves. But there is a law of life that goes like this: when one cell becomes separated from the body, it dies.

Engaged couples are not islands. Both partners belong to different families, are members of particular local communities, both civil and religious, and are challenged and called to lay the foundations for new keys to liberate the marvelous energy of love that is hidden within each engaged couple. Definitely the openness of today's engaged couples is the hope for the next millennium.

Transcendancy

This is not just one more key to a premarital life; it is rather the most important key for those engaged couples who really want to walk together toward a happy marriage and family life. The most important because this is a sacred key that deals with spirituality, faith, hope and holiness - gifts from heaven to honest and humble people. The most important, because this is a secret key, unknown by most of today's couples; the forgotten dimension of life and love, and of marriage.

In fact, in our consumerist society, the majority of engaged couples do not care about the transcendental dimension of life, love and marriage. They are overwhelmed by material and technical things, and do not find the time or the desire to go beyond themselves. What, or rather who, is the mysterious key? Millions of believers throughout history shout with their shining lives: "God!" If you walk forward together, always opening your premarital relationship to the greater presence of God, you will discover God's hidden presence in your midst as He has promised:

"Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."
Matthew
18:20

Vital Questions

How can the circle of selfishness be broken to find joy and peace? The only way is by being honest with oneself and with God first, and then, with each other. The following questions can help:

1. Have I found the meaning of life? What is it?
2. Do I really believe in God? Why or why not?
3. Do I believe in love? Why or why not?
4. Do I believe in marriage and family? Why or why not?
5. Why do I want to marry? My personal motives and interests.
6. Why do I want to marry you? What attracts me to you most?
7. Do I have any doubts about marrying you? What are they?
8. Do I think you entertain some doubts about marrying me? What might they be?
9. What is one thing I can do to bring about better communication?
10. What do I expect from our marriage and family?
11. What do I expect from you? My real and my false expectations.
12. What are my weaknesses and strengths?
13. What do I see as your strength and weaknesses?
14. What do I believe are your adjustments and expectations?
15. Do I really perceive what is expected of me? What?
16. Is the fear of commitment working in me/us?
17. Do I believe I've been called by God to love Him by loving you?
18. Frankly, which are my main fears and prejudgments?
19. Am I really interested in experiencing this book? Why?
20. What do I hope to gain from this sharing experience?
21. What do I need from you to persevere in this adventure?

If you personally:

****Reflect privately** about each one of these questions, **write** your answers in your *Note Book*, and **share** them with *your partner*.**

Then,

- You'll release the energy of love that is dormant within you...
- You'll break the circle of selfishness.
- You'll become a spiral of joy, peace and hope.
- You'll become a light for many, many people who are living in darkness, as perhaps you, once did.

Encouraging Testimonies

I asked some married couples: "What was the best experience of your engagement time?" They sent me the following answers.

- ***Lucy:** "It was when I knew that Neal had made the decision that I was to be his wife, but most important that I was to be his partner in life"
- ***Mike:** "The many hours that I spent in deep sharing with Elaine really getting to know her. It is only when we really know someone and they know us that we really love them and they love us."
- ***Elaine:** "The surprise of getting a diamond ring when I told him a pearl ring would be fine - because Mike didn't have much money."
- ***Bob:** "Just being together, talking, feeling close, especially when, because of my travels we had not seen each other for a while - because of my travels."
- ***Claire:** "The friendship and the support. Something I will always remember was when Bob saved penny after penny to buy me a little gift. It is something I will always cherish."
- ***Deborah:** "It's all pretty great! Basically, the growing closer together as we learn and reevaluate values and ideals."
- ***Tom:** "I was in the USAir Force in Hawaii. She was in Texas in college. In 4 years plus 1 month, we saw each other a total of only 38 different days! But our best experience, in hindsight, were the 1800 letters I sent her and the 1500 she sent me in our "paper romance." Kathy was featured in 4 newspapers with the longest letter ever sent to an Airman (37 feet with 17 vertical lines.) One thing about those 3300 letters: we communicated!
- ***Nancy:** "Feeling completely loved for the first time. Feeling safe, secure, protected and hoping that I could make "him" feel the same - as if we were marching with the Lord."
- ***David:** "Planning things together brought us closer and taught us things about each other. We especially enjoyed planning the music and the readings for our wedding."
- ***Gloria:** "A one day retreat at a local convent, where the priest offered a Mass and we held hands and made an engagement promise."
- ***Patty:** "A prayer night held in our home just before our wedding was very powerful to both myself and my fiance. "Palancas (Prayers) gathered in our name were given to us as gifts."
- ***Carol:** "I don't remember any high points about my engagement. We had a crazy courtship. Tony and I were separated the whole time, and never got together until we were married."

About these testimonies, which one do you like most? Why?

Wise Suggestions

(Some married couples, friends of mine, presented the following suggestions)

- * “Try to be flexible and supportive, to communicate, to remember the little things, for instance, visit your future in-laws, be interested in their feelings, their work and so on.”
- * “Have patience, and be realistic. Don’t expect that both of you are going to change after the wedding. He or she is on his/her best behavior now. If his/her best is not to your liking, think again. It will get worse, not better.”
- * “Spend time, lots of time, together. Share as deeply as you can. Always affirm the other. Accentuate the positive but always strive to be open, honest, loving. A structured experience like an engaged couple program, is a big help to do this.”
- * “Communicate, listen, encourage, trust each other. And wait for sex until after marriage.”
- * “Engaged couples should make a list of each person’s strengths and weaknesses, and then they should discuss ways to complement each other and overcome issues and avoid what could be a surprise after married.”
- * “Be honest with yourself and with your partner. Find out about each other in depth. A closeness to the Lord is very important. I suggest dealing with problem areas, seeking help, information and guidance.”
- * “Discuss issues about “having children”, “roles in the home” and the word “commitment.” Also talk about your respective families. If you come from a dysfunctional family background there might give rise to some difficulties.”
- * “Take your time! I canceled the initial wedding date due to too much stress and a feeling that I didn’t really have ‘me’ yet!”
- * “Talk-listen, talk-listen some more. Communicate. Be honest. Share. Be open to growth. Assume nothing. Be flexible.”
- * “Remember that sex is not a toy. It is a gift from God and should not be abused. To save it for marriage is safe, holy and joyful.”
- * “You won’t live “happily ever after” unless you work at it “forever after.” If you observe, you’ll realize that good marriages are created and don’t just happen. It takes work and lots of it. In fact, marriages fail because of laziness, in particular relative to relationships.”
- * “Take your time to share your feelings about what role religion and God will play in your married life. Take time to tell each other, whether you believe in God or not and why; whether you want to pray together or not; whether you will educate your children religiously or not.”

Which one of these suggestions do you like most? Why?

Friendly Letters

The following letters are not fictional. They have been written by real married couples for you. They have been written with much love.

Dear Friends: You have the fortune to belong to a new generation, in which the old conventions are no more. Anyhow here are the ideas that have worked for us, and we hope they work for you too. Please, live your engagement time the best way you can. Make an effort to get to know each other better. Since you have a natural tendency to reveal your defects, limitations and needs, this will lead you to demand more of yourself. But be aware of it, examine yourself daily, deal courageously with your weaknesses, and sincerely try to overcome them. Set your goals high, so that you will be forced to climb, but close enough so that you won't lose sight of them. And work together toward reaching the goals that will help you and those around you.

Start now to prepare the spiritual nucleus of your future family by praying every day. Even if you cannot be together, you can pray intentionally with each other. Do not let the goods of the world blind you. Learn to move and act without needing too many "things", so that you may feel free and available. As you know this is not easy but very rewarding.

Dear friends: We would like to share with you some of your convictions that are the fruit of our experience. First of all, give thanks to God for the love for each other He has poured in your hearts. Remember that He is love, the source of love, and therefore your mutual love is sacred. Respect it, nourish it, shield it and project it around you. Strive for discovering all that is wonderful in each other.

Talk a lot with each other. Take advantage of your time together. Don't rush, and avoid cutting out intermediate stages. They will come. The Bible tells us; "there is a time for everything." Save some intimacies for your wedding day and the days after. Not precisely because those intimacies are illicit, but because later on you will be glad that you kept them intact. And above all, have much peace. With good will you will be able to solve your differences of character, education, personality...you know what they are. A big hug from couple to couple and forward together!

The Lord will be with you if you truly love each other, and you sincerely ask Him. We guarantee it!

Any comment on these two letters?

Readiness Test

What does it take to be ready for marriage?

Marriage Counselors and Marriage Tribunal officials say lack of preparation for marriage is the major factor in many divorces. They cite immaturity, superficial understanding of what marriage and family entail, fear of intimacy and unrealistic expectations. Most agree on the following criteria on readiness for marriage:

1. Strong self-image
2. Self-esteem
3. Maturity
4. Solid formation
5. A loving family relationship
6. Religious Education
7. Firm belief in marriage and family

Test

Are you ready for marriage?

1. Will you have a steady income and agree to live within the family budget?
2. Will you maintain a joint checking account from which each can draw?
3. Are you inclined to forego something for yourself in order to save for something you both may share, such as a TV set or a vacation?
4. If your spouse's family needs financial help, will you willingly contribute by additional work or by economizing?
5. Have you made a will?
6. Will you carry insurance within your means?
7. Will you know the details of each other's will, insurance and income?
8. Do you value such characteristics as promptness and neatness?
9. Will you respect your spouse's religion, even though yours may be different?
10. Do you occasionally plan entertainment that the other enjoys, even though it is not your favorite?
11. Will you be able to talk to each other about your work?
12. If you can't agree on certain things, are you able to reach a friendly compromise, or must one of you always give in?
13. Do you belittle each other under the guise of teasing?
14. Will you avoid discussing your spouse's shortcomings with others?
15. Will you wait to get home to discuss your differences, rather than argue in public?
16. Will you discuss things openly with each other, rather than keep secrets from your spouse?
17. Do you know each other's ambitions for the future and will you help each other to realize them?
18. Do you listen to each other with interest, rather than being bored unless you do all the talking?
19. Will you be proud of your spouse's popularity, rather than jealous?
20. Do you value each other's opinion and let others know it?
21. Do you compliment each other?

Engagement Promise

To live is to grow, and to grow together is to love. Love is not a mere feeling but a decision. Married Love is a decision that implies not a temporary alliance but a lifetime commitment. Unconditional love is love forever. Why? First of all, because of the “ups” and “downs” of life. If couples abandon the ship at the first sign of a storm they will not journey far and will never discover the treasures in store for them. Also because the best fruits of marriage take a long time in maturing-like good whiskey or wine. This is true in the natural understanding, loyalty and deep affection that come with the passing years.

If Marriage is meant to be much more than the apparently uninteresting and even stifling way of life that we too often see around us, if two persons are meant to grow together in a relationship that is supported and strengthened by the very presence of God within them, as a couple, then it is obvious that marriage should be considered not as a contract, breakable when the conditions are not met, but as a commitment which one freely considers to be unconditional and inviolable. Quite apart from the dictionary definition of contract vs. commitment, there is a vast difference between the two concepts as they are used in the context of marriage.

Commitments are made by people who have the required capacity to comprehend the extent of their importance and their permanence, and then willingly and freely make them in regards to other people. Therefore in commitment language it is not possible to speak of one’s ex-wife, ex-husband, ex-parent, ex-child in the same way you might speak of one’s ex-house, ex-car or ex-employee, because these latter presuppose nothing more than a temporary use of service. To put married life in the same type or category is to make a sham of what is meant to be one of the most beautiful aspects of human life that is possible.

Even so, in this modern world all too many couples begin their married lives refusing to risk engaging their whole person and wanting to restrict the totality of their self-giving. Therefore they begin their marriage with what is not a marriage at all. Their wedding is based upon a conditional “contract” rather than an unconditional “commitment” that involves, in its ideal form, a total self-giving. They are, in effect, like immature children. How to prevent this increasing reality? One of the best ways is to live the “engagement time” according to the mentality and attitude of “commitment”. The following form of “Engagement Promise” is suggested.

***As God promised Himself to His people, I promise myself to you, - - -
- - forever, with no reservations. I will always love you, have faith
in you, for sake all other for you.
I believe that as husband and wife our love will grow, and we will
grow in God’s image as we are meant to do.***

SELF-ENCOUNTERING

Who am I as an individual person?

“Who in the world am I? The answer to that is a complex puzzle!”

Marriage is a team made up of two individuals. It is important to know the ingredients before mixing them. Therefore, a deep and meaningful self encounter is a necessary departing point for a healthy and loving engagement leading to a successful and happy marriage. Only the person who has discovered his/her “real self” will be ready to discover the right partner for marriage. Frequently the reason two people do not understand each other is, because each one doesn’t understand him/her.

What the self-encounter is all about?

Following are some of its essential elements:

- I Self-awareness - Being awake and alert to the reality of myself.
- II Self-honesty - Being truthful and sincere with myself.
- III Self-respect - Honoring my oneness & its roots.
- IV Self-knowledge - Discovering who I am: Needs, Values, Tendencies.
- V Self-understanding - Comprehending what I really am like.
- VI Self-esteem - Accepting myself as I really am.
- VII Self-confidence - Believing in myself and in my potential.
- VIII Self-determination - Having will power, firmness and resoluteness.
- IX Self-fulfillment - Becoming the person I want to be.
- X Self-control - Having self-discipline.
- XI Self-openness - Being a reaching-out-person.
- XII Self-transcendancy - Discerning where I am going and to what extent.

Once you understand and accept yourself as you really are, you will not need any kind of “escapes” - like alcohol, drugs, unhealthy pastimes, over-eating, anorexia, possessions, money, petty thievery, running away, sex-abuse, workaholics, suicide, and so on. Then you will be ready for a meaningful encounter with your partner.

On the following pages, you will find some suggestions to help you discover your “inner self”, by being deeply in touch with yourself; that is, by experiencing, step by step, an exciting self-encounter.

Just follow “The Yellow Brick Road” by:

First: Reading and Reflecting

Second: Writing a Love Letter

Third: Getting together...and sharing

Let’s start immediately with Faith, Love and Hope.

I. Self - Awareness

“To be awake is to be alive” - Henry D. Thoreau -

One’s own self is a mysterious sea awaiting exploration. You possess treasures within your “self”, the best of which may still be waiting to be uncovered. Live our treasures of your spirit by being awake, alert and aware of the reality of your “inner self.” An individual can consciously change, become transformed, and do a surprising number of things in a lifetime. Thoughts, for most people, mean nothing at all; but you may discover how important each human thought actually is. Yes, your mind is clear and restless, and it is capable of meeting any challenge you place before it.

Both your conscious and your unconscious minds are perfectly tuned to the world around you. Your intuition is able to become more sensitive and aware than ever before. Your imagination is creative and can be especially useful to you. You have excellent powers of concentration. Just find a quiet place, in or out of your home and attune all your senses to the subject at hand, and you will be able to focus your attention more and more easily each day.

Mentally block out any distractions, both from within and without - which are not really important to you. You may say a short prayer if you believe so. Maintaining your concentration for long periods of time is not easy, but with endurance and patience will come natural to you. Our minds respond positively and enthusiastically to the idea of “study.” Because of this, if you choose to study or discover your “self“, in order to discover the self of your beloved, this message will be graciously, received and welcomed by your mind. Each time you need to concentrate quickly and completely, say these three words: “picture”, “target”, and “focus”, aloud or to yourself, and then immediately focus your mental energy.

Enjoy your concentration by consciously focusing your attention on your inner and real “self”. Greatness begins in the minds of the great. What you believe about yourself is what you will become.

What specific obstacles do I have in giving myself freedom to live up to my fullest expectations?

II. Self - Honesty

“To try to be true to Oneself is the Law of Man” - Confucius -

Without self-honesty - uprightness with oneself - a true encounter with self is not possible. If you are not honest with yourself, you cannot be honest with others, nor even with God. Self-honesty is the starting point to becoming yourself. How can you get this self-honesty and be true to yourself?

- * By listening carefully to the voice of your conscience and following it faithfully.
- * By being open-minded and openhearted. Openness will permit you to be vulnerable to the truth.
- * By thinking positively and searching for the positive.
- * By never telling lies and speaking only the truth.
- * By spending daily time looking and listening to what's going on within you: facing and accepting the positive and negative.
- * By knowing yourself better so you will be able to understand, to accept and to love your true self.
- * By not blaming others for your own limitations.
- * By taking off your “mask”. That is:
 - Anything that covers up those thoughts, feelings, attitudes, purposes and choices that cause you to conceal your real self.
 - Things you do or ways you act to protect yourself from fears: fear of rejection; fear of not being accepted for who you are; fear of being attacked or ridiculed; fear of appearing to be weak or less than perfect; fear of not living up to what others expect you to be.
 - Actions and behaviors you put on in order to appear to be what you are not, but you would like to be.
 - Whatever hides the real you that you are striving to become and share with others? Personal images of yourself that you are trying to protect or project.

At times it is so much more comfortable to put on a mask than to admit the reality of what you are sensing, feeling, thinking or doing. But when you come to grips with the reality of your sensing, feeling, thinking or doing, then a sense of peace and accomplishment takes over. As you share this with someone you become liberated.

