

PART I

CALLED TO BE FAITHFUL AND FORGIVING

Two Become One for Life

In each part of this book, we'll tell you about one of the four keys to everlasting love—the faithful, free, fruitful, and total love that Jesus gives to us and that we can share with our beloved. Part 1 of this book describes the call to faithfulness, which must be paired with the call to forgiveness.

People in love have an intense desire always to be true to each other in thought, word, and deed. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says they yearn for an “unbreakable union” (CCC, 1646), and they never want their differences to drive them apart (CCC, 2365).

And yet, all too often, reality intrudes. Husbands and wives *are* different from one another, and overcoming their differences can be a real struggle. Remaining faithful

to their lifelong promise requires constant, small, and loving acts of forgiveness.

The graces of the Sacrament of Matrimony and especially the Sacrament of Penance, or Confession, will help you to stay true to your marital vocation. Infidelity can present a powerful temptation. Christ would never betray his Church, but spouses sometimes do betray one another through adultery or abandonment (CCC, 2381, 2384–2386). God's grace in your marriage is a powerful force to keep potential infidelities at bay and usher you all the way to the doors of his heavenly kingdom.

Faithfulness to your spouse expands to encompass his or her family as well. When marriage joins two people, it also binds their two families together. Communication, compromise, and forgiveness are essential to cementing this bond. And the bonds you forge between your families can be the start of unity and peace in your corner of the world.

I.



Turning Two into One

HOW TO OVERCOME THE DIFFERENCES
THAT DIVIDE YOU

So they are no longer two, but one flesh.

—Matthew 19:6

When the two of us first met, about the only thing we had in common was our conviction that marriage should last “till death us do part.” Manny was a first-generation Spanish American, longtime New Yorker, Catholic, Republican, extrovert, and optimist. In contrast, I could trace my family’s roots at least to the American Revolution. I was proud to be a Virginian born and bred Episcopalian, Southern Democrat, and introvert with a slight tendency toward gloom.

We met briefly through a mutual friend, exchanging rushed greetings while crossing a busy street in midtown Manhattan, and the moment passed. “Who is she?” Manny asked his friend. “She’s not your type,” the

friend immediately responded. Two years later, we met again. Despite our dissimilarities, Manny pursued me and won me. On our wedding day he escorted me out of the church to the sound of choir, trumpet, and organ blasting the “Hallelujah Chorus.” Sixteen years and six kids later, we’re still passionate about each other, marriage, and Jesus, although we’ve been stretched to our breaking point more than once.

To accommodate our differences as individuals, we’ve had to change, stretch, and be made new. “No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed,” explained Jesus. “New wine must be put into fresh wineskins,” he said (Lk 5:37–38). Our marriage is like that new wine, filled with astonishing grace, and we are like those old wineskins in danger of bursting if we can’t accept our radical new life. So the two of us have not clung to our differences. Instead we have let in God to transform us.

Our marriage has had its good years and its not-so-good years. Most marriages will experience the truth of the first line of *A Tale of Two Cities*: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” No compelling story ever began with, “It was a routine time in which nothing ever changed and nothing unexpected ever happened.” A tale with no ups and downs would be unworthy of a great adventure, and marriage is without a doubt an amazing adventure.

We have learned that only God can turn two into one because God’s love is the glue that holds marriage together. God’s strength has sustained us as we’ve negotiated personality, cultural, and religious differences. With his help, we have weathered intense health crises that exacted a heavy toll on us physically, emotionally, and

spiritually. God is offering his strength to sustain you in your marriage, too.

Introvert Meets Extrovert: Appreciating Your Personality Differences

On our first date, we joined ten of Manny's colleagues at a barbecue restaurant. On the second date, a picnic and a concert at Central Park, he brought his best friend along, too. We didn't go out alone together until the third date. Manny jokes that he was afraid of me, but I think he just subscribes to the policy of the more, the merrier. He's the classic extrovert, and I'm the classic introvert.

Over the years, our personality differences have worked themselves out. The long and exhausting hours of a medical practice leave Manny little time or energy for big parties other than family events. Our six children are like a portable party anyway. Fun! Mess! Noise! Excitement! Introversion doesn't stand much of a chance in our house.

