



DAY 1

YOUR MARRIAGE MATTERS

We are head chefs, waitstaff, bussers, and dishwashers. We are chauffeurs, coaches, cheerleaders, and referees. We are wipers of countertops, poopy bottoms, snotty noses, and sticky fingers. We are teachers, principals, librarians, and janitors. We are doctors and boo-boo kissers. To our spouses, in addition to all the above, we are lover, friend, teammate, and advisor. Despite all the important roles we play as parents and spouses, how often do we find ourselves asking, “Does this matter? Do my marriage and all the sacrifices I make to raise a family really even matter?”

You will never receive the Nobel Peace Prize for raising toddlers or talking your teenage daughter through her emotional crisis, even though you deserve one. You won’t be thanked enough, and you will probably place more blame upon yourself for difficulties than you deserve. But at the end of the day, we want you to know one thing: Your marriage matters. It really, really matters. And so does your yes. Day after day, your yes matters—your yes to love, your yes to your spouse, your yes to your children, your yes to Jesus. It matters so much. We want to start this retreat by letting you know the full impact of your yes.

Never before in human history have the stakes been so high. It’s not hard to see that our culture has rejected God’s plan for human sexuality and marriage. St. John Paul II said, “As the family goes, so goes the nation, and so goes the whole world.”¹ If marriage and family crumble in America,

so will America crumble. If we see a global collapse of marriage and family, we will also see a global collapse of human civilization as we know it. How can John Paul II say this? Simple. If you look back through human history, many great empires and nations have fallen apart and crumbled. Do you know what all these empires have in common? Before their collapse, they all exhibited two things: first, there was a general breakdown of respect for innocent human life; and second, there was a general breakdown of marriage and family within that civilization. When these breakdowns occur, nations crumble. In our modern world, we are witnessing these two things not just on a national level but also on a global scale like never before.

Never before in human history has the world seen such a massive massacre of innocent human life. Every day 125,000 children are killed through abortion. This amounts to forty-six million children every year. As a result, there is so much pain, so much suffering, so much hurt.

Why is this massacre taking place? There are many complicated and terribly sad reasons why a person would choose to have an abortion. But, for the most part, women in crisis don't have families they can turn to for support, encouragement, and love. We have been brought up by a secular culture that promotes relativism, materialism, and individualism instead of in a family of life and love.

Do you see it? Do you see the ever-increasing dictatorship of moral relativism where people have rejected objective moral truths and have bought into the lie that they can pick and choose for themselves what is right and wrong? Do you see the ever-increasing materialism where people live more and more for the treasures of this world and forget about the treasures of heaven? Do you see the ever-increasing individualism where the modern person acts and lives as if they are on an island and their choices don't impact the rest of human civilization?

As we mentioned earlier, St. John Paul II said, "As the family goes, so goes the nation, and so goes the whole world." Never before in human history has the world faced such a massive worldwide breakdown of marriage and family life. More and more we see broken homes, broken marriages, and broken hearts. This brokenness leads to more isolation, pain, and selfishness. The family is the classroom of love. The family teaches us that we are not islands, that life is meant to be interwoven in relationship

with others, and those relationships make all of us better. But is this lesson still being taught?

These days many young couples have a tangible fear of getting married, or worse, they simply have no desire to get married. With divorce ever increasing in our culture, many young adults today don't want to relive the nightmare of divorce that they endured as children. Reflective of this, many young people postpone marriage and family life later and later. A recent NBC News poll estimates that 75 percent of women live with a man who isn't their spouse before the age of thirty. The poll concluded by suggesting, "The question becomes not who cohabits, but who doesn't?"²

We dare to say that if only we knew and embraced a proper understanding of marriage and family, none of this would be present, or at least a lot less of it. *Gaudium et Spes* at the Second Vatican Council remarked: "The well-being of the individual person and of human and Christian society is intimately linked with the healthy condition of that community produced by marriage and family" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 47).

