

Against the Current

A column for teens and young adults

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Love and Marriage

There is probably no decision we make which has the potential to bring so much joy or misery into our lives as the decision of who we will marry. Yet never in the history of mankind have such a variety of mutually exclusive beliefs regarding (among other things) sexuality, marriage, gender and interpersonal relationships coexisted in a single society. What's a person to think?

I've been a priest for almost 24 years, I've always been involved in youth ministry, I've prepared people for marriage, married them, baptized their children, and rejoiced with them in their familial milestones. I've also had the sad duty of listening and trying to offer good counsel to those experiencing marital problems, and sorrowed when marriages have failed. Based on my experience I'd like to offer you, our teenagers and young adults, a few observations.

At some point in your life you're probably going to fall in love. Please remember that love isn't sex. True love is much more than sexual attraction. If you want to learn what true love really is don't read romance novels, don't fantasize about holidays in the South Pacific, and for God's sake don't even consider watching "reality" TV! Go down, rather, to the local long-term nursing home. Watch the elderly wives and husbands who come every day without fail to feed, wash, and comfort their spouses – spouses who sometimes don't even remember them. Look at older couples in your family or community who have experienced difficult times, but stuck together through thick and thin. This is true love, true romance.

Love without commitment is an oxymoron. Love isn't a noun, it's a verb. A loving act is done for the good of the other, not our own good, not concerned with "what I might get out of it". Love is a choice we make every day, every minute. True love will always involve some sadness and sorrow. But love is the fundamental Christian virtue, and only in true love, holy and Godly love, do we experience the heights of our humanity and the depth of true romance.

The ancient Greeks had four words for love. Altruistic and charitable love, the kind of love which is totally concerned with the good of the other, the love which causes the mother to sacrifice herself for her child or the husband for the wife, is called in Greek *agape*. When we “fall in love” we experience a fiery type of romantic or passionate love called *eros*, from which we get the word “erotic”. Two other types of love are *storge*, or affection, and *philia*, the love which exists between friends. *Eros* is only a solid foundation for a marital relationship when combined with *agape*, *storge* and *philia*.

Eros without the rest is just lust, and will only lead to heartache and disappointment. This is why the Church firmly stands for and supports the institution of marriage. “Living together” without marriage is problematic for the simple reason that sexual activity without commitment to be there “for richer or poorer, in sickness and health” just ends up being self-gratification. “I’m here while my needs are being met, and when s/he can no longer meet my needs (as I define them) I’m outta here!” has become a mantra of our age. This, obviously, is not love.

Nowadays young people often expect to spend their early adulthood studying, working, seeing the world, and enjoying themselves. “I’ll get married when I’m financially stable, when I’ve done all the things I want to do and seen all the things I want to see”, is a sentiment we often hear expressed. Though this attitude might seem reasonable from a human perspective, it’s all wrong from the spiritual point of view. All the personal problems and societal ills of our world are the consequence of one common error - people not taking into account what God’s will for them might be, and instead concerning themselves exclusively with their own wishes and desires. As one philosopher has noted, “hell is when everyone gets what they want.”

Our bodies were created to bear and raise children in our late teens and twenties. The longer we put off childbearing the more difficult it becomes. Engaging in promiscuous sex and using certain birth-control methods (not to mention abortion) have verifiably negative effects on the future ability of a woman to conceive and give birth. I know many couples who put off marriage and childbearing till well into their thirties, and due to particular problems had great difficulty with conception. On top of all of this there is probably no more labor intensive work than looking after young children. It helps to be young and energetic yourself!

Please don't misunderstand. I'm not saying that anyone need get married right out of high school. But if "Mr. or Miss Right" comes along when I'm 23, if it is God's will that I, personally, should marry at 25 or 27, I'd be making a big mistake in not following my spiritual instincts. Just last year I was speaking to a man in his late 30's, a successful businessman, who was lamenting that he had met a woman when he was 22 and there was talk of marriage, but that he wanted to "have a good time" first, and didn't feel ready to settle down. He never did get married. He recognized that he had missed something. His "freedom" was a burden heavy for him to bear.

Raising children is undoubtedly the most important and the least recognized human activity going. But as we know from other facets of our lives, the greater the investment, the greater the return. There is perhaps no greater joy than watching your children grow into respected, responsible adults.

One of the very sad by-products of our dollar-oriented society is that children are often seen as competition for limited resources. "We're not well-off enough to have children", "how will we manage" and other questions are commonly heard from would-be parents. To such people I would say "you can't afford to not have children!"

I often visit elderly parishioners who never married, or have no children, and unless they've been active in their parish or community they invariably end up very lonely. Who will visit us, look after our needs, make sure that we get a proper burial, if not our children? And we all know that due to the nature of business nowadays employees must often travel great distances to find a job. The more children I have the greater chance that at least one of them will live close enough to be able to visit me regularly, etc.

Having three or four children will not make us poor. But personally, given the choice, I think I'd rather be poor than old and lonely.

The love which binds husbands to wives or children to parents is nothing more than God's love for us, poured out and shared among His creatures. The biblical imagery used to describe God's love for us is family imagery – the Bridegroom and the Bride, the Father and His children, etc. This is why it's so important to try, as much as possible, to integrate God into our familial relationships, and our familial relationships into the Church.

Our greatest chance of having successful marriages, good children, etc., is to have a God-centered family life. I'm not talking about parents who "take their kids to Church so they'll learn morality". When the parents only go to Church "for the sake of the children" the children usually leave the Church as soon as they're able to, with the parents usually not far behind. Parents must have a personal relationship with Christ themselves, whether they have children or not. It's a statistical fact that couples who pray together stay together - even when they belong to different Churches! Regular and frequent family and personal prayer, as well as liturgical worship, are the irreplaceable building blocks of a successful Christian family, marriage, and life.

Nothing in this life has the potential to give you greater satisfaction, a deeper sense of fulfillment, a stronger feeling of love and happiness, and even bring you closer to God, than a good marital and family life. Pray to God every day, asking that He will send you a good spouse, and be ready to accept this spouse when God sends them. Never forget that marriage is something you renew every moment, and that your love, like your body, will change over the years. But if you're sincerely committed to God and each other the changes will only be for the better.