

Marriage in Christ: The Sacrament of Faithful, Lifelong Love

Bishop John F. Kinney's Pastoral Letter on Marriage

Introductory message from Bishop John Kinney

When I think back on my own first experiences of the Sacrament of Marriage in my home and family, I think of the faithful love, and sometimes "tough love," my mom and dad had for each other. I think of how they lived the Sacrament of Marriage with Christ at the center of their lives. And I think of how they shared their love and life with my brother, Bernard, and me. I realize that the home my parents made together was really a school of Christian life.

My first memories of family life in Winthrop, Iowa, and in Winona, Minnesota, are of the strong messages of the importance of our family at table together. We were at our very best at meals. Mom and Dad loved to cook together. Saturday evening and Sunday noon meals were important family times, with incredible home-baked food. I can still smell the homemade bread that came out of the oven every Saturday.

We prayed together as a family and that helped us through the tough times. It was in my family that I first learned about love, forgiveness, and working together. It was in my family that I learned about God, prayer, the Church, suffering, and the meaning of Christian death. And it was in my family that the earliest seeds of priesthood were planted in my heart.

I cannot write about the Sacrament of Marriage without first thanking God for the beauty, strength, and grace of my own father and mother, and my brother. What strong teachers and models of love and faithfulness they have been for me.

Dear Engaged Couple:

By now, you have probably announced your engagement to your immediate family members and to other relatives and friends. Perhaps you have enjoyed watching their reactions. Perhaps you have also visited the priest who will preside at your wedding. Or maybe your wedding date is fast approaching and you are busy with all the last-minute preparations involved in such an event. I assume you have also participated in, or have made plans to participate in, a diocesan-sponsored marriage preparation course.

Whatever the case, you are on my mind and in my heart. The gospels tell us that occasionally Jesus called his closest disciples together and invited them to go away with him for a while so he could speak to them from his heart, without the distractions of the crowd or the busyness of day-to-day life. That is what I wish to do with this letter. I wish for you to leave behind all the distractions of your wedding preparations and come away with me for a while, so I can speak to you from my heart about the Church vocation you have accepted and about the Sacrament of Marriage you are about to confer on each other. By now, you are probably looking at each other and saying, "Church vocation? I thought 'Church vocation' meant being a priest, deacon or religious brother or sister. We're just, well...getting married. And what does he

mean by 'the sacrament we are about to confer on each other?' I thought we were getting married by a priest."

Marriage Makes the Church Go 'Round

Recently, I had the privilege of welcoming an entire family into the Catholic Church. The father was returning to the faith of his childhood. The mother, who had been baptized in another Christian denomination, received the sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist. The two school-age children were baptized and also received their First Communion. When asked why she chose to join the Catholic Church, the mother said that, among other things, she was attracted to the Catholic understanding that marriage is a calling. She had never heard of marriage spoken of in such a lofty way.

For too many decades, indeed for centuries, many Catholics had not often heard of marriage spoken of in that way either. Sometimes, Church leaders seemed to imply that marriage was created by God for those who didn't believe they were holy enough for priesthood or religious life, the "higher" vocations. But today, the whole Church recognizes that very important and very sacred role of marriage in furthering the kingdom of God -- which is, after all, the purpose of all vocations.

Indeed, the Church recognizes that, given the challenges to marriage and family posed by today's popular culture, Christian marriage may be the vocation that requires the deepest level of faith and trust in God. At the same time, the Church also recognizes that faithful Christian marriage, lived as God meant it to be lived, can be one of the surest means of healing the many social wounds afflicting today's world. As a married couple, in fact, your greatest contribution to the Church will not be the money you drop into the collection basket on Sunday morning, or volunteering to organize the parish bazaar -- though these contributions are certainly welcome and appreciated. Your greatest contribution will be fulfilling your responsibility to present the Good News of Jesus Christ to the family you will hopefully create together and to represent the values of the Church in the world around you. In my visit with the Holy Father, he said, "...the principal promoters of Christian family life are couples and families themselves, who have a special responsibility to be servants of other couples and families." ¹

I am emphasizing the Catholic understanding of marriage as a vocation because it is very important to me that you understand that your marriage is about something greater than just yourselves. It is a way of being in the Church, and being church in the world. The family unit is often called the domestic church or the church in miniature. Thus, marriage is at the same time an awesome privilege and an awesome responsibility. In fact, many believe, as I do, that God not only calls individuals to the married state in general, just as he calls some to priesthood and religious life, but that he calls specific individuals to marry each other, just as he calls men and women to specific religious orders, such as Franciscan or Benedictine.