***What is blocking my honesty with myself and with God?
Do I wear any “masks”? Which ones?***

III. Self - Respect

“Self-respect is the fruit of discipline” - Abraham J. Heschel -

What does it mean to be a person? According to scholars, “a person” is a unique individual who meets a high standard of achievement and has a sense of self-hood to realize his/her potential as a human being. In other words, you “*have*” a name, but you are not *just* a name. You “*are*” someone. You are not just a body and a mind. You are a person. Furthermore, you are a unique person, not meant to be a copy of anyone. According to the Bible (Gen. 1 and 2) we are persons because “God, the Supreme Person, created us in His image and likeness.” When Moses asked Him for His name, God answered: “I am who am.” (Ex.3:14) Each of us is an absolutely unique creation of God. Our dignity and our personal identification are rooted in God. We are God’s children, His images. Therefore, we deserve great respect. But most people ignore that they are persons that they are children of God, and consequently, they have no respect or reverence for themselves, or for others.

Self-respect, a feeling of deferential approval, liking, reverence, admiration, consideration and estimation, is the key to respect other people, and especially to respect your beloved one. A lack of self-respect is the beginning of the deterioration and corruption of the person, because respect is the first step to justice, and justice the foundation of love. Consequently, without self-respect there is no self-esteem, and without self-esteem there is no true love for anybody. You can’t do your best for anyone else in your life when you haven’t taken care of yourself. That may sound selfish, but it is just the opposite. Unless you take care of your own self by giving yourself some peace of mind, and recharge your own batteries, how can you possibly think, respond, act, or do your best at anything?

For instance, one’s body is the storehouse of his/her mind. It is important to you to keep both your body and your mind well tuned and working for you, and to serve people. Good health comes naturally to you, but you never take good health for granted. Hence it is important to take care of yourself at all times with great respect. Another example, take the time to get rid of your own stress first, and you will find that you get a lot less stress coming back at you from the world around you. Then you will be able to serve better.

Some signs of self-respect

- Nurturing your spiritual growth
- Not letting your problems undermine you
- Making enthusiasm your daily exercise
- Not allowing negative emotions to destroy you
- Believing that you are good.
- Saying good-bye to the past.

Which are the clear actual signs in my life that I have respect for myself?

IV. Self - Knowledge

“A man is least known to himself.”

“Know thy self”, the Delphic oracle, is the key to a discovery of the essence of your unique self. Do you really know who are you? What are you like? How do you see yourself? How do others see you? According to scholars, if You want to have a self-portrait of yourself, you have to deal with other people’s views through their compliments; but mainly, you have to find what is your **temperament**, your **character**, and your **personality** - three dimensions of your inner self.

Your Temperament

This is your physical constitution insofar as it effects your particular manner of sensing, thinking, feeling and acting. As a result of that natural mechanism - according to psychologists - various types of temperaments appear, corresponding to the different and peculiar tendencies of each individual. In fact, there are four classifications on types of temperaments. Most of us are a combination of two or more.

- * Sanguineous - fullness of vigor and activity
- * Nervous - excitability and emotional impulses
- * Lymphatic - calm, indolence, and inconstancy
- * Bilious - irritability, anger and sharpness

Your Character

This includes your particular and distinctive qualities and outstanding traits, derived from your family upbringing and your social education. It distinguishes you from others.

Your Personality

Your personality is the “you” - the picture - that you present to yourself, to everyone around you, and to the rest of the world. Your personality is not something you were born with, and it is not something you are stuck with. Most people who have noticeable personalities have had to create them. One or two days of effort will not actually change your personality, of course. But it will show you what you could do with yourself if you wanted to. The personality you present will always be the one you create in your mind. If you’d like to see that better personality continue, keep changing the old picture of yourself, and replace it with a better one. Tell yourself: “This is the way I choose to be. This is me I will give to myself and to others. From today on, this is how I will be!”

***Honestly, what are my best and worst features?
What are three words that best describe me?***

V. Self - Understanding

“Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves” - Carl Jung -

Sometimes we complain that other people do not understand us. This is true, but it is truer, and much more important for each one of us, to realize that we do not understand our “selves”. This is one of the deep roots of emptiness, dissatisfaction and unhappiness in our individual person. You need to realize which are your deepest needs and your real values.

Your Needs

If you want to be in intimate touch with your inner self to discover the roots of your behavior and actions, you have to identify your personal needs by satisfying them appropriately, and to avoid the easy and common temptation of meeting your needs with substitutes, escapes, such as, with drugs or alcohol. Any time you don't get your needs met - physiologically, psychologically, morally, spiritually, socially or religiously - you become frustrated. Once you have been honest with yourself by recognizing your real needs, in order to avoid becoming addicted to any kind of drugs. You have to reach the conviction that you need a person who will supports you; someone who listens, understands, encourages, nurtures, protects and cares, especially when you feel vulnerable.

This need for a supportive relationship is a primary underlying motive for marriage, as we read in Genesis 2:18: “It is not good for man to live alone. I will make a suitable companion to help him.” When the needed emotional support is lacking, loneliness, dissatisfaction and even desperation invade the person. But once you know your needs, you can establish your priorities and meet them. This will help you to understand better your inner self.

Your Values

Psychologists agree that, hidden deep down inside ourselves, there is a multitude of mysterious forces and energies which affect our way of sensing, feeling, thinking and doing. Your values - your top priorities, what you consider most important in your personal life, whether they are positive or negative powerful potential which you carry within yourself and which strongly influence you. They are a behavior.

The best way to determine what your authentic values are is to determine where you spend your time, your money, your energies, and what you are willing to risk. Real values are measured mainly by what you invest in those four key indicators. Definitely, the clarifying process of your values can illuminate you, a great deal, to understand your real self.

What in fact are my deepest needs and my authentic values?

VI. Self - Esteem

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself” - Leviticus 19:18 -

Self-esteem, a thoughtful feeling of self-worth, is a positive, fair and healthy love of self. Your love for yourself is genuine and mature when you see yourself in truth, as you actually are. But a healthy love for oneself must not be confused with selfishness and narcissism. A positive self-esteem is your deepest psychological need. A healthy self-esteem is the departing point for all kinds of love. You cannot love others if you do not love yourself first.

Self-acceptance is the key to true self-esteem. That means you welcome yourself for being the person you are, not the person you should be. This does not mean that you deny your defects. Only when you truly face your defects along with your virtues will you really face your uniqueness.

Discovering your self-image

Whether you realize it or not, you carry within you a mental picture of the kind of person you think you are. Your self-image affects your feelings, attitudes, behaviors, actions and abilities. Your self-image can be positive, if you see yourself as someone who is OK, a worthwhile person; or negative or poor, when you see yourself as not having much worth, or as incapable of doing much. The mental picture you carry of yourself is a vital factor in determining the richness and quality of your life and of your relationships. If you have a poor or negative concept of yourself, you will feel vulnerable and unlovable and, therefore, you will expect rejection. The pain of being rejected will stymie the closeness and intimacy of your relationships.

Definitely, a positive self-image is an essential element in the process of self-identity. It is imperative for a healthy and successful engagement, and for a fulfilling marriage. A healthy self-image is seeing yourself as God sees you - no more, no less.

Improving your self-image

The **first step** is your willingness to improve your self-worth, rooted in your personal awareness that you are a child of God and Created in His Image.

The **second step** is to improve your self-worth by recognizing your strong points (your good qualities and virtues) and your weaknesses (your defects, shortcomings, flaws, limitations, moral imperfections and sins.)

The **third step** is to experience a self-reconciliation, by accepting yourself in your totality, both your goodness and your nastiness. And the **forth step** is to find our what capable of and start a change through a growing and maturing process.

What do I find difficult to accept about myself? Why?

VII. Self - Confidence

**“Self-Confidence is the first requisite to great understanding” -
Samuel Johnson -**

“Right now, are you capable of giving yourself the gift of genuine self-confidence? How do you deal with your failures and guilt?”

Your Failures

Failure is part of the human experience. All of us share a capacity to fail. We are created in the image of God, but we are not perfect. Yet, failure is often difficult to deal with, and recognizing our errors is not easy. Even more difficult is the attempt to rectify or undo them. Therefore, to cope with your failures you need to:

- * Summon the courage to acknowledge your mistakes.
- * Find the humility to admit them to others.
- * Seek the strength to make amends if that is necessary or possible.

Failure isn't fatal because failure humbles, educates, motivates, challenges and liberates. Failure is the opportunity to begin again more humbly and more intelligently.

Your Guilt

Guilt is the unpleasant feeling we have when we are aware of having done something we believe is wrong, or failed to do what we know is right. Theologically, guilt stems from deliberately and willfully violating the law of God.

Conscience and guilt are connected. Yet to follow our conscience is not always easy. We are human and we falter. But knowing that we are capable of doing wrong and are responsible for our behavior should never be a cause for despair. Even when we are less than perfect in achieving our ideals, they present us with continued challenges and opportunities. What can you do about your guilt?

- * **Being courageous**. Asking yourself, “Is what I'm doing right or wrong?”
- * **Admitting the fault** by calling it what it is, not depression, frustration or fatigue. Then move on and do something constructive about it.
- * **Confessing**, by openly admitting your wrongdoing, to another person who cares about you. And if you are a believer, confessing to God first.
- * **Making amends**, by doing sincere and hearty reparations.
- * **Asking to be forgiven** to receive inner peace, the antidote of guilt.

*At the present time, which are my major mistakes and failures?
How am I dealing with them? What kind of help do I need?*

VIII. Self - Determination

“Every calling is great when greatly pursued” - Oliver W. Holmes -

There is no potion you can take that will automatically put your life in order for you. What you have to do will always be up to you. There is no else who can do it for you. That’s why one of the most important habits you can learn is the habit of self-determination, which encompasses will power, firmness and resoluteness.

To will to do something is to have the tendency to act in a specific way. It is a force within you that impels you to move and accomplish something of felt importance. Your ideas, values and immediate objectives all generate and feed your will. The will to act is a strong predisposition or determination that channels your personal energy into something of value. The question is how to become a self-determined person?

Setting and Reaching Your Goals

It is encouraging to realize the powerful results that setting simple, realistic, specific goals can create.

On the other hand, there are good practical reasons for setting practical goals. One of them is that goals focus your attention, and help you define some of the things you would like to accomplish. Another equally important reason for setting goals is the effect that accomplishing them has on your self-esteem. It is in reaching your goals that you can become a successful person.

Making Your Decisions

We human beings are free, responsible, and consequently, deciding people. Each day’s decisions say something about the kind of person we are, or hope to become. The following steps will help you make the best decision you can. At each step you may pray for God’s guidance in making your decision:

- * State your question simply and clearly.
- * Gather data and list your options - with their pluses and minuses.
- * Narrow your choices to those acceptable to your moral standards.
- * Talk over your options with family, friends, and if possible, anyone who is likely to be affected.
- * Take as much time as reasonable. But once you have decided, act on your decision.

Choosing Your Attitudes

- | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| - Proposing rather than imposing | - Healing rather than wounding |
| - Loving rather than hating | - Giving rather than grasping |
| - Building rather than destroying | - Acting rather than delaying |
| - Persevering rather than quitting | - Forgiving rather than cursing |
| - Praising rather than gossiping | - Praying rather than despairing |

What can and should I do to become a more determined person?

IX. Self – Fulfillment

“The Glory of God is the human person fully alive” - St. Irenaeus -

If you just give yourself the chance, you will realize your high internal potential. In other words, you will discover that:

- You are unique you have to develop yourself or something will be lost. As a human being, you have the ability to choose between good and evil, to choose between right and wrong, to decide to love or not to love.
- You have the ability and the responsibility to make decisions that require choices. You control most of your life by the decisions and choices you make. Within you lives an undeniable spirit and an unfailing determination to succeed. Who will diminish the light of your dreams?
- Achieving things that are important to you is rewarding and exciting. But you know that nothing is free, and you will have to pay the price for any achievement which you truly desire.
- Your goal is not to surpass others, but rather to live up to the best of who you are. It is important to you to do your very best. You have to recognize that the achievement of your goals is your own personal choice, and their accomplishment is up to you.
- You have to make a serious resolution to bring out the very best of who you are. That is how you choose to be. That is your ideal way of life.

Keys to Self-Fulfillment

*** Positive risk-taking.** Without taking positive risk there can be no personal growth, no true self-fulfillment.

*** Overcoming Obstacles.** Obstacles are the barriers that stand between you and your objectives. They can be roadblocks to stop you, or they can be ordinary challenges. How difficult your obstacles are is up to you. Be practical, do not create problems that do not exist. Be realistic, never ignore problems that are there.

*** Creating Hope.** When all else fails, hope still remains. This is true spiritually, but is also true physiologically. Medical doctors will tell you that often patients started on the road to recovery when they began to have hope. Psychologists will tell you that the turning point, from despair to recovery, with many of their clients or patients happened when those individuals found, or were given, hope. So how can you create more hope within yourself? By creating thoughts which express possibility, like: “while there is life, there is hope.”

*** Setting Priorities and Managing time.** Your time is one of the three most natural resources you have to offer: the other two are your energy and your mind. How you use your time will determine how successful you are. Managing time is actually the management of your priorities.

What of these aforementioned keys do I need the most? Why?

X. Self - Control

**“The sense of dignity grows with the ability to say no to oneself”
- Abraham J. Heschel**

“Come on, everybody’s doing it!” “Don’t be a chicken!” “Show me you love me!” “Prove you’re a real man (or woman)! “ You’ve heard or said these or similar expressions. Let’s face it. We don’t like to appear out of place. But the truth of the matter is that in an age of moral permissiveness, as is ours, we don’t *have* to “give in”. We can say, “No!” Millions of young, and not so young, unmarried fathers, pregnant teenage girls and unmarried mothers today wish they had had the foresight, wisdom and courage to say “No!” But often it is too late. They can never recall and reverse their decisions that allowed, for example, the premarital activity that has hurt their lives, their children’s lives, their families and future.

If you honestly want to avoid the constant temptation of being drawn into drug experimentation, or wrong sexual, or other improper activities, don’t hang around with people who want to indulge in these activities. You need to be realistic. You need self-control by being master of your own self, by dominating your own actions, impulses or emotions, and by regulating your own conduct in accordance with some rule of life. Everyone has some problems of self-control, such as to control one’s tongue and temper, to dominate emotions, to regulate one’s sleeping and waking hours, to be tempered in use of drinking, foods and recreation and so on. Let’s deal with one of the most important problems of self-control.

Your Emotions

We were born with the capacity for deep emotions - subjective responses or reactions to a person or situation - like feelings, sentiments, affections and passions. Most of them are healthy; but not all. How to control them? Psychologists tell us that, usually without knowing about it, many times in one day, we all go through a “cycle” that works like this:

1. A situation occurs that could upset you.
2. The situation creates thoughts in your mind.
3. Your thoughts, in turn, create a physiological response in your brain.
4. The physiological response creates your positive or negative emotions.
5. Your emotions then create more thoughts of a similar nature, which in turn create another physiological-emotional response and so on.

This whole process can take place in a few seconds. Unless you are in control of your original reaction, that is your thoughts, about the situation, your emotions take over, and the real control you should have had is taken away from you. Therefore, the better way to control your emotions will be by taking control of your reactions - the thoughts that create the emotions in the first place.

What I am doing about my most dominant problem of self-control?

XI. Self - Openness

**“It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness”
- The Christophers -**

If you do not want to be caught up in a vicious circle of pride or selfishness, you must reach out beyond yourself. You cannot live for yourself alone because you strongly need to love and to be loved. You are not an island. For this reason you have to communicate deeply and share from within with someone. How can you initiate this profound communication and sharing?

Becoming a Good Listener

We have lost the art of listening. We may *hear*, but we do not *listen*. Failing to listen causes misunderstandings, misinformation, and countless problems. Listening can help you open your mind to a whole new realm of possibilities, and is vital to the building of a genuine relationship.

Listening is a way to learn especially from people with wisdom to share. It enhances your personal growth and your understanding of life. When you listen, you can think and learn. It's a useful lifetime lesson.

The best way to listen is to make a deliberate decision to set aside personal preoccupations and prejudices and to devote full attention to another. It is not possible to maintain this level of concentration 24 hours a day. What is possible to do is to set aside a few precious moments for selfless listening; especially to the people we love.

Listening affects important areas of our lives. When it comes to family and social relationships, good listeners are a godsend. Their willingness to try and understand not only eases burdens but simply makes life more pleasant. And in the workplace, good listeners are an invaluable business asset.

To make the most of listening it is necessary to be active, involved and interested. Good listening makes use of ears, eyes and heart. It takes energy. Good listening is especially important in marriage and family relationships, on the job, and in our communication with God.

The key difficulties for effective listening are: **Self-centeredness** - a concern for one's self at the expense of, or in disregard of others; **Arrogance** - Proud or disdainful behavior towards others; and **Laziness** - Disinterest in action and efforts to become open and listening.

Hints for Active Listening

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|----------------|
| *Make time for others | *Give full attention | *Ask questions |
| *Be welcoming and accepting | *Listen for feelings | *Be respectful |
| *Don't think of your answer | *Don't interrupt | *Show interest |
| *Let the speaker finish | *Keep confidence | *Practice |

Am I an open minded person capable of *listening* with the eyes and heart and not just *hearing* with the ears? Positive and /or negative signs.

XII. Self- Transcendence

**“You have made us for yourself, Lord,
and our hearts can find no rest until they rests in You!”
- St. Augustine -**

Transcendence or openness to God, our Creator and Supreme Lord: a forgotten or lost dimension in this day and age. If you are honest with yourself, you will realize that deep down inside yourself there is an emptiness that needs to be filled... Your heart is yearning for something, or for Someone beyond you.

