

Before
“**IDO**”

PREPARING FOR
THE SACRAMENT
OF MARRIAGE

ANTHONY GARASCIA

To Beth—
friend, spouse, lover.
You have taught me more than
you'll ever know about life,
marriage, and faith.

Nihil obstat: Rev. Augustine DiNoia, O.P.; Mr. Fred Everett, Mrs. Lisa Everett; Rev. Jerome Listeck; Rev. Val Peter; Daniel Scheidt; Prof. Janet Smith; Rev. Peter Uglietto.

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Building Your Marriage on a Sound Foundation

Welcome to *Before "I Do"*! As your wedding date draws ever closer, we hope that this session will help you get in touch with the original excitement and love that brought you and your fiancé to the decision of marriage. We invite you to reflect, individually and together, on your own expectations concerning marriage and the Church's expectations and hopes for you. We also invite you to consider the foundations of a healthy and lasting marriage.

1. SO MUCH ENERGY, SO MUCH EXCITEMENT

When two people marry, one often finds a great amount of energy and excitement. Marriage ceremonies and receptions are fun and happy events because they are opportunities for both of your families and your friends to come together to celebrate something they all have in common: their affirmation and love for you as you pledge your love and fidelity to one another. People often travel from great distances to be with the newly married couple, and seeing one's friends and family gather to celebrate with you can be an overwhelming experience. A newly married person described her wedding day this way:

The entire day was great! We had put so much energy into planning the wedding itself, and to see our many friends and family members come together and help us celebrate was awesome. We were given many compliments on the wedding itself, but the thing that I remember most is the presence of so many of our good friends. Someone mentioned to me that this is what life in heaven must be like: people gathered together, everyone happy, friends having reunions with people they haven't seen for so long, singing, dancing, eating, and

yes, some drinking. I was so happy at the end of the day and will remember all of this for the rest of my life.

It comes as no surprise that the image of the wedding feast is one of the major images used in scriptures to describe the kingdom of God. When searching for a way to describe the love affair between God and humanity, the authors of the various books of the Bible were inspired by the Spirit to use the image of marriage. This is because of the love, intimacy, respect, and fidelity present in sound marriages. We can also remind ourselves that in the Gospel of John, Jesus begins his ministry at the wedding at Cana.

Put simply, married love can and often does point to the mystery of God's continuing love for humanity and for the covenant relationship that exists between God and his people. Married love also points toward the energy and creative power of the Spirit of God; one instinctively thinks of the awesome mystery of bringing children into the world. In fact, our word for this comes close to the creative act of God: we say we "procreate"—with the help of God's Spirit we co-create by bringing children into the world. Without often realizing it, married people share in the task of pointing toward the presence of God working in the world. This is what the Church means when it describes marriage as a sacrament. Marriage is both a sign and an instrument of the communion that God shares with us.

The vocation to marriage is written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator.

—*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1603

Reflecting Together

As you begin this marriage preparation experience, it is important to tap the energy and excitement that defines your commitment thus far. Take some time to complete the following questions about your early dating and falling in love.

What I remember about our first meeting is . . .

My first impressions of you were . . .

I knew that I was in love with you when . . .

The one thing I want you to know about me concerning our being married is . . .

If our marriage commitment symbolizes anything, I want people to see . . .

2. THE GIFTS WE GIVE

Another exciting thing about getting married is the many gifts that a couple receives. While many of these gifts are material in nature, others may be gifts of time, caring, or presence. Over time some of these gifts will come to symbolize your marriage commitment.

One couple remembers the gift of an earthenware bowl that was made in the Southwest. Throughout the years that bowl was used for many different dishes and sustained numerous falls and breaks. Each time the break was repaired with strong bonding glue. In time it became a symbol of the couple's own marriage and its ability to sustain the various blows to its structure that are a normal part of a marriage.

As you prepare for marriage, it is important to affirm that you are a gift to your spouse-to-be, just as Christ gave himself to the world. And while you will give each other many material gifts over the course of your marriage, the most important gifts are the intangible ones that often go unnamed.

Take a few moments to identify the most important gifts that you give each other. There are twelve gifts listed below. Prioritize the gifts in order of importance, placing a "1" next to the most important gift and so on down the list. Be

sure to list any other gifts that you consider a high priority as you begin your marriage.

As we begin our married life I give you the gift of . . .

- Admiring you
- Validating your feelings
- Being there for you
- Listening to you
- Spending time with you
- Being honest with you
- Touching you tenderly, holding you
- Believing what you say
- Encouraging you
- Making passionate love to you
- Telling you when I am hurt
- Being open to change throughout our marriage
- Other:

3. YOUR EXPECTATIONS

All of us bring into our marriage a set of expectations concerning how our needs will be met and how we will love each other. One married man expressed his expectations in this way:

In marriage I want . . .

- | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------|
| Happiness | A great sex life |
| Love | To be best friends |
| Trust | |
| Affection | |
| Admiration for things I do | |

Write your own list of expectations for your marriage. Include any of the above and others not listed.

In marriage I want . . .

4. GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Just as you do, the Church has great expectations for your married life. We expect that the love you have for one another not only will express your lived commitment but will point toward a deeper mystery of God's love for the world. That is why we call the marriage of two baptized Christians a sacrament.

When we face a lifetime commitment, we may feel overwhelmed about our ability to guarantee that we can deliver on our promises and expectations. Our world changes so rapidly, and none of us can foresee what the future holds. But if you have any fear about your commitment, remember that in the end it is the grace of God that sustains our commitments and creates possibilities out of seemingly impossible obstacles. If we do our part by taking care of the work of intimacy and commitment, then we can trust that God will sustain our efforts.

5. REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS?

We can, however, bring beliefs and expectations about our marriage that are impossible to fulfill and that can cause a great deal of frustration and pain. Spend some time in reacting to the following set of expectations.

I will meet all of his or her needs. He or she will meet all of my needs.

Makes sense:

Not sure I agree with this:

You can help your fiancé meet his or her needs, but the responsibility for this begins with him or her. There are some needs that we have that are unique to ourselves. One fiancé might prefer to relax by running ten miles; it could be unrealistic for the other to be expected to tag along with him or her. What is more realistic is giving our fiancé affirmation to meet his or her needs once they are voiced.

Comments:

5

Dealing With Conflict

In this session you will explore your own style of conflict resolution and your preference for dealing with conflict when it occurs. You will also have an opportunity to learn about four ways of handling conflict that can seriously harm a marriage. Finally, you will learn a method of resolving conflict that relies on communicating effectively as the first response to any conflict.

1. FAITH AT THE HEART OF YOUR MARRIAGE

As we've already discussed, every marriage has more than two partners. There is you, your partner, and a third reality—the relationship you create. There is a synergy in marriage where the totality of a marriage is truly more than the sum of the individual parts. The love of husband and wife expresses itself in ways that the spouses could never have dreamed of, creating a deep union.

From the perspective of our faith, we can say that this threefold dimension of a marriage is a reflection of the Trinity, one of the deepest mysteries of our Christian tradition. Our Creed speaks of “One God, three persons” to express the unique nature of God. Though this is a great mystery, one thing is certain: the Trinity speaks to the reality that God exists in a community of love. Married couples participate in the life of the Trinity by God's grace and seek to imitate the community of love that is God.

To say that the Trinity is a community of love is to say that there is an unfolding dialogue between Father, Son, and Spirit. So, too, marriage is meant to be an unfolding dialogue of love between husband and wife, a dialogue characterized by respect and unconditional regard for the other.

Of course, we all know that the love of God is a perfect love and that the way we love is flawed and imperfect. We sometimes fail to meet our ideal of loving deeply and experience both conflict within ourselves and conflict with our spouse. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* asserts that we all experience evil both around and within ourselves. “This experience makes itself felt in

the relationships between man and woman. Their union has always been threatened by discord, a spirit of domination, infidelity, jealousy, and conflicts that can escalate into hatred and separation" (#1606). This brings us face-to-face with the need to engage in conflict resolution and reconciliation, so that our love for one another can be perfected throughout the life of our marriage.

Reflecting Together

1. React to the thought that married couples participate in the life of the Trinity by creating a community and an unfolding dialogue of respect and unconditional regard for the other.
 - Wow! I have to think about this.
 - I don't get it.
 - The thought that I find God in our love for each other sounds right.

2. Personal sinfulness affects the way we enter into relationships. The *Catechism* lists discord, jealousy, a spirit of domination, infidelity, and other conflicts as examples of how sin can threaten a relationship. How has your own experience of sinfulness affected your relationship with each other?

3. The sacrament of reconciliation provides an opportunity to experience God's forgiveness and to receive the grace we need to deepen our marital union. Have you considered celebrating this sacrament as part of your preparation for marriage?

4. Do you know of anyone who is a model of going beyond conflict to reconciliation where a "win/win" situation is created? What have you learned from this person about resolving conflict?

5. Our love is imperfect and often requires us to ask forgiveness of the other. Is this something easy or difficult for you to do? Is forgiving easy or difficult?

It can seem difficult, even impossible, to bind oneself for life to another human being. This makes it all the more important to proclaim the good news that God loves us with a definitive and irrevocable love, that married couples share in this love, that it supports and sustains them and that by their own faithfulness they can be witnesses to God's faithful love.