When I hear some couples describe the haphazard way in which they met, I think to myself, "God must have arranged that marriage. No one else could have come up with such convoluted circumstances and achieved the same results." Take Dave and Kathy, for example. Kathy recalls that, as a college student, she returned to her parent's home for a visit. When she walked in the door, her mother said that some boy had just called for her and she should call him back. Kathy asked which boy it was and her mother said she didn't know for sure. Kathy said, "Well, was it Dave?" naming someone she had met the previous weekend. "Yes," her mother said. "I think it was Dave." Kathy called Dave and asked, "Did you want something?" He paused and then finally said, "Ah, sure. Do you want to go out tonight?"

It wasn't until later that Kathy found out that it wasn't Dave at all who had called. It was Jim, a fellow she had dated a few times. Nonetheless, Dave and Kathy have now been married for more than 20 years. Stories like this give new meaning to the biblical passage, "What God has joined together, let no one put asunder."

I'd like you to take a few minutes to recall how you met each other. Can you identify circumstances that could only have been the work of God in your lives?

About that Sacrament

Very often when I ask couples what it means to them that their marriage is a sacrament, they say, "Well...we were married in the Church by a priest." That's not a wrong answer, but it's only part of what the Church means when it says that marriage is a sacrament. One of my favorite possessions is an icon of the wedding feast at Cana. It was at this wedding reception, according to the Bible, that Jesus, at the request of his mother, performed his first miracle -- turning water into wine. In this particular icon, the bride and groom sit at the head table with looks of amazement on their faces, as if to say, "A miracle is happening in our marriage and Jesus is part of it!" I have always believed it is significant that the first recorded miracle of our Lord occurred at a wedding. I believe it indicates the esteem with which Jesus regarded marriage. I believe it also reveals that when Christ is a partner in a marriage, miracles do indeed happen!

The great theologian of the early Church, St. Augustine, wrote that Christ's presence at the Cana wedding and the miracle he performed there are signs that he gave his divine approval to marriage.

But Jesus did even more than that. One of the scriptural passages used most often to illustrate the Sacrament of Marriage is the letter to the Ephesians, chapter 5, verses 23-33. While this passage has, to a certain degree, fallen on hard times because it appears to prescribe a subservient role for women, it does, when taken in its entirety and when properly interpreted, contain a beautiful explanation of the "great mystery" of marriage. And that mystery is this: The love between husband and wife is meant to be as great as the love of Christ for each one of us and for his Church; the love between husband and wife is meant to be so great that "the two will become one flesh," (Mt.19:6) and these two will give their lives for each other, just as Christ gave his life for us. The even greater mystery is that marriage -- the lifelong faithful, committed love between one man and one woman -- is so sacred that Christ, the eternal bridegroom, chose it to be nothing less than a sign to the world of his love for his bride, the Church. It is a sacrament. Because it is only you -- the bride and groom -- who can freely consent to such a commitment for yourselves, it is you who confer this Sacrament of Marriage on each other. The priest does not marry you. You marry each other.

While professing the marriage vows to each other is a serious, solemn and binding act, you need not fear that this is a commitment beyond human capability. Every sacrament carries with it the grace to fulfill its requirements. That grace does not end as the sun sets on your wedding day. It is there at your disposal "until death do you part."² In fact, you began receiving that grace at Baptism. It was at that very first sacrament in your life that you were received into the Christian community, a community characterized, above all, by love -- Christ's love for us and our love for one another. The Sacrament of Matrimony is your call to continue witnessing to love in a more specific way.

I have another icon that I like to use to illustrate the mystery of Christian marriage. It may surprise you to learn that it is an icon of the Blessed Trinity, the three divine persons in one -- God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

"How does that work?" you may be asking yourselves. "Does one person of the Trinity represent one spouse, another person represent the other spouse, and the third person represent the children of the family?"

No. That's not how it works at all. The Trinity is, after all, one God. But the Church has long understood the Trinity as a communion of love and life. That is why I choose it as a fitting symbol of marriage -- a communion of two people whose love finds its highest expression in the creation of new life, in the creation of family, which is then yet another new communion of love and life.