The Saints - people who deeply experience transcendence in their lives - through the testimony of their personal lives, proclaim that without God we are powerless, and our lives become unmanageable; that we won't understand Him; that we desperately need to listen to God's Word in our hearts. In a world filled with materialism there is a need for a revival of transcendence. The revival must be experienced within the innermost you:

- * In your mind - a new thinking
- * In your heart - a new searching.
- * In your will - God's Will
- * In your soul - God's Spirit.

Asking Yourself about God.

Transcendence is a free gift from God. He gives it to the humble and child-like. What can you do to become one of those blessed people? The question about God is the most fundamental and radical question of all, because all questions of life are rooted in the question about God. We all, consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly, are always related and united to God, because He, as revealed to us in the Bible, is our Creator, our Redeemer, and our Savior.

According to some experts, the number one concern for modern day people is how to increase the economic level of their lives. Therefore the questions about God need not start in the clouds of theoretical concepts, but from the depth of your own living experience and your inner desire to grow and improve your standard or quality of life. From this vantage point, you could ask yourself about the quality, the meaning and the ultimate and total sense of your life.

It is in the practical aspects of daily life that you will be ready to question about God. But do not ask about God until you have questioned yourself about the meaning of your own life, which is in fact rooted in the mystery of God. It is in the answer to this radical question that you will find the solution to the unanswered question about God. If you do not deal with that transcendental question, you will be unable to answer the other important questions that are boiling within you. To believe or not to believe, that is the question!

Do I really believe in God? Why? Or why not?

GETTING ENGAGED

Who are We as an Engaged Couple?
You are a Couple filled with Hope!!

Yesterday: You were single - searching for someone
Today: You are an engaged couple- a great task.
Tomorrow: With God's Blessing, you will be husband and wife - a wonderful dream.
And thereafter: You will be a new family - a beautifully formed masterpiece.

Is there a key to acquire the success and happiness that you desire? According to the scholars and experts in marriage and family life, an honest, deep and loving encounter with each other is the master key. Each one of the following pages contains some suggestions to guide both of you on your quest for the master key to a healthy, strong and successful engagement.

Therefore, in each step:

First: Read and reflect - Answering the questions by writing

Second: Write a love letter.

Third: Get together and share.

Make a firm determination now to take one step each day!

- I -
LOVING EACH OTHER

I firmly believe that within each couple there is a divine energy of love which if released can give rise to a true revolution of love over the whole earth. But in order for this energy to produce a human “Thermonuclear Explosion”, it has to be released by a deep sharing between man and woman, through the sharing of their own selves.

Eventually we will realize that inside each person, couple, family and community there is a mysterious supernatural force which is the strength of God Himself. If we use it, with that Strength we can change the face of the earth.

Then violence will disappear, justice will be done, and peace will arrive. What Thailand de Chardin Predicted will happen: “Someday, after we have mastered the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we will harness for God the energies of Love; and then, for the second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire”.

Einstein once said that the average person, in a lifetime, uses no more than one-tenth of his mental potential. I would likewise suspect that the average couple, in their life together, releases no more than one-tenth of their love potential. From the beginning to the end the purpose of this book is precisely to help you both on this marvelous adventure. If you are personally ready, make that known to your partner. Let’s start at once!

The Meaning of Love

Anyone can devise his/her own personal definition of love. Each definition is based on a sense of the deep mystery of each person. Therefore it is almost impossible to attempt to present a complete and satisfactory definition of love. Why? Because relationships with others happen in many different forms and degrees. The following are the most common forms or degrees of love.

1. Love as sexual instinct. It is an impulsive response to bodily sensations that are purely instinctive and sensual. *This is "carnal love."*
2. Love as Romance. It is a spontaneous attraction based upon sensations, emotions, and imagination. *This is "erotic love."*
3. Love as charity. It has compassion for individuals, who are faced with economic, physical, mental or spiritual problems and is selfless in responding to them. *This is "charitable love".*
4. Love as true friendship. It is a natural attraction based upon the needs of one's mind, heart, will and soul. Mutual acceptance, confiding and reciprocity are its essential elements. *This is "filial love".*
5. Love as unconditional self-donation. It is a personal and firm decision to respond continually to the needs of the other in a completely unselfish, faithful and sacrificial way.

This is "Agape love." God is LOVE (Agape) and our Agape type of love always remains an ideal that can never reach the perfection of God's Love, but there is no limit to the possible degree of approaching it.

Love is

- * A Relation of mutual acceptance vested in feelings and emotions.
- * A Decision and Commitment - an act of the will, and not just a feeling.
- * An active and conscious tendency that, rooted inwards, pushes outwards towards the beloved one, looking for his/her good.
- * A daily conquest, not a total possessiveness.
- * A sincere desire for the other person's happiness.
- * Something wonderful and deep that everybody carries Inside.
- * A mysterious Divine Energy within us flowing from God who is Love (AGAPE).
- * Love is to the person what the heart is to the body.

When you look at another person with respect and wonderment, when you love a person so much that you want him/her to be happy - even though you may not be allowed to share their happiness - then you are in the realm of love. For when you sense the mystery in a person, you are acknowledging that their potential is unlimited. Then you are sensing God's Presence in that person. God is the mystery of beauty, truth and goodness we all are looking for, although sometimes in conflicting ways.

- * *List in order five of the above elements of Love that are most important to you.*
- * *What are the two elements you would like to improve in yourself?*

Discerning Premarital Love

A Key question during the period of engagement is: “Do we really love and feel loved by each other?” If the questions are considered courageously, honestly and directly, the results will be beneficial and fruitful for both of you now and later, for your children and your children’s children. How can you distinguish between genuine, mature love and false love or infatuation?

Infatuation

1. The lover is attracted to the other’s features: eyes, body, dress.
2. The lover is attracted by limited characteristics; athletic ability, humor, intelligence.
3. The romance starts fast, a few hours or days; love at first sight.
4. Many ups and downs with no clear focus on who the other is.
5. The relationship is destructive of the person, there is no growth.
6. The relationship, like an instant desire, ends abruptly.
7. The lover focuses on and idealizes one person; can see no defects.
8. Family and friends do not approve of the relationship.
9. Cannot be separated for a long time, fearing that might spoil the dream.
10. They use words in the singular: me, mine, he, she, his, her. Self-concern.
11. Attitude of taking, of exploiting, of using the other.
12. Frequent and intense jealousy.
13. The relation moves at levels of instinct, feelings and imagination.
14. They are not concerned with society.

Mature Love

1. The lover is attracted to the whole person, to the other’s heart.
2. Multiple things attract the lover: beloved’s friends, arts, hobbies, etc., etc.
3. A slow start, months. It takes root with the respective families assisting.
4. Fewer ups and downs, predictable level and clear focus on the others.
5. The relationship betters the person and encourages the other’s effort.
6. The relationship goes slowly, takes time. Person will not be the same.
7. The lover adds new relations to the old ones. He/she is objective.
8. Family and friends approve of the relationship.
9. Can be separated for a long time without affecting the relationship.
10. They use words in the plural: we, us our, ours. Concern for others.
11. Attitude of giving, sharing and generously serving.
12. No possessiveness. Only mild feelings of jealousy.
13. The relation includes a great deal of reason, freedom, and decision.
14. They are concerned with society and children.

*In the light of the previous 14 signs of a mature love:
What is my main reason for loving you?*

Learning to Love

Most people believe that to love is something spontaneous and easy; and that there is nothing to learn anything about love. This a common and terrible mistake that daily facts bring into painful evidence. The inability to love has been described as “emotional immaturity.” That is why experts in human affairs affirm that love is an art that, as any kind of art, has to be personally experienced and learned by practicing discipline, concentration and patience throughout all the phases of love. The common mistake is rooted in a false concept of what loving is all about. We all have to understand and experience that learning to love is.

- * **Discovering** the beloved as a very special person.
- * **Believing** in him/her and **accepting** him/her as he/she really is
- * **Deciding** for the beloved
- * **Focusing** on who he/she is and not on what he/she has or does
- * **Sharing** with generosity with the beloved
- * **Giving** oneself to the other.
- * **Receiving**, that is, affording the beloved the possibility to give
- * **Recognizing** and **reaffirming** his/her good qualities and efforts
- * **Being honest** and **open with the other**
- * **Trusting** and **confiding** in the beloved
- * **Giving** and **receiving** forgiveness
- * **Serving** him/her with simplicity
- * **Helping** the other to grow
- * Delivering to the beloved frequent signs of love
- * **Responding** to other’s needs
- * **Looking** for his/her true happiness
- * **Walking together** in the same direction

Saint Paul, in his First letter to Corinthians Chapter 13, gives us an inspiring lesson about love. Let us hear him and reflect:

- Love is patient = Doesn’t demonstrate anger
- Love is kind = It looks for opportunities to be constructive
- Love is never jealous = It is not possessive
- Love is not boastful or proud = It is not anxious to impress
- Love is not rude = It is gentle and has good manners
- Love is not selfish = It is not irritable or touchy
- Love does not take offense = It does not demand its own way
- Love is not resentful = It does not keep account of evil
- Love rejoices not in what is wrong = It is never rejoices over injustice.
- Love delights in the truth = It is glad when truth prevails
- Love is always ready to excuse = It is always faithful and loyal

Love is always ready to trust = It believes all things.
Love is always ready to hope. = It expects the best of people.
Love endures whatever comes = It is able to endure all obstacles
Love never fails = It goes on forever

*Personally, what I am learning about Love?
What are the major steps I have to take in order to love in a better
and deeper way?
What is the very first step?*

- II -
HAVING MUTUAL RESPECT

In the past, within all cultures, there was a strong strain of Puritanism that viewed persons more as spiritual beings. Because of this outlook, it saw no value in the physical, emotional, and psychological aspects of people's sexuality; and relationship was seen as being "platonic" - not sexual, but purely spiritual. All of this resulted in the very rigid moral principles with which we are all familiar.

During the sixties, a violent reaction to this exploded into what is known as the "sex revolution". Sexuality was now envisioned in terms of the physical, emotional, and psychological dimensions, to the exclusion of the spiritual. And this "New Morality" became accepted by society.

Then started the production of the endless stream of books, magazines, manuals and x-rated films stressing the importance of developing the physical, emotional and psychological aspects of sexuality and so called "lovemaking". The sex revolution created its own new imbalance, and presented a sexual view that does not give due consideration to the spiritual dimensions of sexuality. From here it was just a short step to premarital and extramarital sex.

In our times, sex is everywhere freely discussed and indulged in almost promiscuously. Sex is equated with fun, pleasure, enjoyment - not babies. But after the appearance of 20 different and dangerous sexually transmitted diseases, especially the fatal, growing epidemic of "Aids", millions of confused, frustrated, unsatisfied and empty people are, whether consciously or unconsciously, passionately searching for the lost dimension of human sexuality; its meaning and mystery. They are looking for a new way of relating, a new respect between man and woman. The generations of tomorrow are depending on the mutual respect of today's men and women. This provides us with some hope for the future.

*Do we want to belong to the new generation of men and women who
are laying the foundations for a new civilization of love?*

Human Sexuality

One of the first difficulties to understand this thing called “love” is the modern tendency to identify it exclusively with sex. For many of today’s people “to love” or “making love”, is “having sex”. Despite predictions a decade ago that society was entering a new era of Puritanism; today’s people are accustomed to think of sex as something involving merely genital organs or simple physical expression. Just look around you, and you will realize that we live in a sex-crazed-world.

From a survey of 2,000 men and women, authored by James Patterson and Peter Kim, and published in May 1991, as “The Day America Told The Truth” (Prentice Hall), one in five Americans loses his or her virginity before the age of 13. According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute in New York, the average American now has intercourse for the first time at age 16. More than half of teenage girls are sexually active - up from 36 % in 1973. Most of those have had two or more sex partners, and one in ten has had multiple partners within the previous three months. Ninety percent of college women were sexually active in 1989, the same as in 1975. By age 19, according to a recent Urban Institute report, 80 % of boys were sexually active- up from 73 % in 1979.

While it is true that sexual intercourse is a very vital aspect of married love, it is only one expression of love within marriage. It is part of a total commitment of a man and a woman to each other. To avoid the narrow and limited understanding of the term “sexuality”, it should be understood that sexuality is recognition that sex expression is a deep and pervasive aspect of the total personality. Sex is not what you “do” but what you “are”. Sexuality deals with you as a person, and more specifically, as a man or as a woman. The main target of mutual respect is the whole person. This is the very key to human sexuality, and consequently the secret of a healthy and successful engagement.

Mutual respect means you become conscious of your reciprocal dignity. You are images of God and, consequently, you must value and treat each other with honor and reverence. That requires you to see each other as a king or queen, as it were, whom you must be very careful not to offend. To treat each other not like objects of pleasure, but as sacred persons, children of God. This is not an easy task. You need something that you cannot get with money, or purchase in a pharmacy. Both of you must have self-esteem and self-mastery, and a deep love rooted in God. In other words, you need a virtue that today is undervalued, scorned or forgotten. Its name is “chastity”.

***Do we truly respect each other, by refusing to use one another for selfish pleasure?
- positive or negative signs of mutual respect -***

Chastity

Today, the word, the concept, and the practice of “chastity” have been outlawed from our Society. It has been fraudulently replaced by the so called “safe-sex” theory that, according to many researchers, is a disaster in the making. That’s why today’s experts are concluding that the only safe way to protect oneself from all the contagious diseases (to say nothing of maintaining a pure soul) and have a healthy engagement is abstinence and chastity before marriage.

What is chastity anyway? Chastity is not something negative like a kind of rejection, fear or escape from sex. On the contrary, true chastity is a 100% positive energy, a human potential, a quality value, a strong arm and a treasured virtue. That is, something excellent and precious that gives special worth or value to the person. Chastity is a power that controls the sex drive and relegates it to the service of authentic love according to one’s state in life.

Sexual energy, when it is improperly integrated, isolated, or abandoned to the power of the sexual instinct, using one another merely for personal pleasure, destroys one’s capacity to love. Everyone knows through daily experience how powerful and demanding the sexual impulse is, and how difficult it becomes to master it. But when *it* masters you, it will indeed destroy you. For the “believers” it is clear that only with Grace, that comes from God and renews us from within, will we be able to maintain an interior balance and harmony. But self-control, rooted in a serious decision, is the necessary condition for everybody, and not only for those who have Faith. This courageous attitude, this genuine self-mastery is what we call “chastity”. It is always a gift from God that we should request from Him through humble and persevering prayer, accompanied by continuous self-control.

Through all these years of ministry to and with engaged couples I have learned some practical skills that I cannot silence, and I would like to suggest or propose to both of you.

1. **Be Sincere and Honest** with yourself and with each other, by mutually sharing your ideals, thoughts, intentions, attitudes, purposes and expectations related to sexuality, chastity and faith.
2. **Participate Together** in a course, seminar, Engaged Encounter Weekend or Retreat, along with other engaged couples, to receive a solid knowledge and right direction about what being an engaged couple is all about.
3. **Make a Joint Commitment** - a promise, a pledge, a covenant, or a vow, to respect each other by abstaining from sexual intercourse, and by avoiding whatever indirectly but gradually could push you towards premarital sex, through petting, necking, or heavy caressing etc...
4. **Pray Together** so that the Spirit of God will be your light and your strength.
5. **Have a Support Group** of engaged couples, and meet with them regularly.
6. **Find a Common Counselor** - a married couple, a priest or a religious.

What could we agree to in detail, as our premarital commitment?

- III -
RELATING TO EACH OTHER

Today's democratic culture, with its emphasis on the right of the individual to fulfillment and on basic equality between man and woman brings a new concept of marriage that makes the achievement of success far more difficult than in the past. This also explains why marriage so often fails today. Since marriage no longer exists primarily for the preservation of the family traditions, it can no longer be held together, as in the past, by external cohesion. In other words, marriage must be made to work, or the partners will be inclined and strongly tempted to end it, and try again with someone else.

Today what people are really looking for in marriage is in-depth relationship. But what has not yet clearly been seen is that this new kind of marriage is not easily attained by using the old approaches. Because people are asking for more *out of* marriage, they must be prepared to put more *into* marriage. A new attitude is required.

On the other hand the process of love during courtship is described by today's psychologists not only in terms of growing intense emotional attachment, but also in terms of deepening the premarital relationship. It is a positive and a hopeful reality, your being together to become more and more familiar. Every time you meet, you become less and less strangers, and consequently, you feel more at home with each other. When this happens it is the right time to face the reality of your premarital relationship.

Remember, you have to sow the seeds of your future marriage now.

“Tuning – up” your relationship

During the engagement time you often become alienated from each other. Then you become defensive or confused in your efforts to build a healthy relationship. And even though sometimes some issues seem too threatening personally to deal with directly, it is well worth your effort. In fact a healthy relationship - a mutual and balanced interaction - is a key to a successful engagement.

Basic Elements of a Healthy Relationship

Experts in this field describe four “systems” as basic to your relationship as fuel, ignition, lubrication, or a cooling system are to your automobile. You are invited to check out these four systems to evaluate and diagnose your premarital relationship.

1. Cooperation - This system is working well if:

- Your talents are respected, affirmed and taken into account.
- You are able to work together on a project with not too much tension.
- Both share in decision-making and take responsibility for results.
- Each is free to share opinions, thoughts, and feelings without becoming argumentative or defensive.
- Both take part in identifying, defining, and solving problems.
- You negotiate your differences so that both win.