—*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1648

2. GETTING IN TOUCH WITH YOUR CONFLICT STYLE

When interviewing for a job as an office manager a prospective candidate for the job was asked how she felt about conflict between office workers. She responded emphatically: "I hate conflict!" Her response to the question could easily sum up many people's response to conflict. We simply don't like dealing with conflictual situations because conflict often creates a "win-lose" situation. One person wins, and the other loses: feelings can be hurt, and power can be used to "put people in their place." Even if we think we are the ones who will "win," it can be uncomfortable.

It is especially important to think carefully about conflict in our closest relationships. In these relationships we are able to speak more freely, which can create greater intimacy and personal growth. At the same time, when we are so close to another, it can be easier to speak in ways that are careless, disrespectful, or even demeaning.

Take some time to respond to the following statements and questions. They are designed to assist you in understanding your and your fiancé's approach to conflict.

When there is conflict between us, my fiancé's tendency is to (check all that apply)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> avoid the whole issue | <input type="checkbox"/> give advice |
| <input type="checkbox"/> become quiet and withdrawn | <input type="checkbox"/> get cynical |
| <input type="checkbox"/> become angry | <input type="checkbox"/> respond with sarcasm |
| <input type="checkbox"/> become aggressive | <input type="checkbox"/> blame me or others |
| <input type="checkbox"/> try to soothe things | <input type="checkbox"/> raise his or her voice or yell |
| <input type="checkbox"/> overcriticize | <input type="checkbox"/> try to listen |
| <input type="checkbox"/> respond with humor | <input type="checkbox"/> other: (Please describe.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> become defensive | |

When there is conflict between us, my tendency is to (check all that apply)

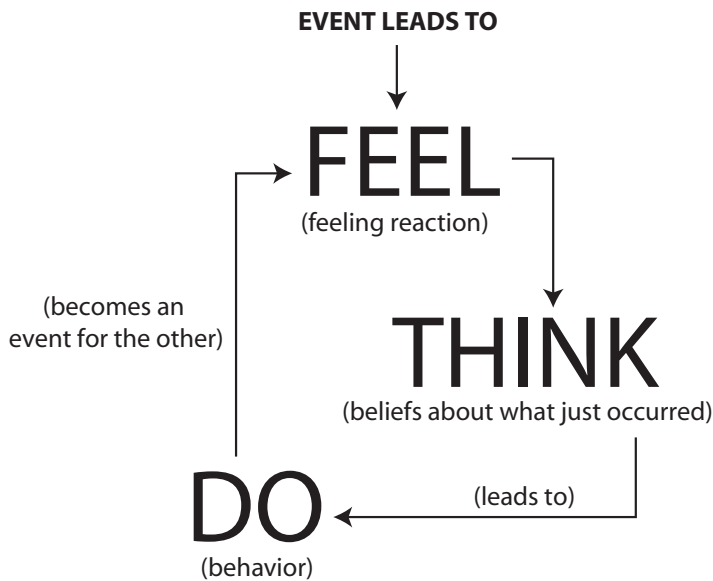
- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> avoid the whole issue | <input type="checkbox"/> give advice |
| <input type="checkbox"/> become quiet and withdrawn | <input type="checkbox"/> get cynical |
| <input type="checkbox"/> become angry | <input type="checkbox"/> respond with sarcasm |
| <input type="checkbox"/> become aggressive | <input type="checkbox"/> blame myself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> try to soothe things | <input type="checkbox"/> raise my voice or yell |
| <input type="checkbox"/> overcriticize | <input type="checkbox"/> try to listen |
| <input type="checkbox"/> respond with humor | <input type="checkbox"/> other: (Please describe.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> become defensive | |

Reflecting Together

1. What aspects of your partner's way of handling conflict do you find helpful? In other words, what does he or she do or say that helps in the resolution of conflict?
2. Is there anything about your partner's way of handling conflict that you do not find helpful in resolving conflict between the two of you?
3. Describe how your own parents resolved conflict in your family. Utilize the checklist provided above.
4. What positive messages and behaviors did you learn from your parents about dealing with disagreements and conflict?

3. CONFLICT RESOLUTION BEGINS WITH CLEAR COMMUNICATION

Effective conflict resolution is really just a form of good, clear communication where we utilize strong “I” statements and strive to define the problem by focusing on specific behaviors. When any significant event occurs in our lives (be it happy or sad), we usually want to talk about it with those who are close to us. Our response to any event has two parts: a feeling reaction as well as a belief or way of thinking about the event. All of this influences the way we act or behave toward the person or persons involved in the original event. The following chart outlines a pattern of how we respond.