No doubt, you realize by now that this Christian sacramental view of marriage is different from a strictly secular notion of marriage. And one need only sit down in front of the television for an hour or so to recognize that Christian marriage is far different from the view of marriage one usually sees in popular entertainment. Christian sacramental marriage is indissoluble. It is faithful love for a lifetime. It is a covenant more than a contract. While marriage also necessarily implies some form of civil contract -- you do, after all, have to have a marriage license -- a marriage covenant goes much deeper than that. You might say it is a partnership with Christ at the center. It is a marriage in Christ. By now you may be thinking, "I've never thought of myself as particularly holy or religious. All this talk about marriage in Christ is a little overwhelming to me."

It's okay to feel that way. Neither God nor the Church expects you to do it all on your own. There's that grace you receive with the sacrament, remember? And no one expects that you will automatically become an expert on marriage the moment you are pronounced husband and wife. It can take years, and sometimes it takes a crisis, too, for a man and a woman to develop total trust in each other and in God.

I do want to make it clear, however, that the Church takes marriage very seriously.

When you exchange vows in a Catholic ceremony, the priest and parish community expect that you understand those marriage vows in the same way that the Church does - - as sacred, permanent and indissoluble. If you are choosing to have your wedding in a Catholic church just to satisfy relatives, or for sentimental reasons, or to have a nice backdrop for photos, then you need to pause right now and honestly re-evaluate whether you're ready for sacramental marriage.

These may seem like harsh words, and perhaps inconvenient, too, if you happen to have your wedding all planned. But I would not be acting in Christian charity if I did not advise you in this way. The Church does not want to make it unreasonably difficult for couples to have a Catholic wedding. But neither does the Church wish to trivialize the sacrament and perhaps scandalize the faithful by allowing couples to enter into it halfheartedly.

Now would be a good time to stop for a few minutes and reflect on how you see Christian sacramental marriage as different from the notion of marriage one often sees in our popular culture, especially in popular entertainment. Identify two or three couples you know who are examples of the Christian sacramental understanding of marriage.

When I look at her, I see the image of God.

When he married Jane 35 years ago, Richard could have given you a textbook definition of sacramental marriage. But now he describes it in this way: "There are just times when we are with each other, in each other's presence, and there is just something, I can't tell what it is, there's a joy in it; to a certain extent, it's kind of a high. There are times when I'm in a deep appreciation of this person. It's love, but it's more than that. My soul is really grasping this person. There are times when my appreciation for this person is such that when I look at her, I see the image of God."

"I've got a winner," he concludes. For her part, Jane has this to say: "It's a hard thing to explain, the Sacrament of Marriage. I always felt we had something very special and Godlike."

Richard and Jane have been married for 35 years and have three children.

New Life

You can see that the Church is, in many ways, countercultural when it comes to marriage. Nowhere is this difference between Church teaching and cultural expectations as evident as in the area of sexuality. There is much confusion about sexuality today, and there is even greater confusion about what the Church teaches regarding sexuality. We live in a society in which sex and sexual innuendo are used regularly to sell products, to entertain, to prove manliness or femininity, or to express personal freedom. We have been led to believe that, regardless of marital status, sexual intimacy is always okay as long as it is "safe" and consensual.

The Church takes a different view. The Church believes that sexual intimacy, as created by God, is so sacred that it, too, is a sign of the union between God and people. It is so very sacred, in fact, that God created the act of sexual intercourse to be the most sublime physical expression of married love. So highly does he regard this act that he intended it as the very means by which couples become co-creators with him.

Many couples underestimate the sacredness of sexuality. They think that premarital sex and even living together before marriage are acceptable, maybe even desirable, means of testing their compatibility. The problem with this view is that premarital sex and cohabitation are missing one very important element -- vowed commitment.

Cohabitation cannot honestly be described as a "trial marriage"³ because it is not a marriage at all. It is very different for a man and a woman to be living together with the understanding that if it doesn't work out, they can just move out, than it is for a man and a woman to be living together with the mutual understanding that if it doesn't seem to be working out, they will both try harder to make it work out. Cohabitation allows for one or both partners to hold back a part of himself or herself. There can be no such holding back in marriage. In fact, studies show that couples who cohabit before marriage actually are more likely to divorce than those who refrain from cohabitation.⁴ Rather than prepare them for marriage, cohabitation distorts their understanding of what marriage is all about.

The Church is often ridiculed as being prudish and old-fashioned when it comes to sexuality. But, in reality, it is the Church that has the highest regard for sexual intimacy. The Church believes that sexuality is one of God's best gifts to humanity. It is his gift to each of you. It is, in turn, your gift to give to your spouse and to no one else. Just as you would not want to give your most prized possession to just anybody, you do not want to give your sexuality to anyone other than the one who has promised lifelong fidelity to you. It is the most important wedding gift you can give to each other.