2. Compatibility - Disagreements about your values and life-style preferences - religion, morality, commitment to social causes, friends, sex, use of money - are inevitable. A complete relationship embraces these differences and discovers similarities upon which to build a common life-style. The greater the diversity in your childhood background, the more attention you will probably have to give to your compatibility.

3. Intimacy - Openness and intimacy make a relationship special. Many people fear this dimension almost as much as they desire it. Without it a relation would be neither significant nor complete. Openness and intimacy include emotional and physical (but not necessarily sexual) closeness, self-revelation, spontaneity, playfulness, and vulnerability.

4. Emotional Support - Everyone needs encouragement and support at least some of the time. You need someone who cares, protects, nurtures, and believes in you. You need this especially when you are scared, hurting, sick, lonely, or feeling vulnerable. The search for caring and support is a primary motive for premarital relationships. Without emotional support a relationship becomes dissatisfying.

Type of Our Relationship - In the light of the previous elements, and knowing that no relationship is perfect, ask yourselves the actual state of your relationship guided by the following types:

- | | | | |
|--------------|------------------------|---------|------------------------|
| 1. Excellent | - Sharing well | 4. Poor | - Sharing infrequently |
| 2. Good | - Sharing adequately | 5. Bad | - Sharing minimally |
| 3. Fair | - Sharing inadequately | 6. Dead | - No sharing at all |

Using Your Conflicts Creatively

To be human is to experience conflict. The social psychologists tell us that the closer a relationship becomes, the more acutely will differences between the persons explode into conflict. Conflict is not a hostile and external force that threatens us, but is essential to human life, especially between a man and a woman. An engaged couple is not simply two persons equal in dignity. Between them there is a psychological difference which finds its balance and fulfillment in its reciprocal accommodation. But this does not happen without conflicts.

Consequently, conflict in relationship, while it may be barren and destructive, can be used creatively to facilitate the process of mutual accommodation. And it is far better to do this than to preserve a spurious peace that is equivalent to brushing the dust under the rug.

To handle conflict creatively is not easy. It takes a certain amount of basic maturity, a great deal of patience and determined effort. But creative use of conflict is rewarding. It brings man and woman together at deeper and deeper levels of communication and cooperation. As their differences are accepted and understood, and effective patterns of coping are learned, the emergence of conflict in the relationship becomes less and less frequent, and less and less disturbing.

Dealing with Your Anger

As Aristotle writes: "Anybody can become angry. That is easy. But to be angry with the right person, and to the right degree, and at the right time, and for the right purpose, and in the right way is not within everybody's power and is not easy." How to deal with anger?

- **Identifying destructive expressions of anger** - like hitting a person, slamming a door, throwing things, causing hurt and humiliation.
- **Expressing your anger assertively** - stating clearly and firmly what is upsetting you, without attacking or violating the other person.
- **Clarifying the real issue** - digging and honestly asking yourself: What is it about this situation that makes me angry? What am I really angry about?
- **Giving yourself time** - it will help you to disengage and stay calm.
- **Keeping information flowing** - shutting down or leaving the scene only escalates the anger. If tension is high, the best way to keep information flowing is to share feelings on paper rather than in person.
- **Letting go of unrealistic expectations** - it can reduce your frustration level, avoid anger, and defuse what anger does occur.
- **Learning how to use degrees of anger** - The best thing is to start to express anger at lower levels, and let go of anger in situations you can't control.

How can we transform our anger into a tool of mutual accommodation?

- IV -
COMMUNICATING

Today, because of the worldwide crisis of marriage and family millions of engaged couples are looking for a new way of being a couple. And they do not find it.

Interpersonal communication through, its different ways and levels such as body language, writing, dialogue, self-sharing, silence etc., is the necessary bridge between partners. Actually a deep and full communication between man and woman is one of the most genuine expressions of true love - both love as a human experience, and love as a divine mystery.

Unfortunately it is also a fact that most engaged couples take communication for granted. They say, "Of course we talk to each other. This is so obvious." Yet studies show that they may not be saying what they really feel. They may well be conversing, but they are not really dialoguing. What about you? What is the quality of your communication? Do you really have the capacity of sharing your personal experiences with each other? The testimony of today's scholars, confirmed by the witness of many married couples, tells us that only with good communication - face to face, and without the interference of a third person - will you be able to settle your differences, discrepancies and misunderstandings, that will help you to become a healthy and functional couple.

On these pages we are intending to focus first on premarital communication simply as a human experience of the couple. Afterward, we will focus on the couple as a divine mystery.

Interpersonal Communication

Communication during the engagement time is a complex process that demands a total effort from both of the partners to relate to each other: Who they are and who they want to be; how they feel about people and things; what their values, needs and expectations are. Interpersonal communication is a person-to-person communication made from all different angles- of one's body, mind, heart, will and soul - with honesty, depth and love between both parties. Interpersonal communication means a lot more than just talking. It means a commitment to constantly strive to give to one's partner the most precious gift of one's self. The more personal communication there is between two persons, the greater the bond of love and unity becomes. And vice versa. Following are the three main ways of interpersonal communication:

Body Language - Eye contact, facial expressions, postures, smiling, frowning, making sounds, kissing, caressing, holding hands, silence...

Writing - Self-reflections, notes and letters.

Speaking - Conversations, dialogues, self-sharings.

Suggested rules for Effective Premarital Communication

1. Relate to each other as friends
2. Show an open face
3. Think positively and smile naturally
4. Show genuine interest
5. Always stimulate the partner
6. Make he/she feel important
7. Admire good qualities
8. Recognize and praise all progress
9. Be attentive in small things
10. Be a good and courteous listener
11. Excuse and be understanding
12. Maintain a sense of humor
13. Allow your partner to speak most of the time
14. See things from the point of view of the other
15. Raise questions instead of giving orders
16. Do not show weariness during the conversation
17. Do not look at your watch during your communication
18. Make a challenge by introducing a question
19. Show an open mind always ready to learn
20. Avoid past histories
21. Stick to the subject
22. Don't part angrily
23. Hold hands while arguing
24. Always be honest
25. Always be gentle
26. Always be patient
27. Always be respectful
28. Always be available
29. Always be charitable

Shortly:

- | | |
|----------------------|--|
| T = Time | Setting aside quality time (appropriate and sufficient). |
| A = Attention | Giving each other active and undistracted attention. |
| L = Listen | Hear not only words but emotions and messages. |
| K = Kindness | Listen with love, with the head and with the heart. |

What can and should we do together to improve our communication?

Dialogue

Dialogue is the most basic level of the process of personal communication between the two partners. It deals with major issues like:

Self	Needs	Values	Concerns	Choices
Ideals	Goals	Priorities	Sexuality	Children
Parenthood	Psychology	Money	Health	Dreams.
Activities	Vocations	Education	Marriage	Responsibilities
Friends	Work	Justice	Friendship	Commitments
Love	Families	Interests	God	Faith and Religion

Each one's early childhood experiences

There are few issues in life that are black or white. Most issues have to be discussed in order to work out a compromise in the gray area. The exchange of ideas, feelings and attitudes about issues is called "dialogue". In the area of compromising, it is important to take into consideration that when the issues are a matter of principle or something dealing with personal rights (like the right to practice one's Faith; the right to physical well-being) there is no room for compromise. When the discussion about issues concerns one's own goals, values, needs and interests, there is room for compromising.

Engaged couples have to clearly understand that a balanced diversity in non-essential issues is a good test of true love and unity. The attitude and ability to compromise about non-essentials is a sign of growing maturity and balance in premarital relationships. But dialogue about major issues in life is not the only, or the most important, subject for premarital communication. It does not itself effectively lead to the development of mutual understanding and trust, the final goal of a healthy and loving Engagement.

A Suggested Experienced Formula

Joseph Cardijn, a Belgian Cardinal, founder of the Young Christian Workers, originated a method for dialogue, called the "review of life", that is universally recognized for its effectiveness. It has three stages:

- * **Observe** - Exchange with one another thoughts, feelings and attitudes about different concrete situations or events.
- * **Judge** - Discuss and evaluate steps that could be taken to deal with the real causes. Those who have Faith should also try to discern what God is telling them through various events and situations".
- * **Act** - Make a clear and practical decision to carry it out.

In what way can we improve our premarital dialogue?

- V -

BECOMING BEST FRIENDS

By relating and dialoguing, you become friends.

Friendship is a special expression of genuine love. It is a priceless gift that cannot be bought or sold, but its value is more precious than gold, pearls, diamonds or riches. The Bible states that he who finds a friend finds a treasure.

Friendship is one of the essential marks of a healthy and promising engagement. Who is a true friend?

“A friend is someone who...

will make you feel happy, will stay by your side,
won't come and then leave you, like a flowing tide.
believes in and trusts you, with fears of his own, and make you feel super,
way up on your throne.

is there when you need him to give you advice
and won't try to hurt you, in the same way twice.

will let you lean on him, and in his arms cry,
will hold you in comfort, and be strong, he'll try.

is the person out there, who everyone needs,
puts the love in the air, upon which life feeds.”

Diane Kramer

What is the beauty of friendship?

“The glory of friendship is not the outstretched hand,
nor the kindly smile nor the joy of companionship;
it is the spiritual inspiration that comes to you when you discover
that someone else believes in you.”

Ralp Waldo Emerson

Nourishing Your Friendship

Why is there such a shortage of true friendship? Because of all the games, masks, lies, fear, ambiguities, confusion, misunderstandings, distrust, suspicion, quarrels etc. among many of today's married couples. Simply put, friendship has a high price- one that they did not pay when they were an engaged couple, and consequently, it was not on their wedding list. They assumed that it would just happen. But the reality is that if you want to be best friends after you get married, you must start becoming best friends right now. Tomorrow will be too late.

The following are some suggestions that may help you build a solid, deep and lasting premarital friendship:

1. **If you want your sweetheart to be your best friend, be yourself his/her best friend.** This means common courtesies, thoughtfulness and kindness. If you encounter difficulties, follow the advice of Saint Augustine: "Where there *is* no love, *put* love and you will *find* love".

2. **Give priority to your premarital relationship.** Never take him/her for granted. The power of a small act of kindness is that it demonstrates that you have not taken him/her for granted.

3. **Always be honest, open and transparent to each other.** Open communication is of the essence of friendship. Express your feelings, both positive and negative. No masks, lies or games.

4. **Give each other space:**

- No controlling
- Encouraging him/her to be unique
- Being cautious with criticism
- Allowing for solitude
- Using the language of acceptance
- Encouraging other relationships

5. **Let him/her be him/herself.** Accept one another's individuality and imperfections. Do not feel threatened if other's opinions and tastes sometimes differ from yours.

6. **Give praise and encouragement.** Tell your partner what you like about him/ her, how thankful you are for his/her presence in your life. Delight in his/her talents, applaud his/her successes.

7. **Be ready to give and to receive.** Be eager to help and able to ask for help as well. Don't be over- demanding, nor let yourself be used.

8. **Be loyal.** Loyalty is faithfulness. It means being with your sweetheart in good times as well as bad ones.

Among the previous suggestions, which ones do I need to practice?

Why?

Trusting and Confiding

According to the testimony of experienced couples, the quintessence of premarital friendship is mutual trusting and confiding, and the key to mutual trusting and confiding mutual self-sharing. As a matter of fact mutual self-sharing involves a listening process between the two partners which obviously involves therefore both a mutual giving and receiving. It aims to achieve a mutual knowledge and understanding which can lead to a mutual and loving acceptance- the main goal of a successful engagement.

Self-sharing has to be characterized by equity and equality. When these two qualities are sensed or experienced by the two of you, it means that you are mutually trusting and confiding.

How self-sharing may be done

- * Has to be understood as a mutually listening process.
- * Demands total attention from both partners.
- * Needs quality time and a special place.
- * Has to be reciprocal and not be just a one-way street.
- * Strives to be intimate, that is, a sharing from one's innermost self: about one's mind, will and soul, and even about one's faith and religious experiences.
- * Must be done on a regular basis. It deserves high priority.

The wise advice of many married couples who have really encountered one another is that the best way to start a loving self-sharing is by exchanging one's inner feelings, but while avoiding the following two extremes:

- **First**, the traditional and damaging tendency of repressing and hiding feelings. The fact is that experiencing emotions is a perfectly human reaction which it is impossible to avoid.

- **Second**, the modern and sophisticated trend of reducing all kind of self-sharing to an obsessive exchange of just feelings. What about the other important living experiences of each person that are not just feelings or emotions like: beliefs, aspirations, attitudes, joys and sorrows, fears, hopes, expectations, disappointments, likes, dislikes, values, needs, priorities, choices, time, goals, dreams and even temptations? Therefore, let us conclude by stating very clearly that:

1. Feelings are neither good nor bad - they just are. Their goodness or badness depends on personal actions, as a result of experiencing the feelings.
2. Feelings are natural, but we should control them and not allow them to control us.
3. We cannot change our Emotions. What we can change are our attitudes, assumptions, suppositions or conjectures. Then our feelings will take care of themselves.

What do I find most difficult to share about my life
- hurts from childhood, failures, faults, mistakes, weaknesses,

etc....?

- VI -
EXPERIENCING RECONCILIATION

Wherever did we get the idea that if we love someone, we won't hurt them?

How can two people promise each other, ostensibly as a sign of love, that they never have to say: "I am sorry"? This may *sound* romantic, but it isn't.

In fact, your own experience tells you the contrary. As the saying goes: "Nobody is perfect." And this is really true, especially in dealing with the art of relating and loving. It is precisely those you love most dearly that you can hurt most deeply.

On the other hand, you cannot know each other, understand each other or grow in communication and intimacy with each other without being a victim of your own limitations, mistakes and weaknesses. When this happens, reconciliation is the necessary first step towards genuine love, inner peace and happiness.

Reconciliation is belongs to the essence of true love. True reconciliations the test of the authenticity of your honesty, self-awareness, and commitment to each other.

But what is reconciliation all about?

Asking and Granting Forgiveness

To forgive or not to forgive is the great challenge everybody faces in a deep and loving relationship. But what is forgiveness anyway?

- Forgiveness is the very soul of the art of loving.
- Forgiveness is the test of genuine love.
- Forgiveness is the secret of our innermost peace.
- Forgiveness is human. There is no forgiveness among animals.
- Forgiveness is Divine. It is a gift from God to humble people.
- Forgiveness is a commandment of Jesus of Nazareth for His disciples, and for everyone.

Asking Forgiveness

Asking forgiveness, because in fact true love is having to say, one time or many times “I’m sorry!” or “I was wrong!” or “Will you forgive me?” All these, or similar sayings, are powerful healers and indications of true love.

Even though it is hard to say “I’m sorry!” “I made a mistake!” or “I am at fault!” such honesty and self-responsibility inspires and produces growth. Moreover, to say “I’m sorry” without blaming or implicating the partner requires magnanimity and gentleness. It reaffirms one’s commitment to remain in a healthy and loving relationship. But hardest of all is to say “Please forgive me!” Because to ask forgiveness is to become vulnerable and needy. It gives the power of rejection to your partner. It is asking him or her to give you something you do not deserve or merit. Your friend could reasonably refuse. In these cases it would be good to remember that forgiveness is not, after all, a matter of the mind but rather a matter of the heart. It is easier to say “I love you!” than to say “I’m sorry”, but it is less effective. This is essentially true when your friend is deeply wounded by you. Reconciliation begins only when someone makes an apology. Many promising reconciliations have broken down because, while both parties were prepared to forgive, neither party came prepared to be forgiven.

Forgiving

To give forgiveness means to accept your sweetheart in his/her totality, both the goodness and the nastiness. To give forgiveness is at the heart of your premarital relationship. A broken relationship, healed by a loving forgiveness, will not return to its previous state. It will improve and, consequently, both of you will change deeply.

It is out of a hurt and disillusionment that you can leap beyond that hurt through forgiveness. As Patrick P. Donnelly writes: “Tears shed together mingle more intimately and have greater effect than do bodies in the act of love...” Unconditional forgiveness is definitely an essential part of unconditional love. But unconditional forgiveness is impossible without the merciful power of God.

What is the one thing for which I feel that I most need to be forgiven by you?

A Suggested Guide

“Suggested guide”, meaning that you may feel free to use your own creativity to change it as you please.

I. Preparing Your Love Letter

Find a quiet place in your home or elsewhere, where you will be able to reflect on the following questions or points that will inspire you to write an honest “love letter” to your sweetheart.

1. In what ways do I think I have failed, and continue to fail in my relationship with you?
2. Because of this I need you to forgive me for
3. Am I harboring resentments about something about which you have failed to apologize? (Try to be specific, honest and clear)
4. What is the part I have played in making our *face to face communication* difficult?
5. Which are the positive and/or negative signs of mutual respect between you and me?
6. To improve my behavior and attitude in relationship with you, I want to commit myself to:
7. To achieve my personal commitment, I need that you help me in.....
8. How can I improve my daily prayer-life to be close to God?
9. What do we need to do, or not do, to improve our premarital relationship with God?
10. How can we improve our relationship with our respective families?

II. Exchanging Your Love Letters

Get together in a quiet place -a part, a garden, a church- to share your love letters by reading them twice:

First, by reading it attentively with your mind

Second, by rereading it with your heart

III. Being Grateful

Thanking each other for something for which you have heretofore neglected to express gratitude.

IV. Praying Together

Giving thanks to God for His love, and asking His blessing.

- VII -
KNOWING EACH OTHER BETTER

If a premarital relationship is to be truly authentic and meaningful, it must be founded on the solid rock of the reality of the two persons - equal in dignity, but sexually different and complementary.