There's no point in us arguing over whether introversion or extroversion is a better way of life. Like hanging the toilet paper over or under the roll, there is no right answer. (Once you have kids, they'll throw your toilet paper all over the bathroom anyway.) Life has a way of busting us out of our self-imposed categories and certainties.

Our personalities are not set in stone. We are fundamentally free to become better people, more in tune with those around us, and more likely to act out of love rather than habit and basic inclination. An extroverted husband can help his wife relax and have fun, and an introverted wife can show her husband the spiritual riches of stillness. Striving to become one with our other half brings

us closer to wholeness, even if we never completely iron out our differences.

Whether people are different doesn't determine how long their love will last. Although irreconcilable differences are frequently cited as the grounds for divorce, the vast majority of happy and unhappy couples have differences they will never reconcile, according to psychologist Dr. John Gottman.¹ Yielding in matters of personal preference can smooth over small problems. But fundamental disagreements usually require more intensive work.

Southern WASP Meets Spanish Catholic: Finding Common Cultural and Religious Ground

My parents (now known to our children as Oma and Opa) raised my brother and me as Episcopalians. The whole family faithfully attended church services every Sunday at R. E. Lee Memorial Episcopal Church. Although Opa's father was a Methodist minister and Oma was raised Baptist, Oma and Opa preferred the solemnity of the Episcopalian liturgy.

Manny's parents, Mama Carmen and José, emigrated from Spain to America in the 1960s. They came from southern Spain, an area near Seville where the pageantry and passion of Catholicism still hold sway. Both deeply devout, Mama Carmen and José taught their four children to treasure their faith.

Despite my career as a Manhattan litigator, I made time to sing every Sunday with the choir of St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church on Park Avenue. Manny went to Mass every Sunday. When we dated, we did both—and as we became tired of going to two similar services, with the same readings proclaimed at both, it soon became a game of ecclesiastical chicken. Who would budge first?

In the end, since Manny's faith was more important to him than mine was to me, I joined Manny at Mass on Sundays, and we both started singing in a Catholic choir. After Mass, we visited Mama Carmen and José in Long Island, where Mama Carmen began teaching me the language and cuisine of her beloved home country while José discussed an unending array of philosophers and theologians. Manny's parents reminded me of my own globe-trotting mother and professorial father. Despite our different cultural backgrounds, Manny's parents made me feel right at home.

With our friends from choir, Manny and I started attending all-night adoration of the Blessed Sacrament every first Friday. As I watched frail-looking elderly ladies in black lace veils genuflect slowly and painfully on both knees every time they entered or exited a pew, the power of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist was undeniable. The seeds for my conversion were sown, and I ultimately entered the Catholic Church in 1999 on the same day as our engagement party.

Unfortunately, not every couple is able to resolve their religious differences this neatly, or as quickly. Just as religion divides people all over the globe, spouses in interfaith marriages risk bringing that disunity into the heart of their own home, and that risk often intensifies with the arrival of children (CCC, 1634). As children reach the age for religious milestones such as Baptism, ceremonial circumcision, Confirmation, or bar or bat mitzvah, the parents are forced to face differences that may have been downplayed or ignored. All too often, one spouse may feel pressured to renounce previously cherished beliefs just to restore the peace—a short-term solution that can foster long-term resentment and regret.

To prevent these kinds of relational landmines, Catholics who wish to be married in the Church are reminded

of their obligation to raise their children Catholic and must communicate this intention to their future spouse prior to the marriage (CCC, 1635). This comes as a surprise to some non-Catholics.

In our pre-Cana class, we counseled a Protestant groom-to-be who was complaining about all the restrictions and rules that were required to get married in the Catholic Church. "We're only doing it because my fiancée's grandmother wants us to," he grumbled. We told him that God was calling him to get married in the Catholic Church for some reason, even if the call came through his fiancée's grandmother. We encouraged him to treasure his future wife's Catholicism and focus on how they were both baptized Christians, seeking to follow God's will.

