

WHAT IS MARITAL SPIRITUALITY?

1.1 This is not a formal treatise, a technical analysis of the elements that make up what in traditional language is called 'The Spiritual Life'. It is a contribution to a growing interest among Christians regarding the ways in which **as Christian Married Couples** they live their daily lives, striving to follow the command of Jesus 'to love God and to love others', and taking as their model the way that Christ loved HIS bride, the Church, the People of God.

Jesus said: when two or more are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them. A Baptised man and a woman, united in one flesh, ARE the Church (Matthew 18:19,20)

There is sometimes a tendency to regard marital spirituality and family spirituality as being the same. They are not (see for example Le Roi-Knieps, 2006). Marriage is a life-long commitment by a man and a woman to grow in love. Parenthood is a nurturing relationship with a child that is preparing for the day when the child leaves home to follow his/her own vocation. Both are a reflection of Christ's love for his people but, if we are to minister to the spirituality of married couples and the spirituality of parents effectively, the different natures of these two relationships must be understood. This paper presents an understanding of **marital** spirituality.

1.2 (M & M) Matrimony is the Prime (First) Sacrament of Church. Jesus said: when two or more are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them. A Baptised man and a woman, united in one flesh, ARE the Church (Matthew 18:19,20)

1.3 It's about the lived reality of Marriage in the Catholic Church, specifically the Sacrament of Matrimony. As couples and a Priest we question whether the 'hierarchical Church' fully understands or appreciates the importance of listening to the experience of married sacramental couples concerning the nature of their relationship. At the symposium at Ushaw Seminary 19th-21st October 2006 individual 'experts' on relationships were drafted in from all over the world, Not one couple were invited, as a couple, to speak about the nature of their relationship. Much discussion was given over to family breakdown and the resultant distress. This was the starting point for so much talk about marriage. How innovative it would have been to hear from a couple how marriage and family life is sustained and developed? This would seem to have been the place to make a start.

1.4 We married couples call upon our brother who are our appointed leaders to listen to what we have to say about Marriage, especially Marital spirituality.

WHAT IS MARRIAGE?

1.5 Before proceeding to define 'Marital Spirituality' it is important to define what we mean by 'Marital' (or Married), and what we mean by 'Spirituality', because our 'Vision' of something....what we think it is..... affects our values, our behaviour and our attitudes. What you think about yourself as a person, about the beginnings of life, about what happens after death, about God, about suffering, about evil, etc. are not just theoretical questions. The answers you give affect the way you live your life. If you think 'God' is just an invention of human beings, then you are likely live your life in a different way to that of a believer. If when faced with what seems like 'irreconcilable difficulties' in your relationship, you think that marriage is just a human institution, you are likely to have a different attitude to resolving differences to that of your Christian partner who believes that Marriage is God's idea, and requires fidelity to a life-long commitment.

1.6 Over 600 couples taking part in 30 Pre-Marriage courses in S.W. London were asked: 'What is Marriage? Of 49 typical responses, just 20% mentioned that it had something to do with God, Religion, a Vocation, or a Sacrament. The rest of the responses could have been applied to ceremonies conducted by a Civil Registrar. Most of the responses could have been applied to same-sex relationships.

1.7 Their responses show the importance of making sure that Engaged Couples are (a) fully aware of the difference between the commonly understood ideas of Marriage and the nature of the life-long commitment that is Christian marriage, based on Biblical and Church teaching; and (b) that they also have an opportunity to listen to the experience of Christian Married Couples who strive to live out that teaching.

1.8 Their responses also show the need to counter the efforts that same-sex couples are making to have their relationship regarded as 'Marriage'. This is contrary to the understanding of Marriage in every culture and religion, where Marriage is always *'a public act before official witnesses in which a man and a woman commit themselves to each other in an intimate relationship, with the general expectation that children **will/may be born of their marriage**, and that they will be educated and nurtured by them'*.