That reality can only be uncovered by discovering and sharing one another's truth as an engaged couple. But what in fact is that truth behind each one of you?

The purpose of this step is precisely to listen to your partner with the heart, to learn about his/her truth concerning your personalities, your respective families, and your peers.

The price you will have to pay in attaining this knowledge will be mutual acceptance of your differences, weaknesses, faults, limitations, goals, choices and priorities. The mutual acceptance will lead to a mutual understanding of your needs, values, and dreams.

And both will establish a spirit of honesty and truthfulness between the two of you, which in turn will assist you in the development of very good communication. This will be *the best warranty* for a healthy and successful marriage, and for a functioning and loving family in the future.

Learning about each other

To learn to know each other fully - the very purpose of genuine courtship - you have to listen to one another with your heart. Afterwards, you will be able to share from within, and learn about the three dimensions of each one's inner self:

Temperament - Each one's physical constitution affecting one's particular manner of sensing, thinking, feeling and acting. And also one's particular type of temperament. (see page 27)

Character - Each one's distinctive qualities and outstanding traits acquired through education and personal experience. (see page 27)

Personality - Each one's self-image or picture, or the way in which you act in relationship to others. (see page 27) But the development of a particular temperament, character and personality doesn't happen by accident; each one's family upbringing and each one's social education is very important too.

Parental influence - By specific design, God planned for two persons, one male and one female, to produce an offspring. The need for male and female parents has to do with biological procreation, but it also has to do with the process of growing healthy personalities. God planned the growth process that requires human offspring to spend many years in various stages of dependence. It's a process that includes physical, emotional and spiritual development. The importance of this process can be understood if you stop to consider the amount of time spent on it. The physical growth process usually takes from 16 to 18 years. This means, that the average person spends generally the first quarter of life as a part of the process of being parented. Therefore, it is important to share what one recognizes to be the influence of both parents on one's temperament, character and personality; and a very important element in this is the influence received concerning one's idea about God.

Brothers and sisters - Another dominant influence is each one's brothers and sisters, although theirs is not so strong an influence as parents, or peers outside the home, but it is also important point to share about.

Peers - Peers - friends, classmates and teachers - also play an important role, and influence each one's temperament, character and personality. They either confirm or deny what you have been taught at home.

A Helping Hand for Sharing

1. List the personal characteristics of your parents that you believe have influenced you most.
2. Name some people whose lives have helped you to build your personality, and explain how.
3. List five characteristics which, by the grace of God and your sweetheart's support, you hope, and even expect, to manifest in the future.

Reciprocal Acceptance

Accepting the partner, as he/she really is - the goodness *and* the nastiness- is the price that must be paid for mutual acceptance and, consequently, a necessary condition for a suitable preparation for marriage as well as for a successful marriage.

Reciprocal acceptance means that you mutually welcome each other for being the person each one is, rather than the person each one should be, or that you would like that person to be. This does not mean that you deny each other's defects. Only when you truly face each other's defects along with each other's virtues, will you really face each other's uniqueness. Reciprocal acceptance will be sincere when you accept each other's:

- **Differences** - way of thinking, feeling, reacting or behaving.
- **Weaknesses**- physical, mental, emotional or spiritual.
- **Mistakes** - the little ones and the big ones.
- **Faults** - ethical, moral or religious.
- **Limitations** - physical, intellectual, educational or spiritual.
- **Tendencies** - to eat, drink, smoke, gamble or drugs.
- **Choices** - material, psychological, moral, spiritual or religious.

Mutual Understanding

The experience of thousands of couples is that if you succeed in totally accepting each other, you will be ready for the next step- mutual understanding which is the quintessence of mutual knowledge and genuine love. The secret key to a new way of life for both of you. How many times do we hear complaints like: "My fiancée does not understand me." "If my fiancé would put himself in my shoes, he would understand me, but he doesn't!" And the fatal statement: "We do not understand each other; we are incompatible; we should break up."

Definitely, in all these cases, there is a lack of mutual knowledge or acceptance of each other's innermost needs and values. Therefore it is urgent to share and meet your personal unfulfilled needs, and discover your real good values. If you do, you both will feel understood.

* **Sharing about each other's innermost needs** - These include self-esteem, love, faith, God, acceptance, family support, discipline, chastity, will power, prayer, education, religion, peace, goals, hope, dreams...

* **Sharing about each other's positive values** - These include respect, kindness, faith, patience, obedience, good will, priorities, long suffering, prayer, family, friends, purity, justice, sense of responsibility, love of nature, honesty, truth, human rights, religion, education, art, courage, spirituality, hope, optimism, discipline, self-esteem, joyfulness, openness, God, peace...

What do I consider in you to be difficult to accept and to understand? Why?

- VIII -
GROWING TOGETHER

When you honestly accept each other and feel understood by each other, then - and only then - will you be ready to start a common adventure- to build your coupleness, together.

In other words, then you will be able to help and support each other to mature and to grow - personally and as an engaged couple. Because it is very necessary to realize and to accept that the development of a person - as well as of a couple - is a growing process that takes time.

We see the wonderful process of growth is God's creation around us. Everything that grows - a flower, a bird, a person, and a couple - is beautiful precisely because it has something of the beauty of the Creator in it.

It is part of the design of God that you are constantly called upon to grow- now as individual persons, and as an engaged couple, and in the future as a married couple an as a family! It will not be an easy task, but together you *can* accomplish it.

You can help each other grow in areas like overcoming his/her feelings of inferiority, encouraging him/her to return to school or finish college, etc.

And remember this:
When the time comes that you feel a need to support and help each other, good intentions and nice words are not enough. If there is enough love to want to grow together, then concrete actions are required.

Promoting each other's Maturity

Seeds hidden in the earth germinate and begin to grow. Then one day a green shoot appears above ground and continues to grow in virtue of the activity which goes on out of sight. The growth of a person works in very much the same way. It begins at a level which is hidden, and continues to be carried on there before it manifests itself at the observable level. But growth to personal maturity does not result from good intentions, good resolutions or an emotional surge. Hard work is necessary to achieve it. A supportive and nurturing relationship provides a secure base for personal growth and development.

You need to learn to respond to each other's everyday emotional needs on a daily basis, and discover what helps and what doesn't. You may also guide each other in the struggle for personal maturity. The following is a list of some of the signs or symptoms of maturity and immaturity that can be instrumental in your mutual help and discernment.

Immaturity

1. Is self centered
2. Has unrealistic expectations
3. Is overly reticent
4. Becomes unreasonable
5. Becomes irrational
6. Tends to hurt or do harm
7. Seeks revenge
8. Becomes jealous or envious
9. Become bitter and pessimistic
10. Displays tantrums
11. Expresses sarcasm and ridicule
12. Centered on self-love
13. Becomes defensive and antagonistic
14. Compromises on principle
15. Feels lonely and isolated
16. Compulsively needs to be liked
17. Violates the rights of others
18. Does not like self
19. Feels self pity
20. Develops a hostile personality

Maturity

1. Has openness to others
2. Accepts personal limitations
3. Values dialoguing and sharing
4. Has ability to compromise
5. Makes reasonable judgments
6. Promotes friendship/community
7. Has a sense of true forgiveness
8. Enjoys other's good fortune
9. Remains realistically optimistic
10. Has ability to deal with stress
11. Recognizes that life isn't easy
12. Has a generous love for others
13. Patiently endures injustices of life
14. Always follows principle
15. Feels fulfilled in life
16. Endures other's rejection
17. Respects the rights of others
18. Has a healthy love of self
19. Deals well with persecutors
20. Develops a loving personality

Only by growing in maturity will you be totally to love and thereby achieve a deep relationship with each other. This in turn is a positive indication that you are growing as the unique persons God created you to be.

***What are the clearest signs of immaturity in our individual lives?
* How can we help each other to become more mature?***

Growing as a Couple

As a couple you are called to grow and to mature together in order to live in such a way that, as revealed in Sacred Scripture, you are indeed “created in God’s image and likeness”. The following are some signposts to inspire you to become a wonderful and promising “we”.

- * Keeping your love growing - Passing from loving your partner for the sake of yourself to loving him or her for your partner’s sake.
- * Learning together - to communicate, to love, to relate to each other.
- * Avoiding what divides - Certain persons, addictions, events, things.
- * Searching for what unites - God, relatives, friends, sharing group.
- * Affirming what you hold in common - Faith, culture, needs, values.
- * Doing things together - Playing, singing, working, reading, and helping.
- * Negotiating your differences - Clarifying the issue; making a proposal; modifying or offering counterproposals; accepting and celebrating.
- * Creating a meaningful set of common criteria - Ideals, principles.
- * Setting goals and objectives together - concrete as well as spiritual.
- * Making serious decisions together - Absolutely refraining from premarital sex...
- * Praying together - Relating to God not just as individuals but as a couple, by belonging to a prayer group, weekly worshipping together, etc.

Practical Exercise

If you would like to find “common values”, to identify what is generally important to both of you - even though you may differ on particulars - you could choose from the following list your three top values, as well as three that you consider least important. For example: “Although we have different interests, personal development and education are important to both of us”.

Career:	One’s job (career, vocation) provides fulfillment.
Education:	Continual growth in knowledge and skills.
Education:	Continual growth in knowledge and skills.
Emotional health:	Solving emotional problems and having inner security.
Family and heritage:	Preserving family traditions and background.
Financial security:	Building financial resources for the future.
Generosity:	Responding generously to genuine needs of others.
Justice:	Fair and impartial treatment for all people.
Loyalty:	Maintaining established ties and commitments.
Morality:	Living by ethical standards.
Openness:	Being open and honest with others.
Originality:	Being one’s own, unique creative self.
Physical appearance:	Taking care of one’s personal looks.
Physical health:	Taking good care of one’s body.
Power:	Having authority or influence.
Religion:	Taking one’s religion seriously and living by one’s faith.
Social acceptance:	Being accepted and liked by others.
Sports, hobbies:	Special interests or activities.
Success and Achievement:	Being able to do one or more things really well.

Which are our common values?

- IX -

LONGING FOR HAPPINESS TOGETHER

Life is not just a concept, it is a reality. Your life is not a static reality; it is a source of tremendous potential to change, to grow and to improve. Human life is a mysterious journey toward a promised land called "**HAPPINESS**"

*** *What does it mean to you to be happy?***

- A momentary sensation of euphoria?
- A strong feeling of joy?
- A deep experience of peace?
- A sense of satisfaction with your life and work?
- A general feeling of well-being?
- A fulfilled desire?
- A dream that is coming true?
- A friendly and loving relationship?

*** *Is happiness an impossible dream?***

- Happiness is possible for everyone.
- But it is not something that occurs like magic
- It cannot be permanently acquired once and for all.
- Happiness is intertwined with effort and struggle.
- Its search is certainly an art.
- There is no such thing as a recipe for happiness.
- But there are some preconditions, like:

- ◇ Self-honesty ◇ Self-giving ◇ Self-respect
- ◇ Self-discipline
- ◇ Self-Understanding ◇ Self-denial ◇ Self-acceptance
- ◇ Self-openness ◇ Self-esteem ◇ Self-transcendence
- ◇ Faithfulness to one's own conscience
- ◇ Sincere quest for God.

All engaged couples want to become happily married. As a matter of fact, all share in the same dream to be like the fairy princes and princesses who "got married and lived happily ever after"; but few succeed consequently, millions of today's young people no longer believe that there *can* be happiness in marriage, and as a result, they don't want to get married.

What about you?

Toward a happy Marriage

Everyone is well aware that modern marriages last considerably less than “forever”. In about 50% of all marital unions, “I do” dissolves into “I don’t”, “I can’t”, or “I won’t”. Yet for every marriage which crumbles, another endures. Many of the longest running relationships not only survive, but thrive through the years. What’s the secret?

Scholars and successfully married couples agree that one of the keys to happiness in marriage lies in being aware of one’s desires and expectations about oneself, one’s partner, and mutual relationships. From that awareness you will have to discern which of those desires are realistic and which are not. Finally, you will be able to accept only the realistic ones and put to rest your old and foolish longings.

Once you have limited your desires to that which is real, you will find right within your lives the happiness you had hoped you would find elsewhere. Therefore, happiness in marriage is possible, but it takes real work, before and after the wedding day. Marriage cannot make anyone happy if he/she does not bring the ingredients for happiness into it. What are those ingredients? There is no magic formula for making marriage happier, but it is possible to identify the common characteristics of those happily married couples whose joy continues to increase.

How do happily married people think and behave? By:

- * Being personally honest with themselves.
- * Firmly believing in their personal and marriage potential.
- * Being seriously committed to making their marriage work, day by day.
- * Mutually trusting each other as best friends.
- * Being always ready to share their whole self with each other.
- * Courageously facing their crises, conflicts and problems together.
- * Knowing how to handle resentment, anger and jealousy wisely.
- * Sincerely accepting each other as they are and for what they are.
- * Wholeheartedly forgiving each other as soon as possible.
- * Periodically spending quality time having fun together.
- * Faithfully relating to God as individuals and as a couple.
- * Being constantly open, hospitable and reaching out.

*As I ponder the above ingredients for happiness in marriage
which ones do I feel we need most right now?*

Becoming a happy Couple

Is happiness possible in Marriage? People with no Faith say: "No!" Those who have a lively Faith say: "Yes!" I want to share with you the testimony of a Christian married couple, friends of mine, listening to JESUS of Nazareth about happiness:

"Happy are you the poor, for the reign of God is yours." (Luke 6:20) We wish to be capable of enjoying what we have whether it be a lot or less, without wishing always to have more; capable of being close to those that have less than us, of those that perhaps have nothing to offer us; ready always to share with others... Only then would God be our richness.

"Happy are the sorrowing, for they shall be consoled." (Matthew 5:4) We wish to be strong in accepting suffering - willing to confront difficult situations inside and outside our family. In that way we shall discover that God is our strength.

"Happy are the meek, for they shall inherit the land." (Matthew 5:4) We wish to be meek by excluding from our life all violence, and trying to be gentle and humble. Then we shall perceive that it is God who is imprinting that meekness in our love.

"Happy are they who hunger and thirst for holiness, for they shall have their fill." (Matt. 5:6)

We wish to feel hunger and thirst for justice - not being content with what is easy and requires less commitment, even if we are considered to be naive and dreamers. Solidarity belongs to Holiness.

"Happy are they who show mercy, for mercy shall be theirs." (Matt. 5:7)

We wish to be merciful - with hearts of understanding and of compassion capable of always reaching out to others. In that way we shall experience a God that receives compassionately and lovingly our own reality, against which we rebel so many times that we lose peace.

"Happy are the single-hearted, for they shall see God." (Matt. 5:8)

We wish to have a clean and transparent heart, that does not hide intentions, and shows only what is inside. In that way we shall perceive the glance of God that transcends us and shall feel the tranquility of knowing that we need hide nothing of our being from Him

"Happy too the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." (Matt. 5:9)

We wish to work for peace - struggling for it without rest in all the environments, starting with the nearest ones; without grudges and confrontations...creating the conditions so that all may live in mutual respect and love. Peace is the greatest gift that God offers to us.

"Happy are those persecuted for holiness sake, for the reign of God is theirs." (Matt. 5:10)

We wish that, when we are persecuted for our fidelity to God's Will, we do not fear being criticized or scorned because we are confident that we are living the type of life to which God calls us. He will be our most precious, greatest treasure and our greatest hope.

How can we become a happier Couple?

- X -
SPIRALING OUT

Despite the fact that you are called to become one, you are not an island. The author of the “Little Prince”, Saint Exupery, expresses it in a challenging way: “Love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking together in the same direction.”

Love is a mysterious energy, that only grows in proportion to the extent that it is shared. Love between two people before marriage is like a living spiral of sacred fire. If it is not shared with others, it will be desecrated and extinguished. If it is shared it grows and spreads widely.

The natural tendency of many of today’s engaged couples is to become isolated- to be together and to possess the maximum degree of privacy and intimacy just for themselves.

But there is a law of life: “When one cell becomes separated from the body, it dies.” You are not an island. You belong to different families and local civil and religious communities. You both are challenged and called together to lay the foundations for new families for a better world.

Christian theology, in recent years, has developed some interesting ideas about man and woman having a relationship which is a reflection of the Holy Trinity in the sense that even God could not exist in isolation and self-completeness.

Since God’s nature is love, it must be shared with other beings. And just as there are three persons in the Godhead (the Holy Trinity) so man was created “in the image of God” not as an isolated individual, but as a dyad - a man-woman pair - which later, with the birth of their child, becomes a trinity.

Consequently, openness is one of the major keys to liberate the tremendous Divine energy of love that is hidden within each engaged couple. And as long as engaged couples maintain healthy and balanced openness there is hope for the future.

How to Become a More Open Couple

I. Becoming aware of your social dimension and environment:

To move yourselves from an individualistic view of your premarital relationship to a realistic vision of your mission in your future within marriage and family in today's society.

In fact, it is within marriage and family where the key elements of your social dimension - authority, education, person to person communication and social awareness - are structured.

- Authority - by assuming responsibility
- Education - by learning values and attitudes
- Communication - by being able to share with others in all areas
- Social Awareness - by expressing sympathy and support for everybody

II. Participating actively in the solution of other peoples' problems and needs:

- * It is necessary to start from an awareness of each other's needs - as human beings, as persons, as students or workers, as members of one's family, as a child of God and as a citizen - by periodically reviewing your premarital relationship.
- * Next going on to an awareness of each other's families and relatives, being conscious of their needs- especially if they are aged, ill, or needy.
- * And then reaching out to your friends and your neighbors - again, especially the ones who are aged, ill, poor, needy, rejected, ignored or oppressed - by helping them to help themselves and by being the voice of the voiceless.