One of the couples who responded to a questionnaire I conducted on marriage clearly understood this. When they bought a house five months before their wedding, the young man moved into the house alone, but chose to sleep on the living room couch because he wanted to preserve the bedroom as the special place in which he and his wife would express their union with each other after their wedding. "Waiting for sexual intimacy until we were married was probably the most important thing in our minds," they wrote. "We wanted to keep our bodies pure until we shared them with each other." What was the result of this determination? "Our wedding night was truly the most magical night of our lives."

Several couples who had engaged in sexual intercourse before marriage, especially those who had sexual relations with partners other than their future spouse, wrote that they now regret having done so. As their married love for each other deepened, they wished that they had not given their gift of sexuality to anyone but their spouse. But, if you have been or are sexually active, it is still possible to achieve that sacred sense of self-giving. I encourage you to reserve sexual intimacy from now until your wedding night.

So far, I have said a lot about the gift of sexuality as a means of expressing and deepening marital union. I would like to talk now about the gift of sexuality as God's means of enabling couples to be co-creators with him. Just as the Church teaches that sexual intercourse is meant to be used only within the context of marriage, the Church teaches that acts of intercourse between a husband and wife are always to be open to the creation of new life. That is why the Church opposes the use of artificial contraception. The ability to have children is a sacred privilege and one of the most profound ways in which humanity can participate in the work of the Creator. Giving birth to children and raising them to be disciples of Christ are inherent to the vocation of Christian marriage. It's true that many forces in today's society would have you believe that children are mostly a burden, that they interfere with careers and the pursuit of economic success or personal happiness. But that is a view that is excessively materialistic and individualistic. This does not mean, as Pope John Paul has explained, that a couple is expected to be irresponsible about bringing new life into the world. The Church recognizes that there are circumstances which make it appropriate for a couple to use natural means to try to avoid conception. The Church, in fact, advocates and promotes a method of family planning called Natural Family Planning (NFP). This is a scientific and highly successful method of either avoiding or achieving conception. During my ad limina visit with Pope John Paul, he stated, "Many couples have experienced how natural family planning promotes mutual respect, encourages tenderness between husband and wife, and helps develop an authentic inner freedom."⁵ Your pastor can tell you how to find out more about this method.

How do the Church's teachings regarding sexual intimacy differ from the view that is often promoted in society? Which view do you think is more conducive to marital commitment? Have you talked yet about whether you both want to have children? Have you talked about your expectations regarding family planning? If not, now would be a good time to do so.

The Big Day

I realize that up until now I've laid some pretty heavy stuff on you, so let us lighten up a bit and talk about your plans for your wedding celebration.

A Catholic wedding reflects in at least two ways the Church's belief that marriage is a sacrament. First, the liturgy and ceremony point to the sacramental nature of marriage. The music that is selected, for example, is sacred music with lyrics that point to the love between the bride and groom as a sign of Christ's love for the Church. Popular songs that dwell only on human love have their place at the wedding reception or dance, but not in church. Likewise, poetry and other literary readings have a place at the wedding reception, but only scriptural readings are appropriate for the liturgy.

A church wedding is also always a celebration that involves the whole community of faith, especially as it is embodied by the particular parish in which the wedding occurs. A wedding, in other words, is not a private affair, and, except in rare cases, should not be

limited to relatives and close friends only. It should be understood that the parish is always invited to witness the sacrament and to gather in prayer for and with the new couple. I recently read of a priest who has even invited couples to consider proclaiming their marriage vows during Sunday Mass when the parish is gathered for Eucharist. While this idea may not catch on as a custom any time soon -- the priest admits few couples have taken him up on this invitation -- such a practice would certainly emphasize the understanding that marriage is given by Christ for the purpose of building up the whole Church.

It is not my intent, however, to dwell at length on guidelines for planning your wedding liturgy. Because some of those guidelines may vary from parish to parish, it is best to ask the priest who will preside at your wedding, or the parish liturgist, for assistance. I do want to say a few words, however, about simplicity when it comes to planning your wedding day. I have noticed in recent years that many weddings have become so elaborate and luxurious that the most important moment -- the actual exchange of vows - - gets lost in the hoopla. I have heard of brides who spent their wedding day stressed because they had been running around for days and weeks doing such things as ordering flowers, selecting bridesmaids' dresses, sending invitations, registering for gifts, finding a photographer, shopping for a guest book and decorative cake knife, trying on shoes, making arrangements for out-of-town guests, selecting the dinner menu...the list seems endless, and it doesn't even begin to include packing and moving into the first home the couple will share.