2.1 This makes it clear that 'same-sex' unions cannot be called marriage because there can never be 'a general expectation that children **will/may be born of their relationship**'. Whatever the reasons for legalizing their relationship it cannot fulfil the universally accepted understanding of Marriage. So same-sex relationships should never be called Marriage. 'Civil Partnerships' is a more appropriate title for such relationships.

2.2 When an older couple marry the fact that there is **no** expectation that children will be born of their marriage show that this **is** the exception to the general expectation.

2.3 If a couple, before they marry, decide never to have any children, and throughout their marriage deliberately take steps to avoid pregnancy, the Catholic Church does not recognize their union as Christian Marriage, because in their sexual relationship a married couple must always be 'open to life'. Their marriage is null and void from the start.

2.4 **M & M ask 'How old do the couple have to be to be 'exempt' from having children? How does the woman know for certain when the menopause will be finished? As a newly married couple do that refrain from love-making? If they do, when will they be married? We need to be certain what we mean buy the statement 'always open to life'. If this refers to children, how are the couple to be 'open to life' in their intimacy with each other – their prime calling in Marriage**

2.5 There is no mention of 'marriage' in the creation story of the first human beings. The writers had no idea of human evolution, whatever the truth of the current ideas on this subject. But the masculinity and femininity of human beings, and the physical and emotional drives that 'call' the couple to become 'one flesh', are at the centre of what we now know as 'marriage'. Regarding its indissolubility, Jesus said in the context of divorce: *'What God has united man must not divide'*.

WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

2.6 'Spiritual' as a word that is often used to describe the emotions a person experiences deep down in their 'spirit', when they are 'moved' by what they see or hear in the created world, or in the context of human relationships. The impact may be immediate or as a result of reflecting on the experience. This kind of 'spiritual' experience may or may not occur within the context of Marital Spirituality.

2.7 Discussing with a group of Married Couples how best to define 'Spirituality', we came up with this (provisional) definition:

2.8`Spirituality` is a term that can be applied to the behaviours that, under the active power and presence of the Holy Spirit, are a person's loving response to God for his unconditional love for us and for the world in which we live

- The starting point for Christians is God's unconditional love for the world in which we live, especially human beings.
- The nature of the Christian response is determined by Jesus's command to `love one another as I have loved you'. His unconditional love is the model for all Christians.
- `Spirituality' is about the interaction between the Holy Spirit and individuals, couples, and communities.
- In order to love others unconditionally on a daily basis requires `the active power and presence of the Holy Spirit'.
- `Behaviours' means words and actions, or refraining from words and actions, as an expression of unconditional love

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- The human response may be that of a single person, a married couple, a Priest or a Religious.
- The circumstances of a person's life or vocation influence the ways they respond to God and to others, and thus to their `kind' of Spirituality.

3.1 In the past, books on `Spirituality' were regarded as more suited to Priests and Religious Brothers and Sisters. It was thought that they must be holy because they seemed to pray more and did more `holy' things.

3.2 But in recent times we have come to see that `Spirituality' and `holiness' are about loving. It is not just about developing one's relationship with God, but also about how we live out our faith on a daily basis through the love we show towards God and towards others.

3.3 So there is a Spirituality for everyone, since we are all called through our Baptism to *`love one another as I have loved you'*. Single people, whether unmarried, separated, divorced and not remarried, or those who have remarried, are all capable of loving behaviour towards God and others under the active power and presence of the Holy Spirit in imitation of Jesus's sacrificial love.

3.4 M & M Given that all human being are `created in the image and likeness of God, does this mean everyone is capable of `loving' whether or not I have knowledge of God or Jesus? If som it raises the question of whether the last lime of this para is needed?

3.5 Love is something that touches the lives of every human being. But the place where most people practice most of their loving is within close relationships: husbands with their wives, wives with their husbands, parents and grandparents with their children and grand-children, and children with their parents and grandparents. A Married Couple striving to live out their Marriage on a daily basis live their love at a greater level of intensity than a single person. Priests and Religious do not experience the challenges that the `cutting edge' of relationship brings to married couples every day, whether or not they have children. But what is this thing called Love?

WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED LOVE?

3.6 C.S Lewis in his book, `The Four Loves', identifies these four kinds of love: Affection, Friendship, Eros and Charity. He says that in human relationships, most of the time, people mingle these loves.

3.7 He defines **Affection** as the kind of love that in our experience differs least from that of the animals, though it takes different expressions in the lives of animals and humans. **Friendship** is most

evident when two men or two women have in some sense drawn apart from the herd. In Friendships there is a greater amount of self-disclosure, and of mutual concern. **Eros** is defined by C.S. Lewis as that state that we call 'being in Love', the kind of state that lovers are 'in'. In marriage, sexuality can exist with or without Eros, and sexuality can exist with or without love.

3.8 Affection, Friendship and Eros address 'needs' in us. But what C. S. Lewis calls 'Charity' is not self-seeking but self-giving, or Agape Love. This is best illustrated by the love God has shown us, the self-giving, self-sacrificing love shown by Jesus who gave up his life for us on the Cross. '*Greater love has no man than to lay down his life for his friends*'.

3.9 Bill Hybels, one of the leaders of the Willow Creek Church based at South Barrington, near Chicago, identifies five kinds of love in his book 'Lessons on Loving': Tender Love, Tough Love, Sacrificial Love, Radical Love and Steadfast love.

3.10 Tender love is perhaps best seen when contrasted with its opposite, Tough Love. A man took a family pet that was sick to be put down because it was old, infirm and in pain. He left the vets, sat in

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4.1 his car and wept. We went to see his brother and told him what happened. His brother said: 'You paid a vet to put down your dog!!! You should have brought it over to me. I would have taken care of it. No problem! Different attitudes to the same situation. Sometimes love has to be tough. Sometimes **Tough Love** is required if difficult situations or Issues have to be resolved, when storms have to be gone through until calmer waters are reached. There is **Sacrificial love**: you have to be willing to make sacrifices for the well-being of your relationship and for the well-being of others. Sacrificial Love is about dying. It involves dying to self, and that can be very costly. It's even more costly when it becomes **Radical Love**, when you have to get down to the Radix, **the root** of things, things about yourself: when you see you have to change your behaviour or your attitudes. Change can be very painful. But there is no gain without some pain, and no ecstasy without some agony. Romantic love can be ecstatic, especially in sexual intercourse. But there can be difficult times, times of real sadness and difficulty in the sexual dimension of marriage. Then what you need to keep you going, in the midst of every difficulty is **Steadfast love**: your steadfastness and **faithfulness** to the commitment you made to each other before God, your family and your friends on your wedding day. Jesus showed steadfast, faithful, sacrificial love in his suffering and death. **M & M The loneliest place in marriage is the marital bed when we have experienced hurt in our relationship**

4.2 So having looked briefly at some people's ideas of Marriage, Spirituality and Love, we can move on to look at the Catholic Church's biblically-based understanding of Christian Marriage, and the Spirituality that flows from it. For Catholics, Marriage is a **Vocation**, a **Covenant** and a **Sacrament**.

MARRIAGE IS A VOCATION

This section amended as below in red and also blue

4.3 It's **A Vocation** – a call from God to every married couple, whether or not they believe in God. The two Genesis accounts of Creation reveal that the vocation to marriage is written in the very nature of men and women as they come from the hand of the Creator. They are called to be helpmates and companions to each other. Physically and by natural instinct they are 'made' for union with each other. They are 'called' to be 'one flesh'. Sexual intimacy, including sexual intercourse, is intended to strengthen their love and their unity.

From the beginning of mankind, men and women have been called by God to live in a lifelong, fruitful, i.e. unifying and procreating relationship. This belief is based on the two accounts of creation that reveal that the vocation of marriage is written in the very nature of

men and women as they come from the hand of the Creator. They are called to be helpmates and companions to each other. Physically and by natural instinct they are made for union with each other. They are called to be 'one flesh', including sexual intercourse, which is intended to strengthen their love and their unity.