III. Peacemaking:

Knowing that true peace is the fruit of true justice, you may decide to be involved in the promotion of justice and peace around you. Also you might try always and everywhere to build bridges of dialogue and solidarity instead of walls of pride and competition. Remembering that:

- You are a "fountain" to refresh those who are thirsty.
- You are a "fire" to warm those who seek and need warmth.
- You are a "beacon" for those who search the way.
- You are a "road sign" to guide those who are lost.
- You should be a "sign of God's loving presence" in the world, for those who believe that God is dead.

IV. Belonging to a support group of engaged couples:

To encourage and challenge each other for a continuous formation, responsible involvement and effective service in the local civil as well as religious communities.

*Do I feel that one or both of us fail to reveal our true selves?
How can we improve our openness as an engaged couple?*

Becoming Witness of Love

To prevent you, as an engaged couple, from being caught in a vicious circle of two, you are challenged by today's society, and called by God to become a witness of genuine love. You must do this not just by words but especially by deeds, and always according to your particular gifts and charisma. How can you do this in a practical way? The following are some suggestions to encourage you in your reflection and sharing and, most of all, in your acting.

Corporal Needs

- * Hungry - by discovering where they are and feeding them.
- * Thirsty - by giving them drink when needed.
- * Naked - by clothing them with dignity.
- * Prisoners - by visiting them and assisting their families.
- * Homeless - by finding a shelter or sharing your home.
- * Sick - by visiting them, especially the disabled and terminally ill.
- * Dead - by attending their funerals, praying for them and their families.

Spiritual Needs

- * Admonishing the sinners through word and good example.
- * Instructing the ignorant by sharing with them gifts and time.
- * Counseling the confused and doubtful with wisdom and prayer.
- * Comforting the sorrowful by listening to them with one's heart.
- * Bearing wrongs patiently and with gentleness.
- * Forgiving injuries by restoring one's relationship to wholeness.
- * Praying for the living and the dead, both friends and enemies.

Looking at the suffering people we know, how can we, how should we, assist them?

TRANSCENDING COUPLE-NESS
BECOMING THREE (as Sacred Scripture indicates)
Marriage is a matter of three: Man, woman and God - the
Creator

Stop and Think about this please!!

This is not just another helpful suggestion for a more fruitful engagement period!

This is *the most important key* for those engaged couples who don't want to be trapped in a dead end street of an empty and dissatisfied "coupleness", but really want to walk forward together toward a united and open marriage and family life.

The *most important key*: because it is a **necessary key** dealing with the essence of love.

The *most important key*: because it is a **sacred key** dealing with faith, hope and holiness.

The *most important key*: because it is **secret key** dealing with a Transcendental Mystery

This is the forgotten or ignored dimension of life and love in today's secularistic culture. It is a fact that in our world-wide consumeristic society the majority of engaged couples are not concerned about the transcendental dimension of their engagement. They are overwhelmed by material and things and the technology that brings these about, thinking that these will bring them true happiness. But since they do not find time or desire to go beyond and consider their relationship with the Transcendental the real happiness that they desire continually eludes them- for in fact, as St. Augustine pointed out long ago: "Lord, our Hearts are restless until they rest in You".

What (or rather Who) is this Transcendental Being that guarantees the happiness that we see? Throughout history millions of people of Faith, unnumbered couples, have given ample witness through their life of joy that it is God! If you walk forward together: Always opening your premarital relationship to the Transcendental presence of God, you will discover God's hidden presence in your midst, as He has promised:

"Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst"

- Matthew 18:19 -

- I -
BELIEVING

Do we in fact believe, or even feel the need to believe, in the need for inviting God into our future life as a couple? What is faith all about?

St. Thomas Aquinas -major Christian theologian and philosopher defines faith as: "The act of the intellect when it assents to divine truth under the influence of the will moved by God through Grace."

Faith, according to the Sacred Scripture, is a complete assurance and certitude -an attitude of trust- in which a believer receives God's gift of salvation.

The classic example is Abraham whose faith was reckoned as righteousness. In fact, Abraham is a model of faith and trust. At a time when he and his wife Sarah were childless, God appeared to him in a vision and promised to give them a son from whom in time would spring a great people and: "Abraham put his trust in the Lord; and because of this the Lord was pleased with him and accepted him." (Genesis 15:1-5)

But "Faith without works is as dead as a body without breath" (James 2:26)

Do you really believe? It is possible to profess Faith with one's mouth without attempting in any way to put it into practice. Such a person is, in practice, an atheist.

Remember: Faith is a way of being, but it's also a way of doing.
Faith is an attitude of the whole person. It is one's personal answer to God.

How does one become a true believer?

Faith is the most precious of God's gifts, but we can make ourselves capable of receiving that by listening to God's word in the Bible with simplicity and humility, becoming like a child, as it were, in our acceptance of it.

God, the Mysterious “You”

“Is there a God?” “What is God like?” “Where is God?” “Who has seen God face to face?” “Is it possible to find God?” People everywhere and in every age continually ask these, questions. To deal with them at once, let us start by recalling the meaningful “Footprints” story.

“One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand, one belonging to him and the other to the Lord. When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very saddest times in his life. This really bothered him and he questioned the Lord about it:

“Lord, You said that once I decided to follow YOU, You would walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don’t understand why, when I needed You most, You would leave me.”

The Lord replied, *“My precious, precious child, I love you and I never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.”*

Throughout the centuries we have the living testimony millions of men and women that they had indeed experienced God, and that there is no “other” (or “YOU”, if you will) that can compare to Him in filling our hearts with joy and with hope- with a real purpose in life.

Blaise Pascal, a French mathematician, physicist and religious philosopher, affirms:

“There are only three kinds of persons:

- * Those who serve God- having found Him;
- * Those that are occupied in seeking Him- not succeeding in finding Him.
- * Those who live without seeking Him- never succeeding in finding Him.

The first are reasonable and happy.
Those in between are unhappy and unreasonable.
The last are foolish and unhappy.”

Among the above three kinds of people, where do we stand individually and as a couple?

- II -
SEARCHING FOR GOD TOGETHER

We have lost God!

A hundred years ago, a German philosopher, F.Nietzsche, in his book "Zarathustra" affirmed:

"God is dead!"

In our century, the famous American psychologist Eric Fromm, in his address to the American orthopsychiatric association, in San Francisco, April 16, 1966, said:

"Theologians and philosophers have been saying for a century that '*God is dead*', but what we confront is the possibility that '*Man is dead*', transformed into a thing - a producer, a consumer, an isolator, or other things."

In other words, *God is alive because He cannot die*. He is Himself, the Source of Life. What happened is that we humans have lost Him in the atheism of our hearts. That is, even though we affirm that we believe in Him, in practice, we deny Him. We live as if He did not exist, preoccupied with what we have or and do, rather than with *who we are*. We have forgotten our being, and consequently, we have lost God, our Creator.

If this is your situation, what can you do?

You could do as those two people who got lost in a jungle, looking for the way out. They met each other and realized that they both had the same problem and need. Then they decided to seek the way out together. Of course, they found it.

In the jungle of today's society, the need to search for truth, love, justice, joy and peace is common to everyone. Also common to everybody is the need for an Absolute and Infinite Reality - GOD.

Why not decide to search together, hand in hand as a couple, either to find the God who has been lost, or to deepen your relationship with the God with Whom you have always had a personal relationship. Just keep reading and sharing the following pages with each other to discover how this can be done.

Tobiah and Sarah

When a fiancé and a fiancée search for God together, they will find the key not just to a successful engagement but to a blessed marriage and home as well. This is precisely what happened to Tobiah and Sarah. Have you ever read their inspiring story? You may find it in the Bible. It is an old, old story, but one that with a message that still offers encouragement and a meaningful challenge to today's engaged couples.

Sarah's Plight	Tobit 3:7 - 10
Sarah's Prayer	Tobit 3:11 - 15
Tobit's Advice to his son Tobiah	Tobit 4:1 - 21
The Unknown Guide	Tobit 5:1 - 23
The Journey	Tobit 6:1 - 19
Marriage of Tobiah and Sarah	Tobit 7:1 - 17
Night of the Wedding	Tobit 8:1 - 9
The Day After	Tobit 8:9 - 21

Premarital spirituality: This is the “*secret key*” that Tobiah and Sarah had, but which many of today's engaged couples are lacking. In fact, a couple without spirituality - harmony not only with self, with the partner and with others, but mainly harmony with God - cannot survive.

A couple without communication and a relationship with God, is like a body without a spirit. It dies! The Bible tells us that this is what happened to the “first couple” in History (Adam and Eve). And unfortunately this is the real situation of most of today's couples. They want to be happy by being just “the two of us”. They have not discovered that in order to be a happy couple, it is not enough to be just two - a man and a woman - but it is necessary to be three - a man, a woman and God!

What must we do to discover this important truth, and live in accord with it?

Ways to Reach God Together

How do we go about searching for God together? How do we discover the “*secret key*” of premarital spirituality, and consequently become “three” with God? Here are some suggestions.

1. *Having a personal* communication and relationship with God.
2. *Listening* to each other with your mind as well as with your heart.
3. *Practicing Reconciliation* as soon as you need it.
4. *Praying Together*
5. *Accepting* each other as you really are.
6. *Encouraging* each other’s self-fulfillment and personal growth.
7. *Helping* each other to have discipline and self-control.
8. *Reviewing* your family communication and relationship.
9. *Being open* to each other’s relatives, friends, and the needy.
10. *Discovering God’s Plan* about Marriage and Family by:
 - a) *Experiencing* the Engaged Encounter or some marriage preparation course.
 - b) *Sharing* with married couples and other engaged couples.
 - c) *Reading and Commenting* on matters related to Engagement.
 - d) *Listening to the Word of God* and sharing it together.
 - e) *Searching together* for *Jesus* of Nazareth, the only one who has ever said:

“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life!” (Jn 14:6)
 - f) Having a spiritual advisor, as a couple
 - g) Doing things together for others, especially the needy.
 - h) Forming a Group or Community of engaged couples.
11. *Making a spiritual retreat together* before getting married.
12. *Preparing together*, with balance, all things related to the wedding.

Let us try to put down on paper our experience of God as an individual and as a couple.

- III -
PRAYING AS A COUPLE

One of most beautiful spiritual experiences a person can have is to pray together with another person. When you encounter the depths of another in prayer, you enter into the presence of God. This kind of prayer involves the creation of intimacy between two persons. This is the prayer of heart speaking to heart. Saint Gregory the Great Affirms: "Friendship is a union of souls and a joining of hearts".

Why do most of today's couples never become true friends, even when they are married? Why is it that, even when they become one body, they never seem to realize that their souls are far away from each other? What is the source of the dissatisfaction, emptiness and frustration that they feel, and which leads so many of them into a life of separation and divorce? The answer is, clearly, that they are caught up in a vicious circle of just the two of them. It would seem that they need a miracle to break this vicious circle. And Who but a loving and powerful God can perform such a miracle? Therefore it is imperative that they turn to Him with trusting hearts, believing in the promise of Jesus, the Son of the Living God:

"Again I tell you, if two of you join your voices on earth to pray for anything whatever, it shall be granted you by my Father in Heaven" and He explains why, because:

"Where two or three are gathered in My Name, there am I in their midst."

(Matthew 18:19 - 20)

Praying together will involve:

- * Entering into your thought, experiences, and feelings.
- * Loving each other as both gifted and broken in your uniqueness
- * Giving you the opportunity to give and receive forgiveness.
- * Experiencing healing, intimacy, joy and peace.
- * Encountering God's Love alive in the depths of another's heart.

Therefore, when you experience, loneliness, frustration, confusion, sadness or unhappiness, try praying together in ways that we will henceforth suggest:

Praying

To believe is to pray. Faith leads to prayer as a river to the sea. In much the same way that food nourishes our bodies, so does prayer nourish our faith. If you truly believe, you will pray. Praying is a gift from God. You cannot pray unless God opens your mind, moves your heart and attracts you to Him. St. Paul expressed it this way: "The spirit, too, helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought; but the spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groaning that cannot be expressed in speech" (Romans 8:26 - 27)

What is Prayer

Prayer is not a magic tool whereby we can change God's mind and heart. Rather it is His gift to change our minds, hearts and wills. The key attitude in praying is not to be concerned about one's own benefit, but simply to remain in God's presence with humility of heart, trust and living faith.

Prayer is a mysterious desire - a desire to meet with God; to unite with Him in love; to find in God peace, joy and happiness. It is the intimate meeting of a *finite* being with *the Infinite* Being. It is a conversation of a poor person with the merciful God.

Prayer is the raising of one's heart and mind toward the mystery of God. It is each one's response to the voice of God that is constantly echoing in our souls, inviting us to unity and peace, in the embrace of His love.

Prayer was and has remained a mystery to each person who has ever achieved a deep and lasting spiritual impact. It has the ability to accomplish more than one could imagine. It offers an awesome power and might. It is the key that opens the final door of wisdom.

There is no better way to come to understand prayer than to actually pray. Pray and you will become an expert on prayer. Without prayer there is can be no spiritual life. Prayer is a bridge between two distant shores - heaven and earth, time and eternity.

How does one learn to pray?

- * Falling on one's knee, folding one's hands, and saying to God: "Our Father Who Art in Heaven..."
- * Praying humbly and patiently.
- * Experiencing prayer as a peaceful meeting with God.
- * Praying with the heart. It means having a desire to pray. When you do something with the heart, you do it with love and trust.
- * Setting time aside each day when you can, in peace and humility, meet with God, the Creator.

As a Couple

Although a personal relationship with God is essential and irreplaceable, for a couple who is called to become one, in marriage, it is not enough. The reason, according to the Sacred Scriptures is simple and clear: “Have you not read that the Creator from the beginning made them male and female and that He said, ‘This is why a man must leave his father and mother, and cling to his wife and the *two become one body*. They are no longer two, therefore, but one body. So then, what God has united, man must not divide.”
(Matthew 19:4 - 7)

Based on the experiences in my ministry with married couples, I have realized that most spouses pray as individuals and seldom, if ever, as couples. And the same is true of engaged couples. Why does this happen? I think that one of the deepest reasons is the individualistic mentality about Faith, God and religion that so many people have. Sometimes the difficulty arises from the fact that partners have different religious beliefs, or belong to different cultures. But how can you relate and communicate with God as a couple?

Three Practical Steps

They are gradual - you cannot take the next step without fully experiencing the previous one. The unconditional departing point of each one of these steps is to develop a personal relationship and communication with God. Without this personal experience, the sharing will be superficial, meaningless and empty.

First: Sharing a Biblical Passage: by reading it together, having a short period of silence and afterwards, sharing with each other your thoughts, feelings and personal reactions to the Word of God. No comments. Just a respectful and active listening with the heart to each other in the presence of God.

Second: Sharing Your Personal Prayer Life: by exchanging with each other your personal relationship with God and your living experiences about life, love, peace, justice, callings, dreams, crises, truth, gifts, good, evil, temptations, ideals, beauty and spiritual needs.

Third: Practicing Mutual Exhortation: by dialoguing in God’s presence about each other’s personal commitments in order to encourage each other to live and grow according to God’s Will.

You could follow this simple outline

1. Sitting together, spend some time in silence, to become aware of God’s presence within you.
2. Listen together to a short passage from the Bible, while one of you slowly reads it aloud.
3. Pause for a few minutes and let God’s Word silently sink in.
4. Tell each other, briefly, what You feel God is saying to you through that Word.
5. More silence.
6. Speak spontaneously and aloud to God, or say a personal prayer.

- IV -
LISTENING TO & SHARING GOD'S WORD

God is not something that you can buy. He knocks at your door and speaks to you.

God speaks to us in many mysterious and marvelous ways:

- | | |
|--|-----------------------|
| * Through Creation | - His Work |
| * Through our conscience | - His Voice |
| * Through the circumstances of our lives | - His Will |
| * Through suffering | - His Mysterious Love |
| * Through the needs of our neighbors | - His Call |
| * Through the Bible | - His Living and |

Inspired Word

The Bible is the key to confirm what He is telling us through other ways.

What is the Bible?

The word "Bible" comes from a Greek word that means "Books". It is an inspired collection of writings about God, whose author is God Himself.

The Bible is the best selling and most distributed book of all time. The American Bible society estimates it has distributed; more than 3,000,000,000 Bibles since its founding in 1816.

The Bible: has been translated into about 1,850 languages since the invention of printing.

The Bible: is the living word of God. in which you can see yourself as if in a mirror.

The Bible: can really be the best portrait of yourselves. In fact, the most outstanding men and women in the history of salvation, have found and experienced God in their lives, by listening to Him in the Bible.

Now let's consider what the Bible means, or should mean, to you.

Listening

There are millions of people throughout the world who, although they may possess a bible, never actually read it mainly because they feel that they do not understand it. Admittedly for many it is not an easy book to read; but the fact is that it is not simply another book to be read. It is the Living Word of God which must be *listened to*. We read in the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible:

* “The Lord God says, ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the One who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty!’” (Revelation 1:8)

* “Here I stand, knocking at the door. If anyone hears Me calling and opens the door, I will enter his house and have supper with him, and he with Me.” (Revelation 3:20)

How to read the Bible so that you will be *able* to listen to God’s Word?