We all find ourselves at a time in the Church when there is not only a desperate need to emphasize the importance and dignity of marriage and family life but also a desperate need for us to be a light in the darkness of American culture by displaying God's plan for the family. This is precisely why your marriage matters and why we have prepared this retreat for your marriage. The more our families can become what God has created them to be, the more we will be able to usher in the kingdom of God and overthrow the kingdom of darkness. The more we strengthen our own marriages and families, the more we will become a beacon of light for the world.

Your marriage matters. Your family matters. Not just for your good, but for the good of all. Today, Jesus needs your yes. The world needs your yes.

The fact that you chose to pick up this book shows that you see marriage and family life as important. But the reality is, for many of us, we are *surviving* instead of *thriving*. In simply trying to keep up with the speed of life, it's easy to let what is most important to us fall apart and for us to start seeking sanity instead of sanctity. This self-guided retreat is designed

to energize you to continue on the path that your heart desires—the path of holiness and happiness, the path of a long and fruitful marriage.

Let's not become desensitized to just how high the stakes are right now in the twenty-first century. As the culture moves further and further away from God's plan for marriage and family life, it's easy for us to be deceived and slowly become complacent because maybe "we're doing better than most other couples we see." Well, Jesus says that the "thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy; I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (Jn 10:10). The evil one desires to steal, slaughter, and destroy God's plan for your marriage, your family, and your children, but Jesus has come so you might have life and have it to the fullest. Jesus wants your family to be fully alive.

Is your family fully alive? Is your marriage dedicated to pursuing holiness and happiness? Are you raising your children in such a way that they are pursuing the treasures of heaven or the treasures of this world? Are you living the life Jesus wants you all to live?

We don't know about you, but we want to be fully alive. We want our marriage and our family to be everything God created it to be. We don't want to survive—we want to thrive. We don't want to settle for a counterfeit version of marriage and family. We want to live for everything God has in store for our family.

St. John Paul II talked about how important your role is as a married couple and how high the stakes really are when he said, "How indispensable is the witness of all families who live their vocation day by day" because "only if the truth about the communion of persons in marriage and the family can regain its splendor, will the building of the civilization of love truly begin."³

Everything we do impacts the world around us. Your vocation, your marriage, can have a tremendous impact. Your marriage matters. It matters not just to you and your spouse, not just to your kids; it matters to the good of human civilization. Your marriage matters to God. We are convinced that the restoration of culture doesn't rely on strong political leaders or governmental agencies but rather on strong marriages and families. Do you want to change the world? Then win marriage.

This is a thirty-three-day retreat. In that time period, many distractions will come up. There will be nights when you and your spouse don't want to go on because you are tired. Let this retreat be the beginning of a marriage in which you push through the tired, the beginning of a love that gives more when you feel you have nothing left to give, a romance of perseverance and dedication through difficulty. Pick up your crosses and let's head for the resurrection, together.

Today's Couple Discussion Questions

1. How are we living the full and abundant life right now? In what areas of our lives, marriage, and family do we want more?
2. In what areas of our marriage might we be surviving instead of thriving?
3. In what ways have we given Jesus all our lives? In what ways have we given Jesus just pockets of our lives?
4. How committed will we be to these thirty-three days? Have we selected a time and a place to take this retreat so as to set aside time each day for the glory of God and the good of our marriage?

Today's Couple Prayer

Holy Spirit, open our eyes to see. You have joined us together for a purpose. You have anointed us through the sacrament of Marriage to be on a mission for you in this world and to be happy with you forever in the next. The work of our marriage and family life is holy. We are anointed for this work, and this work matters to the world. We open our hearts to receive empowerment through the Holy Spirit to complete this work well and to complete it to the finish! Day by day let us see more and more how our love is transforming the culture, how necessary we are. Bless this love, Lord. Help us to be a light in the darkness, a hope for the nations. Amen.



DAY 2

YOU MAY KISS THE CROSS

There is a beautiful tradition among Croatian Catholics on their wedding day. In the Croatian town of Siroki Brijeg (about twenty-five miles from Medjugorje), not one single divorce has been recorded among its thirteen thousand Catholics in more than fifty years. That's right—not one single family has broken up in the living memory of anyone in the town. What? Is that really possible? How can an entire town be preserved from divorce?