ADDITION 12TH AUGUST 2007

There is a great need for Christian couples to more fully comprehend what this means, to understand more fully the nature of loving one's partner and one's self in their sexual relationship

4.4 M & M The Couple by their nature as man and woman are made for union with each other. Their 'calling' of 'vocation' is to each other. They are also enabled by their natures to bring forth children. The level of their co-operation with God's design for children is THEIR RESPONSIBILITY and theirs alone. They are the ONLY ones to decide when and how many children they will attempt to bring into the world. Therefore, the 'act of love' is both Unitive and 'Life-giving' first for them! These elements remain whether or not they are capable of conceiving a child. The facts of economics, fertility cycles, general well-being, among others, begs the question about intercourse ALWAYS being open to conception because that is implied in the Hierarchical Church's view of marriage Always bear in mind in this debate that when any children leave the family home, in the end the couple will be back where they started with each other. DO ALL THESE ELEMENTS (i.e. sexual intercourse must always be open to life) remain? For what Purpose? This an area in need of serious debate among couples.

4.5 P & M The call to a married relationship is a call from God to develop an open, honest trust filled relationship in which the couple appear naked before each other. As the level of self-awareness and self-revelation develops, and the level of acceptance of the beloved grows, the two become 'one flesh'. In the lived actuality of their lives together the couple reveal to the wider church community the love of god. they become visible signs of god's unconditional love. The Church can not therefore be understood....unless we keep in mind the 'great mystery'expressed in the 'one flesh' (union) of marriage and the family (Letter to Families No.19 John Paul's Letter in the year of the Family. Pauline 1994 It is the kingdom that is most experienced in the love of a couple

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5.1 They are also called to '*increase and multiply and fill the earth and make it yours*'. So in satisfying their desire for unity in 'one flesh', they are also enabled, by God's plan and intention to co-operate with God in the awe-inspiring privilege of the creation of another human being.

5.2 So God's plan for a man and a woman has a **unitive** and a **procreative** purpose.

These two purposes are inseparable. Sexual intercourse must at all times be 'open to life'. The decision to have a child, and the parenting of children, requires a couple to make responsible choices that take into account the particular circumstances of their lives and relationship at any one time, including awareness of the woman's fertility cycle

This section amended to read as below

5.3 Since God created them man and woman, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unending love with which God's loves us. There is only one love: God's. We experience God's love through our bodies and minister his love to others through our bodies.

5.3 Since God created them man and woman, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unending love with which God's loves us. There is only one love: God's. We experience God's love through every aspect of our humanity, and minister his love to others in the same way.

5.4 The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that *'Sacred Scripture begins with the creation of man and woman in the image and likeness of God and concludes with a vision of 'the wedding feast of the Lamb'. Scripture speaks throughout of marriage and its 'mystery', its institution and the meaning God has given it, its origin and its end, its various realizations throughout the history of salvation, the difficulties arising from sin and its renewal 'in the Lord' in the New Covenant of Christ and the Church (Section 1602)*

5.5 M & M It is interesting that it states that in its vision, the final thing is the marriage of the lamb. Nothing about a vision of the family. (Frank's Comment: The CCC is correct in stating that SACRED SCRIPTURE ends with the vision of the marriage feast of the lamb)

This section amended to read as below

5.6 Because of *'the difficulties arising from sin'*, the love we receive and the love we minister to others is imperfect. We are born into a world in which each of us is affected by the accumulated effects of sin all down the ages. This is why *'our union with God and our relationships with others are threatened by discord, a spirit of domination, infidelity, jealousy, and conflicts. These can escalate into hatred and separation'*. (CCC Section 1606) This disorder is brought about by ignorance, by differences in language, culture, expectations, attitudes, selfishness, pride etc. All these factors make it difficult for Christians to live out their commitment to *'love one another as I have loved you'*. But the graces that have been made available to us through the New and Everlasting Covenant, sealed with blood of Christ on the Cross, makes it possible for us to be reconciled to each other. We are all called to imitate Jesus' unconditional covenant love by our willingness to *'suffer'*, to die, and to be *'raised up'* in order to make effective our reconciliation with God and with each other.