Emphasizing common ground is usually the best way to make an interreligious relationship work (CCC, 1634). Christians, Jews, and Muslims all worship the same God the Creator (CCC, 839–841). All Christians acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God and our Savior. Islam sees Jesus as a prophet. Many atheists and agnostics share a belief in basic human goodness and the duty to help one another. Focus more on what unites you than what divides you.

As long as they aren't confused, children can benefit from learning about more than one faith tradition. Parents may not feel it's appropriate to expose children to different types of religious ceremonies in different places of worship, but many families joyfully celebrate more than one type of religious holiday at home.

After years or decades of experiencing acceptance and sincere married love with a Catholic spouse, some non-Catholics may choose freely to convert (CCC, 1637). A friend of ours became a passionate Catholic convert from Judaism after being married ten years to her Catholic husband, who never pushed the issue of conversion. If you and your beloved have religious differences, pray

that you both learn to love God more each day, and trust God to work in his own time and in his own way.

Pro-Lifer Meets Pro-Choicer:

Disagreements as Opportunities for Growth

When Manny and I began dating, our private encounters often resembled a one-on-one debate club. Basking in the lovely summer weather, we would visit major Central Park landmarks and discuss hot-button issues on which we vehemently disagreed. While rowing on the lake we debated masturbation. Admiring the view from Belvedere Castle we argued about homosexuality. Lounging on the Great Lawn we clashed over abortion.

Fed up, I finally shouted, “Why don’t you just go find a good Catholic girl?” Manny replied, “It’s not that easy.” Although Manny accepts all the doctrines of the Catholic Church, I soon learned how uncommon that was among Catholics. While the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* clearly opposes masturbation, homosexual acts, and abortion, almost half of all US Catholics disagree with the *Catechism* on these points (CCC, 2271, 2352, 2357). For example, according to some polls, 46 percent of Catholics say abortion should be legal and 43 percent believe that homosexual sex is morally acceptable.²

Even if you and your mate are both Catholic that doesn’t mean you’ll always be on the same page about Church teaching. And while it’s a personal choice where you draw the line in the sand while you’re dating, it’s good to find out where you differ before you get married, preferably early on in the relationship. Then you have the chance to explore together what the Church really teaches and the reasons for it. Greater knowledge may help you settle disagreements.

We encountered our first serious conflict around the issue of abortion. Manny always fervently defended the Church's opposition to abortion based on the *Catechism*, which asserts that "human life must be respected and protected from the moment of conception" (CCC, 2270). Manny argued that a human zygote, a human embryo, and a human fetus are all human. In the womb or out, a human life is precious.

At that time, my views on abortion fell into what the pro-choice feminist Naomi Wolf once described as the "mushy middle." I knew I never wanted an abortion but thought other people should be free to make a different choice. And yet, as I listened to the impassioned arguments of my ardently pro-life suitor, my mind gradually began to change, and I was reminded of something my grandfather said. For my Methodist minister grandfather, the miraculous birth of Jesus from his virgin mother Mary was a reminder that every birth is miraculous. And in the story of the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel seeks Mary's consent to bear the son of God in her womb, we celebrate not only the miracle of Jesus' birth but also the miracle of his *conception*. My eyes were opened to why the Church so staunchly defends life from its earliest stages.

In addition to these theological and philosophical arguments, Manny's clinical experience could not be easily disputed. He had seen firsthand how much abortion hurts the mothers and fathers left behind. Some of Manny's female patients experienced severe abortion-related depression decades after going through the procedure. I had also witnessed this on a more limited scale: I will never forget the day a male college acquaintance of mine broke down in tears as he explained that his ex-girlfriend had killed their child.

Fortunately, Manny and I were able to talk through most of our differences before we approached the altar.

Our “one-on-one debate club,” founded on rules of loving and respectful dialogue, became a terrific basis for hashing out inevitable disagreements later in marriage, too. We learned to fight fair and to forgive, which built a strong foundation for our future relationship.