Their “secret” to marital happiness is no secret at all. They simply have embraced the true meaning of marriage and rejected the lies of the culture. The secret is very simple: These Croatian Catholics know that authentic love comes through the Cross of Christ. When a couple is preparing for marriage, they go to the church and meet with their priest. They are not told that they have found their soul mate or the person of their dreams. What does the priest say? “You have found your lifelong cross. And it’s a cross to be loved, to be carried, a cross not to be thrown away but to be cherished.”

In Siroki Brijeg, the Cross represents the greatest love known to humankind, and thus the crucifix becomes the treasure of marriage and the heart of the home. When the bride and groom set off for the church to be wed, they bring a crucifix with them. The priest then blesses the crucifix, and during the exchange of vows the bride places her right hand on the crucifix and the groom places his hand over hers. The two hands

are bound together on the cross. The priest covers their hands with his stole as they proclaim their vows. After their vows, the priest proclaims, “You may now kiss the cross.” The bride and groom then kiss the crucified Lord as their first sign of marital love. They know that they are kissing the source of love, and that true love always entails death to self.

After their wedding ceremony, the newlyweds bring the crucifix to their new home together and give it a place of prominence and honor. It becomes the focal point of family prayer, for the family is born out of the self-giving and life-giving love of the couple just as the Church is born out of the self-giving and life-giving love of the Cross. When trouble arises or if a conflict breaks out, the couple seeks help before this cross. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin. So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help” (Heb 4:15–16). Before the cross, they find the strength to love just as he first loved us.

If you haven’t figured it out already, marriage is messy. Along with all the incredible joy and beauty of marital love, we as married couples suffer through the difficulties and trials of everyday life, and we suffer through the messiness of selfishness and sin. Literally, just as Jesus did upon the Cross, we take upon ourselves the sins of our spouse. We suffer through their shortcomings, and they suffer through ours. Marriage is messy—and so was the Cross.

Often we fear that if our marriage isn’t perfect, and if there is difficulty and struggle, then there must be something wrong with our marriage. But the opposite is true. It’s through the Cross that redemption comes. It’s precisely the difficulties and the struggles, the daily grind of life, that makes marriage so beautifully holy. Through marriage we are blessed to enter into the Paschal Mystery of Jesus—his own Passion, Death, and Resurrection. Not only is it normal if your marriage has brokenness, but it’s also an opportunity for holiness, for it’s in the brokenness of the Cross where we find life. If your marriage is a struggle, nothing is wrong with you or your marriage. These difficulties are the result of the wounds that Jesus brings to the surface so that he may sanctify and heal you. Remember, there is no Resurrection without the Cross.

In our own marriage, we have often asked ourselves, “How is it possible that two imperfect people could strive for perfect love?” That is the beauty of this retreat. This retreat will challenge you and call you to embrace the perfect love that Jesus calls all of us to in the sacrament of Marriage, but it does so coming from a strong understanding that we are imperfect people in desperate need of Jesus. We haven’t written this retreat from the mountaintop of perfection, telling you to climb the mountain as we have. We have written this retreat as fellow climbers, striving to reach the summit of perfect love, knowing that the climb will be long and difficult but will come with great reward in the end. We want to climb with you. We hope you want to climb with us. In marriage we can’t rely on our own human strength. Temptation and difficulty enter into every marriage in one way or another. In order to discover the fullness of the Father’s plan, we must cling to the Cross; we must cling to Jesus. At the heart of the sacrament of Marriage lies the daily dose of marital grace that Jesus wants to pour out upon you.

Amber:

As a little girl growing up with fairy-tale ideals, I often viewed marriage as a destination instead of a journey. Marriage would be my happy ending. I thought I would simply find my prince; he provides a castle, and voila, I’ve made it!

Daniel and I were truly head over heels, in full ooey-gooey emotional love while we were dating and engaged. Both of us are very idealistic and romantic at heart, so we had our perfect life and our perfect love all figured out. After all, we both took Christian Marriage and Theology of the Body classes in college and aced them! Certainly we would ace marriage, too. You guessed it, I was going to be the perfect wife, and Dan was going to be the perfect husband—until we got married.