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In contrast to the Genesis concept of Marriage, a Christian marriage involves a covenanted relationship in which the husband and wife are called to reflect Christ's unconditional love for His bride, His people, the Church – as far as this is humanly possible with the grace of God.

It is a solemn promise that can only be ended by the death of one of the partners. The commitment of a Christian married couple is shown by their willingness to deepen their understanding of all that is involved when they take each other, to have and to hold, *'for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish till death us do part'*. It involves each person being willing to look at all the *'baggage'* they bring into the relationship, to explore significant differences in their family backgrounds, to share their expectations of marriage, their attitudes to *'life'* issues, including their openness to life and to bringing life to each other, at every stage of their married life. It is also shown by their readiness to *'accept children lovingly from God'*, by their readiness to equip themselves for the responsibilities of a Christian parent, and to bring up their children *'according to the law of Christ and his Church'*.

Although they will experience romance and joy throughout their life together, there will be times of disillusionment, hurt and the need for forgiveness. So they will need the strength that comes from the active power and presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. This requires developing a strong relationship with God through prayer and the sacraments.

THE MARRIAGE OF TWO CHRISTIAN IS A COVENANTED RELATIONSHIP

5.7 Though in civil terms Marriage may involve a legal contract. Christian Marriage is more than a contract. It involves a Covenant. . A contract has conditions attached to it. In Christian Marriage, a Covenant has no conditions. Christian Marriage involves a **Covenant** relationship in which a husband and a wife make together a life-long commitment of unconditional love, in imitation of Christ's unconditional love for HIS bride, the Church, the People of God. It is a covenant that can only be ended by the death of one of the partners. The commitment of a Christian married couple is shown by their willingness to deepen their understanding of all that is involved when they take each other `for better, for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish till death us do part'. It involves each person being willing to look at the `baggage' they bring into the relationship, to explore significant differences in their family backgrounds, to share their expectations of marriage, their attitudes to `life' issues, including their openness to life at every stage of their married life. It is also shown by their readiness to `accept children lovingly from God', by their readiness to equip themselves for the responsibilities of a Christian Parent, and to bring up their children `according to the law of Christ and his Church'.

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6.1 Since the whole of life involves, in biblical terms, a dying and rising, each person must be willing to suffer and to sacrifice themselves for the good of their partner, for the good of their relationship, and for the good of their children. Above all, they must be convinced of their need of the strength that comes through the active power and presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. So they need to develop a strong relationship with God through prayer and the Sacraments.

6.2 Most Non-Catholic Christians would have little difficulty understanding Marriage as involving a Vocation. They might also recognize their **commitment** to each other as involving some aspects of what Christians call a Covenant, without the idea that in their loving they were called to imitate the unconditional self-giving sacrificial love Jesus showed on the Cross. But it is doubtful whether most non-Catholics would have heard of Marriage as a Sacrament.

THE MARRIAGE OF TWO CHRISTIANS IS A SACRAMENT

This section amended 12th August by omitting `the primordial sacrament'

6.3 For Catholics, Marriage is a `Sacrament'. Sacrament are `sacred signs' that make the invisible love of God a visible reality. Creation is the `primordial' sacrament, the first visible expression of the invisible love of God, especially the creation of Man and Woman. This includes their sexuality and its intended fruit in the person of the couple's children, and the provision God in his love has made available for their sustenance and well-being.

6.4 M & M The Marriage of a Catholic and a non-Catholic is also a sacrament, This can be a source of misunderstanding in the Church (Frank's Comment: The marriage of a non-Catholic to a non-Catholic Christian (i.e between two baptized persons) is a Sacrament. The marriage of a Catholic to a non-Christian is not a sacrament.)