Health Meets Sickness:

Standing by Each Other in Troubled Times

Even the strongest foundation can be rocked by crises. Especially in times of difficulty, human love needs to find its roots in the divine. In the words of St. John Paul II, “Could we even imagine human love without the bridegroom [Christ] and the love with which he first loved to the end? Only if husbands and wives share in that love and in that ‘great mystery’ can they love ‘to the end.’ Unless they share in it, they do not know ‘to the end’ what love truly is and how radical are its demands. And this is undoubtedly very dangerous for them” (*LF*, 19).

For the two of us, the possibility of loving “to the end” came sooner than we ever dreamed it would. In December 2000, nine months after we got married and five months after we conceived our first child, Manny was diagnosed with a massive brain tumor. The neurosurgeon said the tumor needed to come out immediately.

When husbands and wives vow to love one another “in sickness and health,” they don’t expect serious medical issues to arise until age eighty or ninety. But of course sickness can hit at any time. In our circle of close friends and relatives, we’ve known several people in their thirties or forties diagnosed with serious illnesses. Twenty-eight-year-old Thomas Peters of the American Papist blog made headlines in 2013 when he became paralyzed from the chest down due to a diving accident only three months after getting married. Some marriages survive these crises

and some don't. Are you committed to forever no matter what? Is your fiancé or spouse?

During the entire ordeal of that first brain surgery, we both prayed fervently and asked practically everyone we knew to pray for us. After Manny's amazingly quick initial recovery, one of our especially prayerful friends from church choir dubbed Manny the choir's "first miracle."

Manny's Story: Facing the Diagnosis

The "Sen Commandments" is what my wife and I dubbed the list of dos and don'ts from my neurosurgeon, Dr. Chandranath Sen. My brain tumor was about the size of a large orange, but the pathology report confirmed the tumor was benign and Dr. Sen assured us the surgery had been a success. "It popped right out," the doctor had said. "Get plenty of rest, make sure to eat, and no heavy lifting or straining."

Karee and I had only been married nine months, and at five months' pregnant her hormones were working overtime to keep me mesmerized by her beauty, prompting me to ask a delicate question: "Dr. Sen," I queried, "what about . . . physical intimacy?"

His answer was swift and decisive: "No. No sex for now." Like all the commandments, this one was difficult to adhere to at times, yet I knew the prohibition was for my benefit. Sex increases intracranial pressure, and this was not a good thing during the postoperative period.

Karee had been a pillar of strength for me throughout the diagnosis, the surgery, and the postsurgical period. No doubt she wondered what she would do if her husband died (leaving her widowed and with child), yet she had been steadfast, even stoic. My mother commented to me privately how impressed she was by Karee's strength. "She's a good woman, a strong woman," my mother said. I agreed.

Five years later, when the tumor returned (this time, the size of a cherry), the most difficult part of it all for me was telling my wife and my mother. I couldn't bear to see the pain and the fear on their faces.

This time around, I immediately sensed that Karee's reaction was different. I sensed her withdrawing emotionally and asking more questions about insurance coverage than usual. In private, I felt a strange sense of isolation, as though the Sen Commandments had been unofficially reinstated. As gently as I could, I asked her if she felt she was distancing herself unconsciously in order to protect herself. After a brief pause, she agreed that she was indeed reacting defensively to the news of my tumor. After that, the Sen Commandments were lifted, and my wife once again became the strong woman who had stood by me at the altar, prayed for me during my surgery, and nursed me back to health.

The first two tumors were only the beginning. Over time, Manny developed a total of four brain tumors, each one treated successfully. And yet the story never seemed to end. When Manny was diagnosed with his most recent brain tumor in 2012, I was struck by a horrible kind of grief, which I tried to hide from my husband. Instead of thinking that surely this brain tumor would be the last, I fell prey to the idea that tumor after tumor would grow until finally one would kill him.

What made matters worse, on some level, was the brain surgeon's refusal to operate. There had been so much scarring from previous surgeries and the tumor was so small and slow-growing that surgery posed almost as much risk as leaving it there. Although it was a relief to hear that surgery wasn't necessary, the presence of the tumor was a constant source of anxiety for me. It was