I have also noticed the trend of spending the hours immediately preceding the ceremony in a seemingly endless session of posing for photographs, sometimes leaving the bride and groom nearly exhausted. In other cases, a long photographic session follows the ceremony, thus detaining the bride and groom while their wedding reception gets underway.

I am concerned about this growing frenzy and materialism for several reasons. First, it distracts you and your guests from reflecting on what the wedding is really all about, the beginning of a sacramental marriage. It also tends to reinforce the false notion that a wedding is more a show or performance than a prayerful liturgy. But, above all, in a world in which millions of people will not even eat on your wedding day because of poverty, it seems scandalous to spend thousands of dollars on clothing, decorations, and entertainment for a single occasion. I would like to encourage you to do something that would be considered radical in our culture. I would like to encourage you to plan a simple wedding and, with some of the money you save, make a contribution to an organization that serves the poor. I guarantee this will bring more blessings on your marriage than an expensive wedding dress or an extravagant reception. This will also allow you to start your marriage on better financial footing!

I am not suggesting that you not celebrate your wedding, or that you fail to show hospitality to your guests. I am merely saying, please, do it in moderation.

Evaluate whether you have already spent more time shopping for dresses and trying on tuxedos than in choosing and reflecting on the scriptural readings for your wedding and reflecting together on the meaning of the vows you intend to profess. Have you thought of memorizing your marriage vows?

You may have taken care of every detail imaginable. But if you haven't taken time to plan your wedding liturgy and to reflect on the Scripture readings, vows, and prayers that will be spoken during that liturgy, you're not yet ready to get married. John and Meg figured they spent as much time planning their wedding Mass as they did planning the wedding reception. They wanted their guests to recognize that this was

a sacred event, not a fashion spectacle, and they wanted the congregation to be praying with and for them, not just watching them.

Here's what John and Meg did:

- They memorized their marriage vows and reflected on them during times of prayer before the wedding.
- They carefully selected Scripture readings and discussed them with the priest who would officiate at their wedding.
- They asked him to prepare a personalized homily based on the readings.
- The bride and groom both wore white to signify that the Sacrament of Marriage flows from the Sacrament of Baptism.
- In another reference to Baptism, they each lit a candle from the Easter candle and then lit the unity candle together.
- They kept the individual candles lit, however, to signify that, while marriage is a relationship, it is a relationship between two individuals.
- In yet another reference to Baptism, their godparents were invited to bring up the offertory gifts.
- Many guests commented that this was the most beautiful and prayerful wedding they had ever attended and that it brought tears to their eyes. The wedding day was a lot of fun, say John and Meg. It's just that the fun didn't distract from the sacrament.

John and Meg have been married for two years

From Me to We

So far, I have talked with you about the meaning of what you are about to do. I hope I have impressed on you the seriousness of the step you are about to take, but I hope I have also encouraged you with the reassurance that, for as long as you are open to God's call, God will bless your marriage. A wise vocation director for a religious community once told me, "God does not give you a vocation if he does not intend to help you carry it through." I think this is as true of marriage as it is of priesthood and religious life.

Of course, carrying through on any vocation, including marriage, requires some human effort as well. I recently sent a questionnaire to married couples across the diocese. One of the questions I asked was whether their expectation of marriage was different from their actual experience. Almost every one of the 1,500 couples who returned the questionnaire responded to that question in this way: "Marriage is a lot more fulfilling than I ever expected, but it's also a lot more work." That's what I would like to talk about now: the work of marriage.

It is not my intention to cover every aspect of marriage in this letter. It would no longer be a letter; rather it would be a complete set of encyclopedias! Besides, there are many church programs and publications that address specific aspects of marriage in-depth. But I have been talking to a lot of married couples in preparation for writing this pastoral letter, and following are some of the things they thought I should say to you.

Commitment

The couples I have talked to and the people who responded to my questionnaire said over and over again that commitment is one of the most important aspects of marriage. Some of them spoke of it as a process in which the partners gradually progress from me

to we. What they mean is that, for a marriage to be successful, each spouse must let go of individual wishes and interests, and they must both start thinking as a couple. In other words, they must put the relationship before all else. There is no room for selfishness in a marriage.