6.5 Sacraments involve `Sacred rites' (Rituals), in which objects, words and actions are used as outward visible signs of a deeper, spiritual, reality. **On their Wedding Day** the Church calls a man and a woman to enter into a covenant commitment (covenanted commitment 12th August 2007) in which they freely consent to love each other unconditionally in imitation of the unconditional love that

Christ has for his bride, the Church; to commit themselves to being 'open to life;' and to show the same kind of love towards any children who are born of their relationship. The Priest witnesses their commitment on behalf of the Church Community. He also asks God to bless the couple, within whose relationship, the love of God, that is invisible, is 'made visible' **today** in the love they have for each other, a love that the Priest prays will continue to grow and become increasingly visible as this couple, in countless ways show their love for God, for each other and their children, throughout **their marriage**.

In making their promises, their solemn binding agreement, to each other in front of church witnesses, the couple become a living flesh and blood sacrament of 'Church'.

6.6 Sacraments bring about what they signify. In making their covenanted promises, their solemn binding agreement, to each other in front of church witnesses the couple become a living flesh and blood sacrament of 'Church'. These *promises* are sealed later with their covenanted act of self-giving love, Sexual Intercourse.

6.7 'Church' is clearly 'the People of God gathered together with Jesus in a growing, deepening love relationship. Therefore, in that sense, Marriage is our first experience as children of Church as it is meant to be.. Our parents, as Mother and Father, give us life! It is they with whom we have our first experience of church But it is our Parents as husband and wife, united in the bond of marriage, joined in the action of their love for each other, who are the living, breathing,, flesh and blood Sacrament.

[This paragraph was excised from the document on 12th August 2007](#)

6.8 The rings, the words and actions used in the Marriage Rite form the 'outward signs' of the covenant commitment the couple make 'before God and his Church', and the Church ask God to make present (bestow) today and into the future the 'inward graces' this couple need to faithfully live out their covenant commitment.

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This section was amended as below

7.1 But there is another sacramental dimension to their relationship. It concerns their **Marriage**. As they live out their commitment on a daily basis, the way they show their love for each other, for their children and for others becomes an outward visible sign of the invisible reality of God's love. The couple **become** a sacrament.

7.1 But there is another sacramental dimension to their relationship. It concerns their **Marriage**. As they live out their commitment on a daily basis, the way they show their love for each other, for their children and for others becomes an outward visible sign of the invisible reality of God's love. The couple **become** a deeper and deeper sign of this love.

This section was amended to read as below

7.2 There is only one Love: God's love! The Blessed Trinity share that love with others. Jesus' call to every Christian is to 'love one another as I have loved you, to imitate the self-giving sacrificial love that he showed the Father when he died on the Cross. When God became man the invisible love of God for us became 'incarnate'. It took on 'flesh'. It was now visible, there for everyone to see, especially in the teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. As a married couple live out their life as a couple and as parents, striving to imitate the self-sacrificing love that Christ showed in his love for his bride the Church, they **become** a Sacrament. They 'incarnate' the love of God. The love of God, alive in them through the power of the Holy Spirit, enables them to be a visible sign to married couples

and to others **in the Church** of the reality of God's love for his bride the Church. And the visible 'incarnated' love of many Matrimonied couples, and the love of other Catholics, helps to make **the Church** a visible sign **to the world** of the reality of God's love.

There is only one love – God's love. In the person of Jesus that love became visible. It also becomes visible in the committed love of a sacramental couple. The love of God, alive in them through the power of the Holy Spirit, enables them to be a visible sign to the Church and to the world of the reality of God's love.

Such an inspiring vision of marriage is challenging. Choosing to live in such a way is empowering. If lived to the best of their ability it gives deeper meaning and purpose to the couple's love for one another. Not only do they have, through the graces of their sacrament, the resources to forgive and heal each other, they are also enabled to touch profoundly the lives of those they come across on their journey through life.

7.3 M & M The couple are the ministers of the Sacrament. They minister it to each other. Having completed their public vows, this ministering is completed in their first intercourse! It doesn't grow exponentially as they go through life. Its doesn't become 'holier' It can and does become MORE VISIBLE depending on their lived out life. This needs to be discussed and understood in the 'every day lived reality of each couple and of church. Family is NOT the Sacrament, even as it grows, hopefully, in holiness.

