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Courtship Makes Sense

A new article in the series on the meaning of human love.
"Learning to communicate joys, gratitude, and even (or especially) learning to constructively put across feelings of anger and hurt make courtship happy and fruitful and will stand a future marriage in good stead."

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If you believe that pop culture reflects or influences our beliefs and actions, you should be concerned when you hear Bruno Mars's hit single *Marry You*: *'It's a beautiful night, we're looking for something dumb to do. Hey baby, I think I wanna marry you.... If we wake up and you wanna break up that's cool. No, I won't blame you; It was fun, girl.'*

And divorce certainly is becoming more commonplace. For instance, it has been estimated that, in the US, the lifelong probability of a marriage ending in divorce is 40%–50%.^[1] Only about a third of the marriages in Belgium actually last. In Asia, in developed countries like Singapore and Hong Kong, divorce rates have been rising steadily while young people are delaying marriage – if they get married at all.

However, while divorce is an option for those who want out, many people

still yearn for the ideal of marriage as a life-long union. And pop culture does reflect this longing as well. British singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran's *Thinking Out Loud*, which includes lyrics like '*When your legs don't work like they used to before... And I can't sweep you off of your feet... darling, I will be loving you 'til we're 70...*', topped the charts around the world.

A couple who aims towards this second sort of marriage – the one that lasts – must be ready to put in some thought, prayer and effort, not only during the marriage, but months or even years before the wedding day. Vital to a happy marriage is a period of serious, purposeful courtship “which should be a time for growing in affection and getting to know each other better. As in every school of love, it should be inspired not by a desire for personal gain but by a spirit of

giving, of understanding, of respect and gentle consideration.”[2] St Josemaria recommended that this period shouldn't last too long, just long enough to be reasonably sure that the other person is suited for sharing a holy married life.

Courtship helps avoid two extremes that seem to blight relationships today. It ensures that a couple does not rush into marriage, compelled by emotion and infatuation; it helps them enter into marriage with eyes wide open and not blinded by “love.” Courtship also ensures that the couple doesn't get stuck in a rut of endless hook-ups with no commitment. Regarding this latter phenomenon, which he calls “the fear of forever,” Pope Francis makes the following plea: “we mustn't let ourselves be overcome by the ‘culture of the provisory’! Today this culture invades us all, this culture of the temporary. This is not right!”[3]

As an antidote to this fear, Pope Francis talks about true love – not a mere psychophysical state, but “a *relationship*...a reality that grows, and we can also say by way of example that it is built up like a home. And a home is built together, not alone! To build something here means to foster and aid growth. Dear engaged couples, you are preparing to grow together, to build this home, to live together forever. You do not want to found it on the sand of sentiments, which come and go, but on the rock of true love, the love that comes from God.”[4]

Commitment

When a man and a woman enter into a Christian marriage they make a remarkable and beautiful commitment: to be united with each other “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part.” But

the decision to commit to each other starts some time before the wedding day. Perhaps the first commitment is made when a couple realizes that they are attracted to each other and decides to get to know each other more deeply, as more than just ordinary friends. This decision, the beginning of the period of courtship, can, from its very outset, be an antidote to the “culture of the temporary” if the couple uses courtship purposefully towards marriage. As time progresses and bonds of love and friendship deepen, the commitment to each other also matures. A milestone is reached when the couple decides that they’re ready to marry: a new commitment is made, a promise to marry each other, and to prepare even more intensely for marriage. It must be noted that none of the commitments prior to the marriage vows are binding. That would defeat the purpose of courtship as a period of

discovery and discernment. The final commitment, on the day of the wedding, is for life. For this final commitment to be made meaningfully, the period preceding it should be spent well: with openness, objectivity, growth and joyful friendship

Love and courtship

Courtship is a time of getting to know each other well: it isn't just about hanging out together and getting to like each other. This "getting to know each other" should be far from cold and calculating: the couple is not studying each other as one would study a job candidate. What is happening is that they are becoming better friends.

However, the various manifestations of the "culture of the temporary" (cohabitation and premarital relationship, for example) make this period of discovery quite

challenging. When the physical and sexual aspects of the relationship are embarked upon prematurely, it ends up marginalising every other aspect. Lovers then allow themselves to be blinded by physical attraction and passion and they are unable to make the objective discernment that should characterize the period leading up to marriage, in order to enter into a marriage with both eyes open and avoid regret and heartbreak later on. The maxim “if you want your partner to be faithful to you later in marriage life, make sure that he or she is faithful now” plays an important role. Experience attests that for young people nowadays this test is especially relevant. It has become a real guarantee of a healthy family life thereafter.

Chastity and purity are thus vital components of good courtship. Despite what the movies,

advertisements and songs tell us, purity is possible and satisfying – if a couple cares enough to put in the effort. St Josemaria taught that “chastity is a virtue that keeps love young in any state in life. There is a kind of chastity proper to those who begin to feel the awakening of physical maturity, and a kind of chastity that corresponds to those who are preparing for marriage; there is a chastity for those whom God calls to celibacy, and a chastity for those who have been chosen by him to live in the married state.”[5]

Purity is an important value for all men and women, and enables them to see God and to listen to him:

Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God.[6] Purity empowers people in the knowledge and mastery of the lesson of love.

A time of growth

Courtship is a period when a young man and woman get to know and come to admire each other's gifts and strengths. They also realize each other's defects and help the other person to overcome these failings. It is a time of smoothing out each other's rough edges as well as a process of coming to understand and empathize with the future spouse's personality and unique strengths and weaknesses.

