

One

Feed the Hungry

*Identify and respond to your partner's
deepest longings.*

For I was hungry and you gave me food . . .

-Matthew 25:35

Teresa

"He doesn't understand me." "She doesn't fulfill me any longer." "I am not getting what I need from this marriage." These statements, representing a real spiritual and emotional hunger, are not just something you hear from desperate guests on the latest episode of *Dr. Phil*. Unfortunately, they are all too often spoken by many frustrated spouses.

Marriage is in crisis in our country and our world. In the United States the divorce rate still hovers around 50 to 60 percent, and the numbers aren't all that much different among those who identify themselves as Christians.

So what's the problem? How can two people who fall in love and vow to love each other "until death do us

part” in front of God, their family, and friends . . . then give up on their relationship just years, or in some cases, only months later?

How many other married couples, even if they’re not at the breaking point, are simply going through the motions, or “going along to get along”? They’re also hungry for love and acceptance—starving, actually—but are convinced that marriage is just getting through another day.

At one point in our relationship, years ago, my husband and I expressed similar feelings of disappointment and discouragement, a real emptiness and hunger. We weren’t satisfied with our marriage because we didn’t know what a Catholic marriage was supposed to be. When I look back on those first few years after our wedding, I could see how spiritually malnourished we really were. As Pope Francis says, too many of us fail to understand that only God can satisfy the hunger in our hearts:

“Dear friends, it is certainly necessary to give bread to the hungry—this is an act of justice. But *there is also a deeper hunger*, the hunger for a happiness that only God can satisfy, the hunger for dignity.”¹

Understanding, as Pope Francis says, that God (not a spouse) is the source of true joy and fulfillment was a real turning point for me and my husband. Dominick and I were raised Catholic and therefore married in the Catholic Church. We were, however, more catechized by the culture than by our faith. We were led to believe that the recipe for

happiness equaled pursuing the American dream together. And, for a while, as we were accumulating material and professional success, the recipe tasted pretty darn good. We were, however, missing one key ingredient: God. We put him totally on the back burner, so to speak. While we still went to weekly Mass, we had no real relationship with Christ, so the recipe quickly turned sour. We fooled ourselves into thinking we were a team, but in reality it was all about pursuing personal goals and nothing about putting the other partner first.

Truly satisfying or feeding the hunger in any marriage starts with bringing Christ into the relationship and keeping him there front and center. This was beautifully expressed in a Christian billboard campaign a few years ago. Dominick and I spotted it on our way home from the airport. One of the billboards erected along major freeways across the United States spoke specifically to the issue of marriage, and, given our history, this one really hit home. It read simply, "Loved the wedding, invite me to the marriage. —God."

Okay. I know what you're thinking. That's very clever and very noble. It also sounds quite unattainable for Jane and John Q. Public. What the heck does it really mean to invite God into marriage? How in the world does it translate into the nitty-gritty of real life?

Quite frankly, it translates into a single word: self-sacrifice.

It's not a word that's often plastered on billboards or in glossy magazines; it's a word not often used to describe the prevalent cultural "me, myself, and I" lifestyle. At first glance, this idea of self-sacrifice and inviting God into the marriage doesn't make marriage seem very attractive or romantic.

Or does it?

It does if we take the time to dig a little deeper and discover the true meaning of marriage as God, not the world, ordained it. In *Familiaris Consortio*, Saint John Paul II said that at the heart of married love is the total gift of self that husband and wife freely offer to each other. "The only 'place' in which this self-giving in its whole truth is made possible is marriage, the covenant of conjugal love freely and consciously chosen, whereby man and woman accept the intimate community of life and love willed by God himself" (FC 11).

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops also reminds us that marriage is a sacrament: "The bond between husband and wife is a visible sign of the sacrificial love of Christ for his Church. As a sacrament, marriage gives spouses the grace they need to love each other generously, in imitation of Christ."²

From the world's point of view, this "total gift of self" or "gift of sacrificial love" is seen as restrictive, oppressive, and downright medieval—straight from the Dark Ages. However, if we're talking about creating and maintaining an intimate island for your marriage, wouldn't you want

to be with someone who is more than willing to give you the last slice of coconut or sip of fresh water rather than someone who has a “me first” attitude? When one spouse knows the other is doing his or her best to be more Christ-like, the relationship will be a safe haven, a real island refuge where the hunger pangs are washed away. It took us years to come to this understanding, but once we did, everything changed.

Dominick

Ever since our first date at the Gnome Restaurant in downtown Detroit, Teresa and I have enjoyed trying different foods and going to different restaurants, whether it’s for a special occasion or a quick bite to eat. Our favorite, of course, is Italian, but we both enjoy a variety of cuisines. For the most part we like all the same foods except olives and avocados—I can’t stand them.