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7.4 This understanding of Christian Marriage as involving a Vocation, a Covenant Commitment, and a Sacrament is essential when it comes to looking at what is meant by Marital Spirituality. Why? Because your vision - what you think something is - affects the way you life live. It affects your values, your behaviour and your attitudes.

What is Spirituality? (Brian? Mark?)

Spirituality is an awareness of God's presence in a behaviour that reflects his unconditional love for us and the world in which we live.

7.5 So, What is Marital Spirituality?

This is a question that today is exercising the minds of many people. Essentially, Marital Spirituality relates to how a Christian Married Couple, aware of the unitive and procreative aspects of their Marriage, and their life-long commitment, seek the active presence of the Holy Spirit in their relationship as they strive to live out that commitment in their daily lives.

7.6 This 'vision', this understanding of what Marriage is, affects the way each of the spouses approaches the situations that they face. When for both spouses divorce is not an option, they have to find a way through the situations that arise, and have to reach appropriate compromises where necessary, for the sake of their relationship and the well-being of any children they may have.

7.7 In August 2004, Donna Orsuto, a Professor at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, gave a presentation to a Seminar on Matrimonial Spirituality at INTAMS, the International Centre for the Study of Marital Spirituality based in Louvain, Belgium. Speaking of Marriage as a Sacrament she said that

- *besides being a human institution marriage is a prophetic symbol, revealing and celebrating the communion between God and God's people. Sacraments require an outward, visible sign, and in marriage that externality is lived out in the ups and downs of daily life together. In this way, the spouses become sacrament to one another, visible signs of God's grace. The same*

physicality is also celebrated in their sexual relationship, which in the marital context has itself a sacramental dimension'.

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8.1 This makes it clear that **Marital Spirituality** refers to the ways a Sacramental Married Couple, under the active power and presence of the Holy Spirit, respond to God's unconditional love for the world. It includes their relationship with God, their relationship with each other as a couple, their relationship as couple with their children and other family members. and their relationship to the Church community, the Body of Christ.

8.2 Donna Orsuto says that marriage is a **prophetic** symbol. Prophets 'speak up' for God. He uses their words and actions to remind us that we live in **his** world, a world in which he is working out his saving plan for the human race. Marriage and family life is at the centre of his saving plan. It is through the ups and downs of their sexual relationship, and other expressions of love, that Christian Married couples become 'prophetic symbols', visible signs of the reality of God's love. It all starts with the couple!

8.3 M & M think all this is interesting, but it needs to be unpacked so it can be related to the way in which it is lived out.

8.4 Since 'spirituality' and 'holiness' are about loving it is helpful to look at what Pope Benedict XVI says about love in his Encyclical '*Deus Caritas Est*', (God is love). He says that '*amid the multiplicity of meanings of the word 'love' one stands out: the love between man and woman, where body and soul are inseparably united*'. He says that 'love' includes both 'eros', which is self-seeking love, and 'agape', which is self-giving love. It begins with a 'searching' love, but in the course of time and with the help the graces of the Sacrament of Matrimony '*the experience of love involves a real discovery of the other, moving beyond the selfish character that prevailed earlier. Love now becomes concern and care for the other. No longer is it self-seeking, a sinking in the intoxication of happiness; instead it seeks the good of the beloved: it becomes renunciation and it is ready, and even willing, for sacrifice*'. (Paragraph 6 '*Deus Caritas Est*') There is a process of inward purification through which this love becomes *exclusive* (for this particular person alone) and *for ever*. It embraces the whole of existence, both within time and into eternity. It includes self-discovery and the discovery of God. It is clear from this that Pope Benedict is positively affirming the importance of erotic love in marriage, but it needs to be 'purified' so that the first concern is for your partner. In terms of sexual intercourse, each person needs first of all to listen to the desires, the needs and the concerns of their partner.