One couple used the image of a suitcase to illustrate this point. The wife recalled that she first realized she was part of a we when she started packing to visit relatives on the first Christmas following the wedding. For the first time in her life, she was packing men's clothes in the same suitcase as her own. The image of the mingled clothing has stayed with her through more than 30 years of marriage. Another couple also recalled a suitcase experience. This time, it was unpacking that drove home the importance of going from me to we. After the wedding, the couple moved their belongings into an apartment. While the husband went off to work one day, the wife started unpacking. When he came home in the evening, he discovered that she was throwing most of his things away and keeping all of her own things. She didn't even realize she was doing it. *As an engaged couple, you have already begun the process of moving from me to we. What are some images or anecdotes from your relationship that illustrate this growing commitment?*

Communication

If the couples I spoke with were required to put into three words their best advice for the newly married, those three words would be, Communication. Communication. Communication. And if those couples were required to put into three words the most difficult thing about being married, those three words would again be, Communication. Communication. Communication. You get the drift?

The ability to appropriately communicate feelings, needs, and desires -- and to ask for forgiveness and offer forgiveness when necessary -- is so important and, for some people, so challenging, that couples often make rules regarding it. Many, for example, have a rule that they will never go to bed angry with each other. If they have an argument, they resolve their differences first. Many years ago, I spoke to a couple who had been married less than a year. Their rule was that neither could leave the apartment building in which they were living in the midst of a disagreement. Ten years later, I asked them if they had stuck to the rule. They said they had...though occasionally one or the other got as far as the steps outside their apartment and sat down for a while before returning.

The purpose of communication within a sacramental marriage, however, is not just to let each other air expectations, disappointments and grievances in the hope that one or the other will eventually give in. The purpose is to work toward communion, to make whatever individual sacrifices and compromises are necessary for the good of the relationship. It's a we thing, not a me thing.

It often happens in a marriage that only one spouse is willing to seek help when there is a communication problem in the relationship. Do you think that could happen to you? Do you think it would be a good idea for you to have a house rule about communications? What might that rule be?

Finance

Young couples often say that finances cause the most stress in their marriage. Many young people begin their lives together in debt because of college loans, buying and

furnishing a home, or paying the bills from the wedding. Most of them do not remember the days when their own parents started off with little money and few possessions. They may think their parents always had all the things they have now. They may feel disappointed that they can't afford a similar lifestyle right away. Ours is also a society that values possessions and materialism, making it difficult to choose to live simply and within our means, and making it seem foolish to follow the biblical injunction to tithe a percent of one's income for the poor and for the works of the Church.

It is also troubling that in many marriages the spouses continue to keep their financial affairs separate from each other, each clinging to individual credit cards, checking accounts and savings. They don't realize that progressing from me to we can be stymied without also moving from mine to ours.

It is important to remind yourselves now and then that, while money is essential for survival, it should not be allowed to tear your love apart. What are some of the financial challenges you might face during the first years of your marriage? How do you plan to progress from mine to ours in the area of finances?

Time Management

People may have been no less busy back in the pioneer days, but today, more and more, busyness takes family members away from each other rather than pulling them together. As a young couple, you may each be trying to establish separate careers at the same time that you are trying to establish a home. You will also discover that as soon as you are married, you will each have an additional family to relate to -- your in-laws. Then, when your own children come along, you will be busier than you ever thought possible. It is important to set realistic goals and boundaries early in your marriage. And this may involve sacrificing, or delaying, some individual dreams. Is it realistic, for example, for both of you to be working full-time and attending college half-time when the first child is due in two weeks? Or, you may be able to afford a week at a resort for your first anniversary if you each take a part-time job in addition to your full-time work, but is it worth it if you rarely see each other for those first twelve months of your marriage? Given the importance of establishing your own home, will you really be able to visit each set of your parents once a week? Maybe you have to agree on a pattern of every-other-week visits.

It is important that you learn to recognize when life is getting so hectic that your relationship is suffering, and to change the circumstances as much as possible. It is especially important to take time to continue growing in your spousal relationship as your children are growing up. It's an old saying, but a wise one: "The best thing parents can do for their children is to love each other."

I suggest that at least every six months, beginning right now, you sit down together and evaluate whether the activities you are involved in together and as individuals are helpful to your relationship or are getting in the way of your relationship.

Infertility

It is the expectation of the Church that married couples remain open to having children. It is the sad experience of some couples, however, that they are unable to conceive or carry a child to term. This is a painful discovery for them. Often these couples are able to adopt children. For some, even that may not be an option. The Church recognizes the pain that such couples experience and encourages them to use their capacity for

parenting in other ways, such as by welcoming foster children into their home, or by volunteering to help in schools and community programs for at-risk children. Obviously, these are not substitutes for having one's own children, but such acts of kindness can help fulfill the couple's desire to be fruitful.