When I woke up and realized I was married with four children under the age of six and I wasn’t living the idealistic, romanticized version of marriage that I believed I would, I found myself in deep despair. I cried myself to sleep many nights, so disappointed for failing at the only thing I’d ever wanted to do. I

wanted to be perfect. I wanted to do this thing right. It took me almost a decade to realize I was chasing perfection for perfection's sake. Sure, it was laced with love for my babies and my husband. But the root of my drive was pride. I wanted to prove my worth to myself, to my family, to the world. Pride is funny; it tells you opposing lies, and you believe them. It simultaneously tells you that you are "better than" and "not enough." If I couldn't be perfect in every way, I told myself, if I wasn't the ideal mother, then I was a failure at motherhood. If I wasn't the picture-perfect bride, I was a failure at marriage.

Please listen to us, dear friends. Marriage is a journey, not a destination. As we sojourn together, we come as imperfect pilgrims. The struggle, the climb—we can't run from it, for it's precisely what is strengthening and perfecting us. You have found your cross, not your castle. Our castle, our happily-ever-after, is real and it awaits us. There will come a time when every tear is wiped from our eyes, and there is no more sorrow (Rv 21:4). But those tears and sorrows of yesterday and today are not trash that will be thrown away. If we allow them, those tears can cleanse our souls, washing away the selfishness, pride, and lies. Those sorrows can strengthen our faith and our shoulders to carry all that God has for us and to become the great saints he has created us to become. This journey isn't easy, but it's good. It's so, so good. When we set aside our desire to be perfect for perfection's sake, for pride's sake, for the sake of ease and comfort, we will find *true* joy and lasting love. Jesus calls imperfect people to strive for perfect love.

"The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18).

You must stop running from the cross. You don't have to chase anything. The Lord himself has called you and given you the cross that will lead to your salvation—to joy and fulfillment not only in heaven but also here. Turn around and choose to pick up those crosses. Pick them up by your own choice and with love. As Fr. Jean C. J. d'Elbée writes in *I Believe in Love*, "Without love, everything is painful, everything is tiring, everything is burdensome. The cross, taken up hesitantly, is crushing. But, taken

up smilingly, and by free will, and with love, the cross will carry you, much more than you will carry it.”⁴

Trust the Cross. Trust our Jesus. He is the *only* way, the *only* truth, the *only* life. Together we will fall in love with the Cross over the next thirty-three days. We will fall more deeply in love with Jesus. We will fall deeper in love with our spouses, our children, and the world Christ has called us to serve together. Are you ready?

On our wedding day, we embraced the Croatian tradition. The crucifix has become the focal point of our house and in a world that has so many counterfeit portrayals of what love is. We use the crucifix to teach our children the real meaning of authentic love. Love isn't a fleeting emotion or an uncontrollable desire. Love is a sincere gift of self, a lesson taught upon the Cross. Just as we kissed the cross on the day we pledged our lives together, each night after family prayer our children kiss the cross, praying, “Jesus, I love you. Jesus, teach me how to love.”

We invite you to take on this tradition in your family. Kiss the crucifix nightly with your family. If you don't have a crucifix, purchase one sometime this week. The words contained in this self-guided retreat are our simple reflections on perfect love from an imperfect married couple. In the classroom of this prayerful retreat, Christ the teacher will teach you more about love than could be contained in all the books of the world. Learn from him. Love like him. “Jesus, I love you. Jesus, teach me how to love.”

Today's Couple Discussion Questions

1. What are the heaviest crosses we carry in our marriage? What are the heaviest crosses we carry in our family life?
2. Where is there beauty in the crosses in our family life?
3. What brings us the greatest joy in our marriage? What brings us the greatest joy in our family life?

Today's Couple Prayer

Lord Jesus, today we unite our cross with yours. As we journey through life on our own way of the cross, be our strength and our salvation. In the name of Jesus, we surrender the cross we carry. We abandon our lives into your hands. Amen.

With your spouse, find a crucifix and, placing your hands upon it, renew your vows in the quiet of your home:

Husband prays:

“I, _____, take you, _____, to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part.”

Wife prays:

“I, _____, take you, _____, for my husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part.”

Now, having renewed your vows, you may kiss the cross.