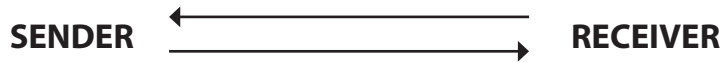


Suppose a husband (who is happily married) becomes intensely involved in a work project and forgets to inform his spouse that he will be late for a dinner engagement. He is an hour late, and this becomes the event. The feeling reaction of the wife is most probably one of worry, anger, and hurt. This is because she is sitting at a restaurant not understanding why he isn't. She may believe or think that he has been involved in an accident, that he simply doesn't care, or simply that he's been rude. As a result she may act in a way that shows her spouse anger, hurt, and displeasure. Her behavior then becomes an event for the other spouse.

Understanding How Communication Happens

We often underestimate the complexity involved in communicating and listening to another. Many fights get started not because people want to fight but because they react to what the other says instead of really listening. The diagram below depicts what happens when we attempt to communicate.

Dynamics of Communication



1. Every communication involves two people, the **SENDER** and the **RECEIVER**. Even before the **SENDER** begins to speak, he or she is influenced by:

Beliefs about how the world works and how people act;

Attitudes toward the future and his or her expectations for an outcome;

Generalizations and **assumptions** about people's behaviors and their motives;

Stereotypes: rigid generalizations attached to a specific group of people.

2. The message between the **SENDER** and the **RECEIVER** is not only the words spoken. The **SENDER** encodes the message, and then the **RECEIVER** decodes it.

3. How does the **SENDER** encode the meaning?

Verbal: The listener picks up on only 7 percent of a message communicated through verbal content;

Voice Tone: 38 percent of the message that the listener hears is communicated through voice tone;

Body Posture: 55 percent of what the listener hears is communicated through body posture.

4. How does the **RECEIVER** decode the meaning?

Feelings: As the sender talks, the receiver has an immediate feeling reaction about what he or she is hearing;

Thoughts: As the sender talks, the receiver has immediate thoughts and beliefs about what is being said;

4. LEGITIMATE/REASONABLE REQUESTS OF THE OTHER

The above cycle of event, feelings, beliefs (about the event), and behavior can become a vicious circle where spouses continually react to each other's behavior without the benefit of seeking and giving feedback to the other. Good communication will allow a couple to focus on specific behaviors that are significant to either the healthy development or the detriment of their marriage.

Look at how someone might communicate feelings and thinking to his or her spouse while making a valid request for negative behavior to change or positive behavior to continue. The first example is taken from the incident described above. The second example is a communication about something positive. This way of communicating works equally well with both the negative and positive events that occur in any relationship.

Person Communicating Feelings and Thoughts

| | | |
|--|--------------|--|
| EVENT (Describe the event, focusing on the behaviors of persons involved.) | Example One: | When you didn't call to let me know you'd be late . . . |
| | Example Two: | When you brought me flowers yesterday . . . |
| FEELING REACTION (Describe how you felt.) | Example One: | I felt . . . angry . . . sad . . . irritated . . . hurt . . . |
| | Example Two: | I felt . . . happy . . . excited . . . surprised . . . |
| DESCRIBE THE CONSEQUENCE | Example One: | Because I had to eat alone after preparing a meal for the two of us. |
| | Example Two: | And it really made my day. |
| THOUGHTS/BELIEFS (Describe what you are thinking about the behavior.) | Example One: | I thought maybe you didn't respect me since you didn't call. |
| | Example Two: | It really shows that you care for me. |

| | | |
|----------------------|--------------|--|
| WHAT YOU WANT | Example One: | I want you to agree to be more considerate the next time. Does that seem reasonable to you? |
| | Example Two: | You can send me flowers any time you want, and who knows, maybe I'll surprise you one of these days. |

5. GOOD COMMUNICATION TAKES PRACTICE

Take some time to think of a positive event that happened this past week that involved both you and your fiancé in which your fiancé played an active role. First, describe the event in the “event” column. Next, construct a description of the event, placing emphasis on your fiancé’s action. Then, describe how you felt, what you were thinking about the event, and what you want to see happen in the future.

| EVENT | EVENT DESCRIPTION | FEELING-REACTION | THOUGHTS/BELIEF | WHAT YOU WANT |
|--|--|---|--|---|
| <i>Write a brief description of the event.</i> | <i>Construct a statement describing your fiancé’s action in the event.</i> | <i>Let your fiancé know how you felt.</i> | <i>What were your hidden thoughts about the event?</i> | <i>What would you like to see happen in the future?</i> |
| | When you . . . | I felt . . . | I thought to myself or was thinking . . . | And I want you to . . . |

6. KNOWING HOW TO FIGHT FAIRLY

Listed below is a step-by-step strategy to minimize the harmful effects of unresolved conflict. Take some time to review the procedure before practicing this with your fiancé.