Have you talked about alternative ways you might express your love for children and use your parenting skills if you are unable to conceive or carry a child to term?

Ecumenical marriage

In many marriages, the spouses do not share the same faith tradition. One of you may be Catholic and the other may have been raised in another Christian church, or in a faith tradition other than Christianity. Perhaps one of you professes no religion at all. It is common that when people are in love and about to get married they think such faith differences will never affect them, but invariably they do. It is usually when the children come along that ecumenical couples must make decisions about religion. Some spouses decide at that time that it is less confusing to the children if they are both members of the same church. But others successfully maintain an interfaith or inter-denominational relationship throughout their married lives. Those who do this most successfully are usually those who remain fully committed to their own separate religions but also are fully respectful of each other's. Many of these couples say they worship regularly in both churches. In this way, they perform a valuable service of ecumenism.

It is the teaching of the Church, however, that in an ecumenical marriage, the Catholic spouse is expected to do everything possible to raise the children as Catholics. The spouse who is not Catholic needs to be informed of this before the wedding. When a Catholic marries someone who is of a faith tradition other than Christian -- such as Jewish or Muslim -- there are other issues that need to be discussed. Such couples should visit with the pastor or leader of both faiths.

If you are an interfaith couple, have you talked about your religious preferences and expectations? Are you prepared to raise your children as Catholics?

Prayer

It is not because I think prayer is the least important aspect of marriage that I choose to address it last. It is because I think it is most important. I put it at the end because I want you to remember it. As many elderly couples have told me, "Prayer is the glue that held us together." Ironically, many couples also say that learning to pray together as husband and wife did not come easily. Sharing prayer, some of them have noted, is almost more intimate than sharing sexuality. But none of them regrets having learned to pray together regularly. Many of them started out by praying traditional prayers, such as the rosary, mealtime blessings, and the Lord's Prayer. It was only gradually that they became comfortable with sharing their own deep spiritual longings during their times of prayer. In addition to praying together at home, it is important for couples to worship together in a community of faith. It is within a parish context that groups of couples can support each other, pray for each other, and work together to create a healthy environment for raising children. Pope John Paul has asked that each parish be a "'family of families,' helping in every way possible to nourish the spiritual life of parents and children through prayer, the Word of God, the sacraments, and the witness of holiness and charity."⁶ It is within the faith community, particularly through the Eucharist, that sacramental marriage is enriched so that couples are able to fulfill their mission in the world. It is at Sunday

Eucharist that family members begin each week by asking for forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer and recommitting themselves to each other through the Sign of Peace. I believe, as Pope John Paul stated, "Where the family life is strong and healthy, the sense of community and solidarity is also strong, and this helps build that 'civilization of life and love' which must be everyone's aim." 7

Take each other's hands now and say a simple prayer for God's blessing on your marriage.

The book entitled *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff...And It's All Small Stuff* may be a best seller, but Gerald and Helen know better.

"It really is the little things that drive you nuts," said Helen. She was talking about the first year or so of her marriage to Gerald. "This man! When I dated him, he was so neat. We got married and his shorts are on the floor. The food is left on the counter. He leaves toothpaste and whiskers in the sink."

"Her pantyhose are hanging on the shower," he chimes in. "Each of us would have our own system of squeezing the toothpaste," he continues.

"And the car," she interrupts. "We still deal with this one. I'm short and he's tall. I have to readjust the mirrors every time I drive."

"She does right-side driving and is always pulling on the brakes," he interjects. How can these two live together? Well, it's also the small stuff that adds up to love, trust, and romance.

He brings wildflowers to her when he gets back from jogging, for example. And she tries to make sure she's "spiffed up" for him when he gets home from work.

Sometimes they share a hug and a smooch in the kitchen.

"Marriage is hard work," they agree. But they also agree on this: "It's a wonderful, wonderful vocation."

- Gerald and Helen have been married for 36 years and have four children.

One More Favor

I want to thank you for taking this time to come away with me to talk about sacramental marriage. I want to assure you of my prayers and the prayers of the whole Church as you stand before God and each other to profess your marriage vows.