Suggested Ways

1. The search for God can be likened to when you receive a visitor. You invite him or her to come in, you sit down, and you politely listen. This could be your in attitude reading the Bible, and looking for His Word.
2. You can read just with your eyes and with a wandering mind; but every effort must be made to read attentively with your head, and listen with your heart and with your soul. This is the best way to read the Word of God.
3. Set aside time for Bible reading. Have quality time.
4. Before opening the Bible, pray to God with confidence. He will purify and open your spirit-mind, heart and will.
5. After reading with humility and honesty, ask yourself: “What is God telling me?” Unlike the words of men, God’s words are never empty.
6. When it comes to picking a Bible, you may choose one of the following editions: The New English Bible; the New American Bible; the Jerusalem Bible; the New American Standard Bible; or Today’s English Version (the Good News for Modern Man).

What can you do if you do not understand what you are reading, even though you have tried? Then be glad and not saddened, because you are challenged by God’s Word. So listen and listen again and again. People are happy when they are drinking. They are not saddened because they cannot exhaust the spring. Let the spring of God’s Word quench your thirst and not your thirst quench the spring. The Living Word of God in the Bible is a mysterious treasure. Whenever you discover some part of this treasure, don’t think you have therefore exhausted God’s Word.

Are we ready to make a commitment to make the Word of God a part of our lives?

How to Share

For a man and a woman who are preparing themselves to become a happily married couple it is very important, during the engagement time, to make a practice of sharing one another's personal listening to the Word of God. The following are some suggested ways.

Together

1. Find a quiet Spot. Choose a comfortable seat. Give each other a sign of peace. Offer a short prayer. Choose one Bible passage. For instance Luke 8:4 - 15
2. Open your Bible. Read and reflect, in silence, about the passage. You may underline whatever especially strikes your heart. (5 minutes)
3. Write in your Prayer Note Book. You can write down your thoughts, your feelings, your discoveries, or simply your answer to the general question, "What struck me most in this Biblical passage?" or "What do I feel that the Lord telling me?" (10 minutes)
4. Sharing Time. As a personal gift to your partner, share whatever you want with one another and listen to one another from the heart. (10-20 minutes)
5. Give thanks to God. Out loud and spontaneously.

By mail when the two of you cannot get together.

1. Share a Biblical Passage. It could be one of the readings from Sunday's liturgy.
2. Agree on a Date, over the Phone too. A week day or a weekend day, for personal reading, attentive reflecting, listening with the heart, and faithful writing in your Prayer Note Book.
3. Writing a Love Letter. The content of this letter has to be mainly your sharing about your personal reading, listening and reflecting on the Word of God.
4. Pray for each other every Day. To be faithful to this very important reading, listening and sharing.

Practicing Spiritual Retreats

1. Alone With other single people. Preferably overnight retreats.
2. As a Couple With other engaged couples, like an Engaged Encounter.
3. Together With other people. Mainly spiritual retreats.

***What is my favorite person, passage or sentence of the Bible?
Why?***

- V -

DISCOVERING GOD'S PLAN FOR MARRIAGE

Have you ever asked yourself:

- * What is marriage all about?
- * What constitutes the essence of marriage?
- * What is the main purpose of marriage?
- * Is marriage meaningful and worthwhile?
- * Is marriage just a human institution built upon casual circumstances- psychological, sociological and economic - or is it a divine and sacred institution?
- * Are a husband and wife absolutely independent and self-sufficient in marriage, or must they be strongly rooted in God and dependent on Him, who is their Creator?
- * Is there a divine plan for marriage? If so, what is *God's vision* for marriage and family?
- * How important is it for a husband and wife to live according to God's vision and plan?
- * Do I believe that God does want married people to be happy?
- * Is happiness in marriage possible without God?
- * Are there some guidelines for a healthy and happy married life in the Bible?

To find the answers to each one of these or similar questions, try to read the first three chapters of the Bible with your mind, your heart and your soul.

Let's take the time right now to read those chapters.

The Bible's Amazing Revelation

God's revelation about marriage and family appears in the first pages of the Bible. According to Scripture scholars, there are two parallel stories or complementary accounts about Creation.

The First Account of Creation (Genesis 1:1 - 31)

* "In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth." Therefore *God is the Creator.*

* "God said, 'Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves, and let them be the masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wind beasts and all the reptiles that crawl upon the earth'. *Marriage is the culmination of God's creative work.*"

* "God created man in the image of Himself, in the image of God He created Him, male and female He created them." *Marriage is the image of God.*

The Second Account of Creation (Genesis 2:4 - 25)

* "God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone. I will make him a helpmate...' so God made the man fall into a deep sleep. And while he slept, He took one of his ribs and enclosed the flesh. God built the rib He had taken from the man into a woman, and brought her to the man." *Marriage is a community of Life and Love.*

* "The man exclaimed: 'This at last is bone from my bones, and flesh from my flesh! This is to be called woman, for this was taken from man.' This is why a man leaves his father and mother and joins himself to his wife, and they become one body." *Marriage is a mystery of communion and unity.*

Let's stop to consider:

If from the beginning marriage was so perfect, how can we account for so much unhappiness, infidelity, separation, divorce and breakdown in so many marriages and families throughout history and especially in this present day?

What happened in the beginning? You will find the answer to this if you read the third chapter of the Bible, Gen. 3:1 - 24. It is about the temptation that the original couple had to separate themselves from God, and become independent and self-sufficient; how they disobeyed God's Will for them, and the consequences of that rebellion.

In line with the above Bible readings, what do I think is the secret key to a healthy, strong and happy marriage?

Discerning God's Call

Each of us arrives on this planet with a call from God. To answer this inner call is to ignite the spark of divinity in us and find meaning in our lives. The tragedy is that millions of today's people fail to find meaning to their lives precisely because they fail to discover that God is calling them to be happy through a marriage and family life that is lived in accord with His Plan for them. In other words, if a man and a woman want to succeed in their marriage, they need to come to realize that God is calling them to live marriage and family according to His Plan, and not the plan that the world has decided on for them.

What about you? Are you convinced that God is calling you to live marriage according to His Plan? For our own future happiness, how can we become convinced that this is true? Hopefully, some of the following points can help you.

1. Theologians teach us that God, ordinarily, does not call us directly, but indirectly through "signs".
2. Therefore, to come to know God's Will, we have to correctly interpret those "signs".
3. The "signs" may come from our nature, or from events of life.
4. The interpretation of these "signs" can never run contrary to nature or to Revelation.
5. The Ten Commandments and the Evangelical Councils are an excellent reference to discern God's Will.
6. The practice of genuine virtues - like honesty, obedience, chastity, prudence, justice, fortitude, moderation and so on - carry the Will of God within themselves.
7. An important source for Catholics to discover God's Will is the Magisterium of the Church.
8. Another ordinary source to discern God's Will in a marriage vocation is the advice of one's parents and relatives, as well as the advice of a good counselor - like a priest or an experienced person.
9. One more good way to discern God's call for marriage and family is to participate, together, in Cana Conferences, Spiritual Retreats for Engaged Couples or in an Engaged Encounter.

Why am I convinced that our marrying one another is what God wants for us?

- VI -
EXPERIENCING GOD'S LOVE

Let's ponder the following "Good News" of love presented to us in the Bible:

"Beloved, let us love one another because love is of God."

"Everyone who loves is begotten of God and has knowledge of God."

"The man without love has no knowledge of God, for God *is* love."

"God's love was revealed in our midst in this way:
He sent His only Son into the world that we might have Life through Him."

Love, then consists in this:
Not that we have loved God, but that He has loved us
and has sent His son as an offering for our sins.

Beloved, if God has loved us so,
we must have the same love for one another.

No one has ever seen God
Yet if we love one another God dwells in us
and His love is brought to perfection in us..."
(1 John, 4:7 - 12)

"If anyone says, 'My love is fixed on God',
yet hates his brother, he is a liar.

One who has no love for the brother
he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

The commandment we have from Him is this:
Whoever loves God must also love His brother."
(1John, 4:20 - 21)

Test about God's Love

This is a time for serious reflection:

It would be great if you both, after personally reading the previous page, reflect about each one of the following questions, write in your note book, and afterwards share it.

1. What kind of experience of God's Love have I had in my personal history?
2. Is the revelation of "God's Love" in the Bible great news for me? Why, or why not?
3. What do I think and feel about the Biblical affirmation: "*God is Love*"?
4. What are some positive signs that we truly love each other?
5. Do I believe that our love has its source in God? Why or why not?
6. What is my personal reaction to the following words:
"If we love one another, God Dwells in us and His Love is brought to perfection"?
7. What can we do to deepen our love in the Lord even before marriage?
8. What is my understanding of the following words:
"God's Love was revealed in our midst in this way: He sent His only Son to the world *that we might have life through Him.*"
9. Do we depend on God's Presence in our midst; or are we building our lives upon purely human endeavors?
10. Can we apply to our own lives the following words.
"If anyone says, 'my love is fixed on God', yet hates his brother, he is a liar"?
11. How can we apply to our lives the following words: "Whoever loves God must his brother."

Being Witnesses of God's Love

There are many people in the world today who say that they do not believe in God, but neither do they believe in love. The fact is that they may have never experienced love in their lives. For there is no doubt that it is precisely people who haven't experienced love in their personal lives that have the most difficulty in believing in God. They desperately need someone close to them to be a witness of God's love by loving them unconditionally.

Unconditional love; love without limit; a permanent and total acceptance: This is the way God loves us! And this is the way God wants us to love each other. And we can love in this way if we really believe in Him. Unconditional love is precisely the kind of proof needed by those who do not believe in God. The following are some of the "signs" of unconditional love we can give.

At home

- * Accepting each member of the family as he/she is.
- * Being permanently open to one and all.
- * A constant effort to both give and receive.

To each other

- * Being totally respectful, honest and sincere with one another.
- * Accepting each other as each one is, and helping him/her.
- * Giving and receiving forgiveness whenever necessary.

To society

- * Expressing one's sympathy and support for whoever may need it.
- * Always serving others to the best of one's ability.
- * Being the voice of those who don't have one.

***How can we become witnesses of God's Love in our homes
with each other and in society?***

- VII -
BECOMING THREE

Many people wonder: “Is God at our side?” The answer to that question lies in the answer to the next logical question: “Are we at God’s side?”

The Bible assures us over and over again that God indeed is constantly at our side, no matter what the circumstances. And if we take the effort to make ourselves conscious of it, we cannot help but experience the truth of that revelation.

*“God is our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in distress.”
Therefore we fear not, though the earth be shaken and mountains plunge into the depths of the sea; though its waters rage and foam and the mountains quake at its surging.*

*The Lord of hosts is with us our stronghold is the God of Jacob.
There is a stream whose round lets gladden the city of God,
the holy dwelling of the most high.
God is in its midst; it shall not be disturbed: God will help it at the break of dawn.*

Though nations are in turmoil, kingdoms totter, His Voice resounds, the earth melts away. The Lord of hosts is with us; our stronghold is the God of Jacob.

Come! Behold the deeds of the Lord, the astounding things He has wrought on earth.

He has stopped wars to the end of the earth: the bow He breaks; the splinters He spears; He burns the shields with fire.

*Desist! And confess that I am God, exalted among the nations, exalted upon the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us; our stronghold is the God of Jacob.”
(Psalm 46)*

The question remains then: “Are we with God, or against Him”

Jesus of Nazareth
The Son of the living God

God is the Mystery of Mysteries. Yet the Bible assures us once again that we can encounter Him in our midst? Let's read and listen:

"The word became flesh and made His dwelling among us." (John 1:14)
"Yes, God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him may not die but may have eternal life." (John 3:16)

Who is this "Only Son of God?", "The Word who became flesh" that the Bible speaks about? Again we need to open the Sacred Scriptures, and read, reflect and listen with the heart:

"Jesus came to Nazareth where He had been reared, and entering the Synagogue on the Sabbath as He was in the habit of doing, He stood up to do the reading. When the look of the prophet Isaiah was handed Him, He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore He has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and release to prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord. 'All in the Synagogue and their eyes fixed on Him. Then He began by saying to them: 'Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.'"

(Luke 4:16 - 21)

"Jesus asked His disciples this question: 'Who do the people say that I am?' They replied, 'Some say John the baptizer, others Elijah, still other Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.' 'And you' He said to them, 'Who do you say that I am?' 'You are the Messiah', Simon Peter answered, 'The Son of the living God.' Jesus replied, 'Blest are you, Simon Son of John! No mere man has revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father.'" (Matthew 16:13 - 17)

Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of the living God, tells about himself:

- * *"I am the Light of the world!" (John 9:5)*
- * *"I am the door!" (John 10:9)*
- * *"I am the good shepherd!" (John 10:11)*
- * *"I am the way, and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but through me." (John 14:6)*
- * *"I am the vine, you are the branches. He who lives in Me and I in him, will produce abundantly, for apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)*

Does Jesus of Nazareth occupy a place in our lives?

HOW TO BECOME THREE

Breaking the vicious circle of two, and become three with the Lord by:

* Listening to the Lord and opening your relationship to Him: This is His prophecy in the book of Revelation: *“Here I stand, knocking at the door. If anyone hears me calling and opens the door, I will enter his house and have supper with him, and he with me. I will give the victor the right to sit with me on my throne, as I myself won the victory and took my seat beside my Father on His throne.”* (Revel. 3:20 - 21)

* Being faithful to the Lord. As He promised to His disciples: *“Know that I am with you always, until the end of the world.”* (Mark 28:20)

* Gathering in the name of Jesus of Nazareth and pray. It is His promise: *“If two of you join your voices on earth to pray for anything whatever, it shall be granted you by my Father in heaven. Where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in their midst.”* (Matthew 18:19 - 20)

* Inviting Him as the two disciples of Emmaus did: *“Two of them were making their way to a village named Emmaus seven miles distant from Jerusalem, discussing as they went all that had happened. In the course of their lively exchange, Jesus approached them and began to walk along with them. However, they were restrained from recognizing Him.*

“Jesus said to them, ‘What are you discussing as you go your way?’...They said: ‘All those that had to do with Jesus of Nazareth, a Prophet powerful in word and deed in the eyes of God and all the people, how, our chief priests and leaders delivered Him up to be condemned to death, and crucified. We were hoping that Jesus of Nazareth was the one who would set Israel free. Besides all this, today, the third day since these things happened, some women of our group have just brought us some astonishing news. They were at the tomb before dawn and failed to find His body, but returned with the tale that they had seen a vision of angels who declared He was alive. Some of our number went to the tomb and found it to be just as the women said, but Him they did not see.

Then Jesus said to them,, ‘What little sense you have! How slow you are to believe all that the prophets have announced! Did not the Messiah have to undergo all this so as to enter into His glory? Beginning, then, with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted for them every passage of scripture which referred to Him. By now they were near the village to which they were going, and Jesus acted as if He were going farther. But they pressed Him; ‘Stay with us. It is nearly evening...’ So Jesus went in to stay with them.

When He had seated Himself with them to eat, He took bread, pronounced the blessing, then broke the bread and began to distribute it to them, with that their eyes were opened and they recognized Him; Whereupon He vanished from their sight. They said to one another, ‘Were not our hearts burning inside us as He talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?’” (Luke 24:1 - 35)

What can we do to break the vicious circle of two and become three with the Lord?

- VIII -
GETTING MARRIED “IN THE LORD”

Marriage

Marriage came to be considered sacred by the early Christians. It was officially declared a Sacrament by church authorities in 1438 at the council of Florence. Its Sacramental quality has been reviewed and reaffirmed by the church through the centuries, especially in 1965 at the second Vatican Council. Today it is generally recognized that marriage between Christians is a sacrament.

What’s a sacrament?

Theologians describe Sacraments as meaningful and effective signs, made sacred by Christ, to show His saving presence in the world, and to help us reach a closer union with God.

What is the sacrament of matrimony?

It is a covenant -a solemn, unconditional and unbreakable promise between a Christian man and woman totally committed to each other through Jesus Christ. It involves a permanent partnership of life and love. This involves being faithful to one another, sharing life and love together, being united for life “in the Lord”.

Sacramental Marriage

This differs essentially and significantly from civil marriage.

Civil Marriage

This is a conditional and temporary contract that can be legally canceled. It concerns material goods, rights and duties. It may exclude rights of children. It originates from civil law. What constitutes the essential difference between a civil marriage and a Sacramental marriage is that the latter involves an unconditional love between husband and wife -sealed by Christ the Lord. Just as God does not stop loving us even when we are unlovable, and even when we reject or betray Him, so too a couple must determine to unconditionally love one another. Obstacles will inevitably arise; but when partners love each other “In the Lord”, there is no obstacle that cannot be overcome.

Matrimony: Sacrament of Hope

Hope is one of the values that we humans need most, especially in today's chaotic society. Do you think, marriage, lived "in the Lord" -according to God's Plan and Jesus' Commandment of mutual love- is a clear and prophetic sign of hope for today and tomorrow's world? If you don't think so, read carefully the following quotation of Pope John Paul II and share it with each other. Afterwards, try to find, among the couples you know, the ones you believe have lived, or are living, in accordance with the spirit of the words of John Paul II. You will find more than one!

Jesus Christ and the sacrament of matrimony

"The communion between God and His people finds its definitive fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the bridegroom who loves and gives Himself as the Savior of Humanity, uniting it to Himself as His Body. He reveals the original truth of marriage, the truth of the 'beginning', and, freeing man from his hardness of heart, He makes man capable of realizing this truth in its entirety. This revelation reaches its definitive fullness in the gift of love which the word of God makes to humanity in assuming a human nature, and in the sacrifice which Jesus Christ makes of Himself on the Cross for His Bride, the Church.