However, just because we like the same foods doesn’t mean that we have the same longings and desires at our deepest level. What she needs to be truly satisfied spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually is very different from what I need, and the only way we can discover what those needs are is if we share them with each other.

As an engineer (and probably also because I’m a man), I tend to see the world as a series of problems to be solved. Tell me the problem or issue and give me a little time to think about it, and I will give you a point-by-point list of how to solve it. That might be good for fixing a leaky

faucet or a broken pipe, but I wouldn't recommend it as a way to truly understanding someone's deepest desires in life.

Because we are complex human beings made in the image and likeness of God, and because we live in a world that is constantly bombarding us with messages contrary to true fulfillment, it is not easy to understand our own longings, let alone someone else's.

So, how do I begin to discover what it is my spouse most needs from me—how she (or he) needs to be satisfied? Well, it starts with humility—by humbly acknowledging that I will never come to understand my wife's deepest desires on my own. Only through the power of the Holy Spirit—by listening with the ears of my heart and seeing with the eyes of Christ—can I get a glimpse into what is truly important and meaningful to my wife.

And this isn't just at those critical times in life when a crisis or major decision point comes, but—more importantly, I believe—in the everyday conversations and activities. What is she passionate about and why? What gets her up in the morning or keeps her up late at night? What are her charisms and gifts? God has made each of us for a unique purpose in his plan. Our deepest longings help reveal God's plan for our lives. To see Teresa joyful is the greatest joy in my life. To know that she is content in the Lord in whatever she is doing and in whatever is going on in her life makes me feel like I am fulfilling my marriage covenant. As a husband, my role in this matter is to help

Teresa understand and respond to her own longings and then to nurture them as best I can.

One of my favorite stories from Teresa's childhood is about the "girlie fort" (her words) that she and a few friends built in her backyard when she was about ten years old. Teresa has always been physically strong for her size, so when I first heard how she beat up the neighborhood bully who had totally wrecked their fort, I just thought it was a cute kids-being-kids type of story. It wasn't until a few years later, having come to understand the passions and desires the Lord has instilled in her, that her actions as a ten-year-old revealed not a vengeful person but one who hated injustice wherever it was found.

Through our relationship as husband and wife, as partners for the whole of life and as best friends—all under the reign of Christ—I came to understand this and respond in ways that help Teresa better realize (as in make real) her God-given passions. (So as a Christmas gift a few years ago I bought her a DVD of *The Karate Kid*. Just kidding.)

How about you? Do you want to experience this kind of intimate grace in your marriage, discovering and feeding your partner's deepest longings? For the rest of this chapter (and at the end of each chapter hereafter), we've included some tips, reflection questions, and a prayer you can offer together to set you on this journey of mutual discovery, so that you might also experience firsthand authentic intimate graces in your marriage and in your family life.

Tips for Feeding the Hunger in Your Spouse's Heart

The first corporal work of mercy, feed the hungry, has a special application within marriage for those who crave the intimacy that comes from being fully and truly known. Over time, this kind of sustained mercy and heartfelt generosity can begin to wane. It is also important to remember that just as we grow and change as individuals, so too do our needs and desires. Within marriage, it's important to share and respond generously to these changes. Below are some ways to begin this intimate journey.

Reconnect with the couple you used to be. Think back to a time in your marriage, or maybe your courtship, when sharing your deep concerns or hungers happened more easily. Recall the qualities in your spouse that made you feel so safe and comfortable. Talk about how you might be able to regain that feeling and what you can do to help each other be more open.

Look for ways to make your spouse feel safe. Sometimes we're afraid to share our deepest longings for fear of being misunderstood or even rejected by our spouse. Take some time to remind your spouse (in words and actions) that you want to help him or her address the hungers in his or her heart in order to make your marriage and your relationship with God the best it can be.

Don't be afraid of taking baby steps to reach your goal. If you are not comfortable sharing your deepest longings face to face, think about ways to begin sharing that are comfortable for you. Write a love letter or note sharing one of your desires (or asking about one of your partner's). Plan a date night in which you do something you used to enjoy doing together. Pour a glass of wine and look at old photo albums or other mementos of your courtship and talk about what you miss most about those days.

Prayer for the Hungry Heart

Lord, we know, as Saint Augustine said, that you are the only cure for our restless hearts. We know that every human longing points to a need you have placed within us to lead us closer to you. Help us guide each other along the journey of married life that will one day lead us together to experience the kind of intimate grace you want us to enjoy. Amen.

Questions for Reflection

1. What “hungers” have you noticed in your spouse’s heart? How do those hungers point to unique gifts or abilities?
2. What “hungers” do you feel inside? Have you ever shared them with your spouse? If not, why not?
3. “God has made us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in him” (Saint Augustine). What hungers or longings do we experience that are placed there by God and can be met only in relationship with Christ and the Church?
4. Have you discussed ways in which as a couple you can help each other, through a deeper relationship with God, satisfy the hungry heart?