I hope this letter has provided an opportunity for you to reflect on your relationship in new and deeper ways. I found that my own priestly vocation was strengthened as I listened to married couples talk about how they live out their vocations. Truly, there are many heroic and faithful couples in our diocese and beyond. One thing that I heard from all of them is their heartfelt concern for you and for all young couples. Many of them recognize the challenges you will face, and they are determined to pray for you and do whatever they can to help you along your married way. I hope you will take advantage of the generosity and wisdom of experienced couples in your faith community when you need encouragement. And I hope you will share your youthful enthusiasm and idealism with the faith community as well. Let us all always remember that we need each other.

Now, I have just one more favor to ask you. I would be pleased if you would reread this letter occasionally during your first years of marriage and reflect again on what a great journey of faith and love it is that you began on your wedding day.

God bless you,

+John F. Kinney
Bishop of the Diocese of Saint Cloud

Appendix

To Married Couples

I want you to know how important you are to the life of the Church in the way you sustain your marriage as a sacrament of mutuality, continuous love and new life. Please be aware that you are a witness to the Catholic community and particularly to engaged couples in the way you treat each other.

I believe it is important that you share your knowledge and experiences of this sacrament with our young couples planning for marriage. You need to be visible to them and talk with them about how you live your married lives during good times as well as times of challenge. One way you can support engaged couples is by volunteering some time to be with them, perhaps as part of the diocese's marriage preparation program. In this way you can be a valuable witness to marriage, the Church, and its teachings on the sacrament.

To Parents of the Engaged

I want to remind you that you are invaluable to your children as teachers, as lovers, and as havens for peace and rest. Since the birth of your children, you have been their primary educators. Now, more than ever, you must continue to teach, although you have a different role. Your children need you to teach them how to love, how to forgive, and how to work at a marriage. No marriage is easy, but so often we hear engaged couples expressing a belief that everything will be fine without a lot of hard work on their part. They need to know from you that marriage takes a lot of work, as well as a commitment to stay together and find solutions when things get rough.

Be clear and straightforward with them about the Church and its strong desire to help them. If your child and his or her future spouse are living together before marriage, you need to keep the lines of communication open. But you must also be honest with them about the Church's teachings regarding cohabitation and the wisdom and grace of saving sexual intimacy for marriage.

Your sons and daughters will listen to you -- just seeing your witness to the Sacrament of Marriage already says a lot. Finally, tell your children you love them and ask them to express their love to their spouses regularly.

To Relatives and Friends of the Engaged

You play an indispensable role during the time leading up to the couple's marriage. Help them to be faithful witnesses of Christian love. When a couple announces their marriage, be supportive and help both partners be faithful members of the Church. Keep them in your prayers, both during their engagement and throughout their married life.

You who are members of the wedding party have accepted a special role in supporting this couple. Not only on their wedding day, but throughout their marriage, you will be a blessing to them as you stand by them in good times and bad.

To Pastors

Your time with the engaged couple is an important moment of faith for them. Like Christ the Good Shepherd of John's gospel, who was present at the marriage feast of Cana, you are present at the marriage of this man and woman, shepherding them in the name of Christ.

Please work with them in a positive way by supporting them, forming them and being spiritual guides to them. Spend time praying with them and teaching them how to pray together. Help them to love the Eucharist as a couple by stressing the importance of attending Sunday Mass together as a family. Encourage them to forgive each other every evening so that their hearts will always remain open to the love that brought them together.

It is important that you be clear and straightforward about the Church and its teachings -- especially concerning marriage as a sacrament and as a meaningful vocation in the life of the Church. As a priest of the Church, whose commitment to celibacy is a sign of God's kingdom, you are in a special position to help them see that, at times in their marriage, they will be called to be celibate, and that this celibacy is a sign of their faithful love, just as your celibacy is a sign of your faithful love for God.

Convey the importance of these Church teachings to your deacons and parish staff members who work with you in the formation of engaged couples. Together you communicate to them the grace and gift of marriage in Christ.

Endnotes

1 Pope John Paul II, "Address of Pope John Paul II, Region VIII." Ad Limina Addresses: The Addresses of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Bishops of the United States February 1998-October 1998. Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1998, no. 5, p. 68.

2 The Rites of the Catholic Church. New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1976, p.562.

3 Pope John Paul II, The Apostolic Exhortation on the Family (Familiaris Consortio). Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1981, no. 80, p. 79.

4 "Cohabitation isn't conducive to marital bliss," St. Cloud Times, February 1, 1999, p.8.

5 Pope John Paul II, "Address of Pope John Paul II, Region VIII." Ad Limina Addresses. cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2370; *Humanae Vitae*, no.21.

6 *Ibid.*, no. 5, p.67.

7 *Ibid.*