In this sacrifice there is entirely revealed that Plan which God has imprinted on the humanity of man and woman since their creation, the marriage of baptized persons thus becomes a real symbol of that New and Eternal Covenant sanctioned in the blood of Christ. The Spirit which the Lord pours forth gives a new heart, and renders man and woman capable of loving one another as Christ has loved us. Conjugal love reaches that fullness to which it is interiorly ordained, conjugal charity, which is the proper and specific way in which the spouses participate in and are called to live the very charity of Christ, who gave Himself on the Cross. In a deservedly famous page, Tertullian has well expressed the greatness of this conjugal life in Christ and its beauty:

'How can I ever express the happiness of the marriage that is joined together by the Church, strengthened by an offering, sealed by a blessing, announced by angels and ratified by the Father? How wonderful the bond between two believers, with a single hope, a single desire, a single observance, a single service! They are both brethren and fellow servants; there is no separation between them in spirit or flesh. In fact they are truly two in one flesh, and where the flesh is one, one is the spirit. (Tertullian, Ad Uxorem, II, VIII, 6 - 8)

By virtue of the Sacramentality of their marriage, spouses are bound to one another in the most profoundly indissoluble manner. Their belonging to each other is the real representation, by means of the Sacramental sign of the very relationship of Christ with the Church. Spouses are therefore the permanent reminder to the Church of what happened on the Cross, they are for one another and for the children witnesses to the salvation in which the Sacrament makes them share. "John Paul II on the Family." (#13)

Do I foresee our future marriage as being a sign of hope? Why?

Called by God to Marriage

Marriage, in the light of Christian theology, is a “Grace” more than a choice. In other words, marriage is a vocation not because man and woman feel a natural mutual attraction - everybody does- but because it is God’s call, as we may read in Ephesians 1:3-4, *“God has bestowed on us, in Christ, every spiritual blessing in the heavens! God chose us in Him before the world began, to be holy and blameless in His sight, to be full of love.”*

“Covenant” in Christian marriage is a relationship akin to the Covenant that binds Jesus to the Church, as we read in Ephesians 5:25-27: *“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loves the Church. He gave Himself up for her to make her holy, purifying her in the bath of water by the power of the word, to present to Himself a glorious Church, holy and immaculate, without stain or wrinkle or anything of that sort.”* Therefore, the engagement is a very important time that has to be lived as a “Grace” and “in Grace”. Particularly, as a time to search for one’s vocation. In other words, to discern God’s Will. The following questions could help you in your vocational discernment.

- * Do you and I feel called to marriage?
- * What are the positive or negative signs in each one of us?
- * Is the Lord calling us to a Sacramental marriage?
- * Which is the main reason for saying “yes” or “no”?
- * Are we called to get married to each other?
- * Which some clear indications that we seem to be meant for each other?
- * Do we really accept each other as we really are?
- * Do we feel God’s call for an unconditional love?
- * Do we feel God’s call for a total unity?
- * Which are our concrete difficulties at this time?
- * Do both of us see marriage as God’s call “pro-life”?
- * Have we decided to become responsible parents?
- * Do we believe Christian marriage is a call to holiness?
- * Are we ready to live our future marriage according to God’s Law?
- * Is our engagement period in fact a time of “Grace” for us?
- * Have we chosen Jesus Christ as our only Lord and Savior?
- * Do we have difficulties in relating to one another in God’s Grace?
- * What are those difficulties?
- * Do we pray individually? Do we ever pray as a couple?
- * Why or why not?
- * Do we frequent the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist?
- * Do we have a spiritual guide?

- IX -

TOWARD CELEBRATION OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

A “wedding” takes an hour; a “marriage” takes a lifetime. But the celebration of a wedding is in fact the starting point of your entire married life. Therefore, the preparation for this vitally significant day is one of the more important tasks of your whole life.

Nowadays the term “Church Wedding” is often used merely to designate a marriage ceremony which takes place in church, in contrast to one that takes place before a civil magistrate. Therefore, unfortunately, a “Church Wedding”, in the minds of many, is a reflection of social values rather than an explicit statement about religious beliefs which must be at the heart of every Christian marriage.

This current misperception emphasizes the importance of understanding the real meaning of being married “in Christ”, whether the marriage takes place in a family setting - as it probably would have in the first century - or among a community of believers in the presence of a Church representative -as is the case today.

The early Church understood marriage in relation to salvation and the re-establishment of all things “in Christ”. Their belief was strongly rooted in the Sacred Scriptures. Paul, indeed, in his letter to Ephesians sees marriage among Christians, not only as a divine institution but as a meaningful symbol of the intimate relationship of the love between Christ and His Church.

“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cling to his wife and the two shall be made unto one’. This is a great mystery; I mean that it refers to Christ and the Church.” (Ephes. 5:31 - 32)

In other words, the marriage of Christ and His church is the model for Christian spouses. Therefore, whenever a man and a woman promise their lives to each other before Christ and the church, the Spirit promised by Jesus breathes life into their hearts and minds.

They realize in a special way the fulfillment of the prophecy of Ezekiel:

“A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you.” (Ezekiel 36:26 - 27)

Definitely, the day of a wedding is as important as the day of a baptism, or of a priestly ordination; It cannot be taken lightly!

Encouraging Testimony

Ordination to the Priesthood takes several years of serious preparation. What about the celebration of Marriage? Is it something that can be rushed into? The following is the testimony of a Christian couple.

“John and I had known each other for some time before we began to date. At the time, both of us were seeking to grow in our relationship with the Lord and to discover His will for our lives through daily prayer. During several months of dating, our attraction and love for one another deepened. Our decision to marry came not only from that mutual love, but also from a clear assurance that this was God’s plan for us.

“Our likes and dislikes about weddings and receptions had been formed pretty much by what we had seen in the weddings of friends and relatives. As we began to plan our wedding, the need for the Lord’s guidance and the Lord’s perspective became increasingly apparent. Family members, friends, brides’ magazines, and other commercial interests began to encourage us to make this an emotional and self-centered time. We were subjected to a variety of pressures to make this a ‘perfect’ wedding and ‘ideal’ home.

“Prayer enabled us to resist temptations to be concerned only with how everything would look and sound to others. The Lord helped us to see that this was a period for deeper prayer, for learning about and preparing for Christian marriage, for conforming ourselves to His plan for our life together. By His grace we were able to direct our attention and energies to the real priorities and responsibilities of our life at that time, without being overwhelmed by wedding plans.

“John and I prayed a lot about our decisions. As we did, the Lord showed us that the details which loomed so important at the time would seem much less significant a few months later. First and foremost, we knew that Jesus had to be at the center of the wedding, not us.

“We determined to keep the arrangements simple and within reasonable costs, as a way of showing our care and concern for our families and attendants. A friend lent me a lovely wedding gown and we borrowed dresses for the bridesmaids as well. The rehearsal dinner was a simple meal held at home in a relaxed atmosphere.

“Our friends scheduled a time of prayer as part of both the bridal shower and John’s bachelor party to help us keep our focus on God and the relationship of marriage to the body of Christ. Songs for the wedding were chosen to give glory to God, not to His creatures. We were aware that living out a Christian marriage in the world today would be a challenge. The priest who assisted in preparing us reminded us that we, not he, were going to become the ministers of the Sacrament of our Marriage.

“We certainly had a wonderful wedding. There was no question about the Lord’s Presence and Power as He poured out His Grace upon us. We began our married life thankful for the abundant blessings we had received and confident that the Lord would continue to bless us throughout our marriage.”

Are we of like mind with what this couple has shared? Why, or why not?

Planning Your Wedding Ceremony

A wedding is both a social and a religious event. Consequently, the engaged couple is always in danger of allowing the social side aspect (invitations, receptions, organist, flowers, gifts) to outweigh the importance of the spiritual preparation for marriage. Since the time of Saint Paul, Christian marriage has had the special meaning of being celebrated “in the Lord”. This significant dimension is richly expressed in today’s liturgy, the Sacrament of Matrimony. Let us focus on the actual liturgy.

* **The Christian Community**. A Christian marriage is a celebration of Faith in which the Christian Community gathers to give glory and honor to God, to proclaim and to hear the Word of God, and to respond in faith and hope.

* **The Priest**. The priest assists at a marriage by being the official witness for the Church.

* **The Bride & Groom**. The ministers of the Sacrament of Marriage are actually the bride and groom. They express marriage covenant through the vows they exchange. Their mutual consent is the sign of the Sacrament. Because both have been baptized into Christ, their freely given vows make them sharers in the marriage covenant that Jesus made with His Church through His death of the Cross.

* **Liturgy of Marriage**. Whether or not a wedding is celebrated within a Mass, it is always celebrated within a liturgical setting. The following is the outline of the celebration of marriage during a Mass:

- **Entrance Procession and Opening Prayer**. The bride, the groom and the wedding party gather around the Altar with the priest, and the Mass begins in the usual manner.
- **Liturgy of the Word of God**. Previously chosen Bible are proclaimed. After the Gospel the priest gives a homily.
- **Marriage Rite**. The bride and groom, assisted by the priest, exchange their vows and free consent to unconditional love.
- **Blessing and Exchange of the Rings**. The ring is a Symbol of faithful and enduring love.
- **Intercessory Prayers**. That may be written by the couple.
- **Liturgy of the Eucharist**. Traditional prayers of thanksgiving and praise are offered, and the bread and wine are consecrated.
- **Nuptial Blessing**. The bride and groom can choose their favorite blessing.
- **Lord’s Prayer and Greeting of Peace**. A community experience.
- **Holy Communion**. If both are Catholic and reconciled with God.
- **Final Blessing and Recessional Song**.

If one partner is not Catholic, in principal the wedding takes place without a Mass.

Which aspect of the celebration of matrimony is most to my liking?

- X -
BUILDING A CHRISTIAN HOME

After your wedding celebration, your married life will become a sign of Christ's love for the whole world. This is precisely the essential purpose of each Christian marriage. Hence, your mission as husband and wife will be to build a Christian home. But you must both fully realize that, without the Lord's merciful power, you can do nothing. Let's recall the prophetic words of Psalm 127: "*Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it* "

Just look around, and you will realize how this biblical prophesy is a very clear reality... Therefore, it is very important to discover the best way to build a Christian home, and also what is the first step to be taken. As a Proverb says:

"A house is made of brick, but a home is made of love."

Consequently, being a loving, united and open couple will be the best way to lay the foundations of a Christian home. Having and raising children, the fruit and sign of true married love, is the very first step towards creating a "Christian home". Couples who can't have children can, and must, express the fruitfulness of their love in other ways.

They can: - Adopt children or become foster parents

- Minister to each other, to parents and to other loved ones.
- Give help and support to the community.
- Participate in the life of the church.
- Care for elderly in the neighborhood
- Etc.

But what is a Christian Home?

What a Christian Family is like

To discover what a Christian family is, let's open the Bible again:

* *"God created man in His image; in the divine image He created Him; male and female He created them. God blessed them, saying: Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it.*

Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth." (Genesis 1:27 - 28)

* *"Some Pharisees came up to Jesus and said, to test Him, 'May a man divorce his wife for any reason whatever?' Jesus replied: 'Have you not read that at the beginning the creator made them male and female and declared, "for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife, and the two shall become as one?" "Thus they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, let no man separate what God has joined."* (Matthew 19:3 - 6)

God the Creator did not create marriage for itself but for the family. His Plan for marriage is unity ("Become as One") and openness ("Be Fertile and Multiply"). The spouses in being as one become the image of God, and in giving new life, they fully participate in His creative power;

* *"This is my commandment: Love one another as I have loved you." There is no greater love than this..."* (John 15:12 - 13)

A Christian family is one whose members, as St. Paul points out, sincerely try to practice the commandment of Jesus in their home.

* *"Because you are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with heartfelt mercy, with kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another; forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you.*

Over all these virtues put on love, which binds the rest together and makes them perfect.

Christ's peace must reign in your hearts, since as members of one body you have been called to that peace. Dedicate yourself to thankfulness. Let the word of Christ, rich at it is, dwell in you. In wisdom made perfect, instruct and admonish one another. Sing gratefully to God from your heart in Psalms, Hymns, and inspired songs. Lord Jesus. Give thanks to the Father through Him."

You who are wives, be submissive to your husbands. This is your duty in the Lord. Husbands love your wives. Avoid any bitterness toward them.

You children, obey your parents in everything as the acceptable way in the Lord. And fathers, do not nag your children lest they lose heart." (Colossians 3:12 - 21)

What do I feel that God's is saying to me and to us through the above passages?

Called to build a Christian Family

If you agree to get married “in the Lord”, you must also agree to seriously prepare yourselves, and to be ready to become:

A Community of Persons. 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. Its first task is to live with fidelity the reality of communion in a constant effort for honestly sharing all that each member of the family is, has and does.

- Do I feel that there is a sense of communion in each one of our homes?
- Do I honestly share with my parents and brothers and sisters about myself, my activities, my plans, hopes, etc.? If not, why not?

A Community of Life. The fundamental task of the family is to serve life, to actualize in history the original blessing of the Creator -that of transmitting by procreation and education the Divine Image from person to person. God is calling you to a special sharing in His power as Creator, in a Society that doesn't care about life, but is rather centered on a culture of death.

- What are your thoughts about having children? Can you accept the fact that abortion and contraception, being directly opposed to the transmission of life, thereby forfeit the very possibility of a couple being an “Image” of God the Creator Who provides joy to those who value life? Have you made a clear decision against abortion and contraception, having become fully aware of the disastrous effects in the lives of those who have not?
- Have you studied, understood and come to an agreement about Natural Family Planning? What is required in your lives now to undertake in your future married life the role of a responsible parenthood?

A Community of Love. Love is a gift of God, but at the same time it is a decision and a commitment. It is the inner principle of family, its power and final goal. God is calling you to share His love not only by having children, but also by educating them to a free and responsible love.

- What are the gains and losses that you had in the education you received from your parents?
- What do you feel is the most important thing you would like to transmit to your future children? How do you intend to go about doing that?

A Community of Christians. This is a couple that is consciously married “in the Lord”; and that is concerned with giving a Christian education to the children. It is a community that is becoming a “Domestic Church”, and giving testimony of Jesus Christ in the Community.

- Is your Christian faith alive and active? What are the positive and negative signs of that?
- What kind of difficulties can prevent you from giving a “Christian education” to your future children? How do you think you can overcome those difficulties?

Is the building of a Christian Home a priority for me? How do I plan to go about it?

Epilogue

If you are an engaged couple,
I invite you to face each other, hold hands,
close your eyes and think along with your heart.

Within us, there is dormant a whole world of new people.
They will be happy or unhappy, depending on the quality of our love.
Let us trust in our God the creator, and deeply confide in each other!!

Let us walk forward together, in the name of the Lord!

If you are a married couple,
I invite you to dedicate some of your time to share with engaged couples.

They need the testimony of your married and family love.

If you are a dedicated single -a lay person, a religious or a priest-
I invite you to ask yourself what you can do to help engaged couples
to become aware of their wonderful vocation and great mission.

Then, you will work for a better world, and your names will be written in heaven!

“True Love Waits”

It was on the eve of finishing this book when I had one of the most impressive experiences of my life; and I want to share that with you. I consider it revolutionary. Teenagers -25,000 of them- belonging to 27 Christian denominations and organizations, including the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry -arrived on the Washington D.C. Mall at dawn on July 29, 1994, to stake in the ground 211,163 pledge cards signed by teenagers from across the country who have promised to wait until marriage to have sex.

The pledges were the most visible and exciting demonstration yet of the growing Christian abstinence movement. This began 16 months ago when 59 teenagers signed pledges at Tulip Grove Baptist Church in Nashville, TN. In an era when studies show that most teenagers have had sex by the time they graduate from high school, the promised abstinence of these Christian youth was a breath of fresh air providing hope for more and more young people to appreciate, and subsequently experience, the unbelievable joy of a married couple giving their total selves only to one another, and therefore being faithful to one another. . They marched onto the Mall and danced in the rain at an evening concert, featuring some of the top stars in Christian rock-and roll. What these kids were doing was really against popular culture. It was a “counterrevolution” in which being virgin was “in”.

The following are contrasting stories from two different generations:

* *“Ever since I was young, I always wanted to stay pure for my husband”*, said Crystal Courville, 17, hammering stakes in neat rows with her Church youth group from Opelousas, LA. Swinging a rubber mallet nearby was her boyfriend, Chad Moorefield, 16. They said it wasn’t hard for them to stay chaste. On dates, *“if we start kissing, usually we both stop each other”*, Courville said. *“We know what it can lead to.”*

* Crystal’s mother, Claudia Courville, 37, recalled that she got pregnant before she married. Crystal was born, and Claudia Courville married the man who is still her husband. Claudia said it was hard coming home from her honeymoon to an infant. *“If we had had a program like this”*, she said, waving at the pledge cards, *“it would have been different”*. Finally, I want you to have the text of the chastity pledge signed by teens participating in the “True Love Waits” campaign:

Believing that True Love Waits

I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, those I date, my future mate, and my future children to be sexually pure until the day I enter a covenant marriage relationship.”

What about you? A “revolution of love” has already started. Will you allow the challenge of those courageous pioneers to touch your mind, your heart, your will and your soul? Think about it, pray and make a decision. It could, it will, make a remarkable positive difference in your future marriage and family life. You may be a pioneer too!