During their courtship, couples develop and practice many virtues that are vital to a happy marriage later in life. Putting in effort to acquire these virtues leads to the refinement of a person's character and enables one to live out the vocation to marriage in a more perfect way. Some of these key virtues are:

Selflessness and Generosity – These virtues are centered on putting

others' needs before our own. A person who is thinking of getting married cannot just think of his/her own necessities and preferences. For example, a guy who likes to watch football with his friends may find that he has to cut down on these activities to spend quality time with his girlfriend. Conversely, a girl may decide to cook a dish that her boyfriend likes even though it might require a lot of effort on her part. This requires an ability to say "no" to oneself, in order to give oneself and to be sensitive to others, which is an important element for a harmonious family life.

Patience and Humility – As we get to know our partner better during courtship, we will inevitably discover flaws and shortcomings both in ourselves and in our partner. We need to exercise patience in dealing with each other's weaknesses and learn to get over irritations and

annoyances, since nobody is perfect. Each has to accept the other person fully, including the negative aspects of his/her character. As long as these do not pose a serious obstacle to one's ability to live out the vocation to marriage, we should be patient with our future spouse and provide encouragement in his/her struggles. We also need to be humble enough to recognize our own imperfections, accepting corrections and asking for forgiveness when necessary even when we might be right. The lyrics of the song "All of me" by John Legend come to mind: *"Cause all of me, loves all of you... all your perfect imperfections... give your all to me, I'll give my all to you. Give me all of you. Cards on the table, we're both showing hearts. Risking it all, though it's hard."*

Temperance and Fortitude – Christian couples are called to live courtship with self-control, and not to give in to

the temptation for physical intimacy before marriage. A person will ultimately never want to be considered as a thing, an instrument for the other's self-satisfaction. Living temperance also means empowering character and enabling people to be more joyful and caring.

Some people may look at courtship and engagement as a sort of "trial marriage." St Josemaria insists: "Any decent person, and especially a Christian, would consider it an attitude unworthy of men. It debases human love confusing it with selfishness and pleasure... Love cannot be treated as a commercial product that is tested and then accepted or rejected on the basis of whim, comfort and interest."[7]

Friendship

Friendship thrives on spending quality time together. So an obvious – though perhaps overlooked – aspect

of good courtship is putting effort into the way we spend time with each other. Conversation is a necessary condition of friendship and marriages often suffer grievously because of poor communication. Couples can – and must – learn to communicate well with each other early on in their relationship. Spend time talking about how the day went and about each other's interests; exchange ideas, discuss values, wishes, hopes. Learning to communicate joys, gratitude, and even (or especially) learning to constructively put across feelings of anger and hurt make courtship happy and fruitful and will stand a future marriage in good stead.

It is essential to spend a good deal of time talking about higher values. A couple should make sure they share the same basic values about life, love and family, and that they have

common dreams for the future. Sharing hobbies, encouraging each other's interests, embarking on projects together. All these, and not the physical and emotional, are what will make a marriage last a lifetime – through aging, poverty and ill health. Every person is of course different, but there are some traits in the feminine and masculine affectivity that should be taken into account. A man has to be open to a brand new affectivity that he should get to know, accept and love.

Courtship is also the time when a couple should learn to develop sensitivity and exquisite manners. A common piece of advice that Pope Francis has been repeating over the last three years is the importance of three little phrases: *may I?*, *I'm sorry* and *thank you* – words that cannot be mere formalities but must reflect deep respect and love for each other.

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It is important to be creative during courtship: finding ways to express deep love and affections in ways that aren't reliant on the physical and the sexual. Flowers, preparing meals for each other, notes, gifts, acts of service, gentle and noble words: the sweet arsenal of love is quite immense! When that creativity is lost and each one goes off in his or her own direction, love can cool, and sooner or later the thought "we are so different, we need to split" will appear on the horizon.

Interior life

Of great importance for all that has been mentioned above is a strong relationship with God. Without the grace that comes from prayer and the sacraments, love can easily become shallow, sacrifice can turn onerous, and hope fade. Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical on love, put it thus: "Anyone who wishes

to give love must also receive love as a gift. Certainly, as the Lord tells us, one can become a source from which rivers of living water flow (cf. *Jn* 7:37-38). Yet to become such a source, one must constantly drink anew from the original source, which is Jesus Christ, from whose pierced heart flows the love of God (cf. *Jn* 19:34).”[9] In prayer we receive new insights about ourselves, we discover new avenues of generosity, understanding and compassion, we learn to forgive and ask for forgiveness. We even get specific ideas on how to be loving to our future husband or wife. After all, God is the eternal wooer.

[1] American Psychological Association, “Marriage & Divorce,” <https://www.apa.org/topics/divorce/>.

[2] *Conversations with Monsignor Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer*, p. 105.

[3] Pope Francis, General Audience, Friday, 14 February 2014. https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/february/documents/papa-francesco_20140214_incontro-fidanzati.html.

[4] Pope Francis, General Audience, Friday, 14 February 2014.

[5] *Christ is Passing By*, 25.

[6] *Mt 5:8*.

[7] *Conversation with Monsignor Escriva de Balaguer*, 105.

[8] See Pope Francis, General Audience, Wednesday, 13 May 2015. https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150513_udienza-generale.html.

[9] Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 7. 25 December 2005. https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html.

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