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Engagement: Looking Forward to Marriage

First in a new series of articles on the meaning of human love. "Being engaged was certainly not what I expected. It's a time of learning to love selflessly, to put love into the details, and to put the other person first."

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By Tamara El-Rahi

"Human love is a wonderful adventure. What I will tell you is: love

each other, talk and listen to each other, get to know each other, respect each other, as though each of you is a treasure that belongs to the other.

"Don't forget that God our Lord is with you, that he sees and hears you. Our Lord will bless your marriage, and will fill it with radiance and happiness. And it will be a love that will go all the way to Heaven." (Saint Josemaría Escrivá)

This is the quote we chose to have on the last page of our wedding ceremony booklet. It summed up what my now-husband and I believe so strongly: that God has given us each other and that our marriage is our path to happiness – and most importantly, our path to heaven.

My name is Tamara. I'm 26 years old, from Sydney, Australia, and I'm currently enjoying the first months of married life. It was only three months ago that I walked down the

aisle towards an amazing future husband, drastic lifestyle changes, and the next step in my vocation to marriage. But I don't think it would have all been quite as wonderful if I didn't know and learn certain things in the lead-up.

There's nothing quite like being in love. As quite a logical and naturally guarded person when it came to relationships, I had never really given my heart away before. But when I met my husband, I was swept off my feet in the elation of meeting someone with the same faith and values, who I could never get enough of, and who cherished me in a way I hadn't experienced before. After all the complaints of singlehood, it turns out it is possible to find a man who is both good and attractive! He is more than all I had wished for and complete and utter proof that my years of prayers for a great husband hadn't gone unheard.

Our 10 months of dating was all about falling in love, so we looked at the period of engagement as being about deepening that love, learning about our vocation to marriage, and setting the foundations to build it into the beautiful work of a lifetime. I think this attitude was a game-changer: we experienced a very joyful engagement period, despite its hard work, sharp learning curves and setbacks – and I think we avoided what could have been a very unpleasant and divisive time.

Being engaged was certainly not what I expected. Growing up in a culture that romanticises all things wedding-related, even the most discerning young woman couldn't be blamed for expecting engagement to be a glamorous time comprised solely of attending cake tastings, trying on pretty dresses and being wined and dined towards wifedom. Not quite, as it turns out.

As much material organisation as was going into the day, I realised that a Christian engagement requires more than that. After all, it was the time of immediate preparation for marriage – our vocation; the purpose of our lives! After our one-weekend marriage course, it occurred to us that it didn't make sense that we spent years at school and university preparing for our career, and yet only put aside two days to prepare for the commitment and work of the rest of our lives!

We wanted our preparation for marriage to be more than seating plans and flower arrangements. We asked for more in-depth spiritual preparation from the priest who would officiate our wedding, so as to fully understand the wonder of the sacrament we were entering into (and even when he told us things that we knew, it was a powerful way of keeping us focused on the true and

non-shallow purpose of our wedding day). We tried to seek advice in good books and good friends, and we tried to use any challenges that came our way to coach us for overcoming the future challenges of married life.

And of course, we took it to our prayer – because ultimately, we knew that if God was at the centre of our marriage, He'd look after us.

In retrospect though, I can see that my preparation for marriage started long before I met my now-husband.

It started at home, and ideally this would be the case for others too.

Seeing the unity and commitment of my parents and experiencing a loving family (that included many siblings) was the best indicator of what marriage, love and family actually are. My husband experienced the same in his upbringing. They say that children are most secure when they know that their parents love each other:

and this was something we certainly felt. Even amongst the usual quarrels of daily life, we firmly knew that divorce was not an option and that our parents would make up in no time at all. Example teaches more than words could ever do! My home was the place that I learnt the human values which I hope to teach to my own kids one day; and where I grew in faith and character led by my parents.

Getting to know each other deeply

I do think that it takes a lifetime to really get to know another person – and that my husband and I will be learning new things about each other until the day we die. But there is definitely a certain amount of learning that I think was critical during our dating and engaged months.

On our third date, my husband asked to be official – but I responded that I

still had questions for him. And there and then, my first inquiry was about the Catholic faith and whether he had any hang-ups with any of it. Talk about getting straight to the point! Both being very direct people, we covered everything from where we saw the relationship going to being open to children, all within a matter of weeks: but I cannot reiterate enough how wonderful it was to know where we stood! I see so many long-term relationships where fundamental topics have not yet been covered and important questions have not been asked – sometimes perhaps because one person is afraid of what the answers will be. I don't believe this is the best way to go into marriage – scared of the answers and just hoping for the best! As one of my wise friends told me when about to get married: she was confident that her husband was the man for her because she knew that if they had kids and something

happened to her, he'd bring them just up as she would. How beautiful is that? But it's also something that you can't know unless you have the right discussions!

But what are the right discussions to have? From my experience, it's important to talk about many things. We talked about children – starting with being open to them. Being on different pages regarding kids can be very stressful for a new marriage! We also discussed how we hoped to bring our kids up, though we also realised that a lot of these topics would come up again in more detail once we actually had a child. We discussed expectations at home – the kind of lifestyle we were looking forward to, whether gender roles would be traditional or not in the house and how that might change when kids come along, and about the hope of one parent being able to be at home with the kids one day. We

covered finances – it was all “our money” from quite early on but our spending habits still had to change as we saved after getting engaged, and they certainly have moulded to our marriage situation as well. We talked about our families: obviously we had gotten close to each other’s families already, but it was helpful to understand more about how each other’s families worked – every family is unique! We also talked about what marriage meant to us – since it’s somewhat key to be on the same wave-length about this, don’t you think?

We also talked about suffering. Seems like an odd thing at such a happy time, right? But there is a quote in Saint Josemaria’s *Christ is Passing By* that always stood out to me: “*On the other hand, there are also sorrows and difficulties... We would have a poor idea of marriage and of human affection if we were to think*

that love and joy come to an end when faced with such difficulties. It is precisely then that our true sentiments come to the surface. Then the tenderness of a person's gift of himself takes root and shows itself in a true and profound affection that is stronger than death." I find that to be so beautiful, and so true. It's the couples who have weathered the storms together who have the strongest loves. There is so much unnoticed heroism in loving someone when it isn't easy to do so!

One thing that really helped my (then-)fiancé and I to get to know each other better was planning the wedding together. I see a lot of couples leave all the planning to either just the bride or the groom – what a missed opportunity to grow as a team! During our engagement, we had to make so many big decisions that affected us both, as well as our families and our friends.

What a learning curve, as it was such a time of learning – not only about each other's tastes, but about what affected each other's decisions. We had to learn to communicate better and we had to grow. For example, I'm very laidback and was happy for my fiancé to take the lead on plans. But for everything to get done, we had to share the load. I really saw myself become more efficient and organised, while he grew in patience to deal with me lovingly.

Chastity

“When there is chastity in the love of married persons, their marital life is authentic; husband and wife are true to themselves, they understand each other and develop the union between them. When the divine gift of sex is perverted, their intimacy is destroyed, and they can no longer look openly at each other.” (Saint Josemaria, Christ is Passing By)

At a wedding a few years ago, the priest said something that has always stuck with me. He said that this couple, who had chosen to live chastity, had been able to get to know each other in a way that most couples don't.

Wow. How true is that? A lot of people see chastity as rules – namely, “You shall not have sex.” But my husband and I saw it as a beautiful affirmation of our love: more like “You shall get to know each other and learn to truly love each other and therefore really enjoy the associated perks later on!” Too many couples jump into a sexual relationship early on and get distracted from the process of actually getting to know each other. Sex is the ultimate expression of love, but these days it's used in other ways: as means of figuring out whether you want to be with someone or not; to physically and

hormonally connect with someone who you haven't yet rationally confirmed is even a good match for you; as a social activity... How very degrading.

Statistics show that married people have the best love lives, and no wonder when they are intimate with the one person who knows them, loves them unconditionally, and has committed to stick by them through thick and thin. Only that kind of security is worthy of that kind of intimacy – of that whole and complete self-giving of a priceless human being!

But of course, that didn't make the practicality of living chastity any easier during our engagement, believe me. We are made of body and soul, so it made sense that with a growing love came a growing desire to be united physically; and this was a constant battle that we fought

(definitely made easier by the fact that we were both fighting for the same thing). We knew that at the heart of things though, sexual relations before marriage was the same as us lying to each other – and lying to your fiancé is probably not the best way to build a solid foundation! We respected each other too much for that! The marriage act implies complete self-giving, and without the sacrament, this is both absent and unsure. In this context, it becomes so easy for sex to be about using the other person, which ends up creating distance rather than the desired unity. Living chastity is the way in which we learned to love each other better and more selflessly – to want the best for the other, even if it was the harder road. It was also great training for moments in marriage when sex won't be an option: so that we would still know how to show love without the act itself.

In conclusion

When it comes down to it, engagement is only the start of the journey. It's a raw time of ups and downs, discoveries and lessons. There's an overwhelming joy in saying "yes" and looking forward to the future, full of the peace that comes from choosing the right spouse. It's a time of learning to love selflessly, to put love into the details, and to put the other person first – a lesson that takes a lifetime to really get. And yes, it can be a very stressful time, but if that stress is a reminder to re-focus on the genuine meaning of the day, it becomes a time to grow both as individuals and as a team.

The period of engagement is certainly not meant to be easy, but nothing worthwhile ever is. But it's a beautiful, beautiful time, and has the potential to be so enriching and character-building; as well as to set

the foundations of a happy, fulfilled and fruitful marriage. Most importantly, if you take every step of the journey with God, all will be well in the end.

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