8.5 The Pope says that marriage involves a 'real discovery of the other'. It means that the whole of life is a learning experience, and married couples need to learn what loving means, especially in the context of Christian Marriage. Nowadays, Priests are offered 'On-going Formation' to enable them to develop their understanding of the Christian faith and ways of sharing the Gospel with others. Married Couples, and parents whether married or unmarried, need 'On-going formation' to help develop their understanding of Christian Marriage and Parenthood in the light of the growth of 'theologies' and 'spiritualities' of Marriage and Parenthood.

8.6 M & M What do the Pope's fine words mean in the context of the way we live our lives. Difficult to absorb what he is saying

8.7 To love others unconditionally on a daily basis requires '**the active power and presence of the Holy Spirit**', at work within the 'behaviours' that in various ways are the daily expressions of unconditional love. What are some of these 'behaviours' that are characteristic of **Married Couples alone**? How does being married to this person affect or influence my behaviour? What constitutes the 'holiness of our relationship **as a couple**, our couple relationship with God, and our couple relationship with others? What distinguishes Marital Spirituality from Family Spirituality, and from what might be called 'Personal' Spirituality

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MARITAL SPIRITUALITY – THE HOLINESS OF LOVING ON A DAILY BASIS

9.1 `Home is a Holy Place' because holiness is about the ways we show love for God, for each other, and most of that loving goes on within homes. The **indispensable foundation** for this is the life-long committed love of husband and wife and the ways they **as a couple** show their love for God, for each other, for their children, and for others.

9.2 The ability to love is a `grace', a gift from God. To love `as Christ loves his bride the Church' requires a continual `supply' of grace, and the spiritual help of the Holy Spirit to `empower' us to live our lives according to Christ's love. So the foundation for Marital Spirituality is the prayer and Sacramental life of the couple, in which they show the need they have of God's help as husband, wife, couple, parent, in order to live out their commitment to each other, to their children, and to others. None of us are perfect. Only God is truly `Holy'. Our holiness is not so much in our arriving as our striving. It's their prayerful striving to live out their covenant commitment that constitutes the holiness of the couple. as it does for the Saints. Here are some examples of Marital holiness:.

- by affirming, encouraging, and praising each other, and your children.
- Showing by your words and actions that you accept each other with each other's faults and weaknesses,
- by the confidence and trust you show towards each other,
- by your commitment to a deeper level of intimacy through communicating thoughts, feelings, hopes, dreams, expectations and desires,
- by your availability to each other, especially when listening is difficult because you are afraid of the demands listening may make on you;
- by active listening, allowing what is said to be `heard and felt in the heart' and responded to with tenderness and sensitivity, even when it requires `facing issues' and speaking about difficult and painful things in an open and honest way.;
- by accountability, being accountable to each other for your individual actions, especially fidelity to the agreements you made together about courses of action with regard to people and situations;
- by acknowledging blame (and avoiding blaming) in times of strained relationship, brokenness and heartbreak, by asking forgiveness.....and granting forgiveness as an expression of compassion and mercy, in order for healing to take place. Also showing by your words and

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- action the importance and value, for yourselves and your children, of the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a means of overcoming sin and correcting failings.
- by finding time for each other, for humour, laughter, fun, recreation, and celebration.
- by continually showing in words and actions your love for your spouse and your commitment to them and to your marriage, by giving `tokens' of affection, small gifts, leaving `love notes', through the purchase of cards that `say the words' that you can't put into words yourself, etc.
- Love is holy when sexual intercourse is a genuine expression of self-giving love and commitment to your spouse
- Holiness is about sharing with each other the sensual joy and delight you experience in each other's bodies
- Love is holy when by mutual agreement you `fast' from the intense and ecstatic pleasure that accompanies sexual intercourse during the fertile period, or in the latter stages of pregnancy, or when some medical problem makes sexual intercourse difficult, inadvisable or inappropriate.
- Love is holy when a couple decide together what is needed around the house, and on the basis of `who does what', set about the tasks agreed upon, including the shopping, the cooking, the decorating, changing nappies, bathing the children, driving them to the doctors, and to and from their school and recreational activities.

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- Love is deciding to be open and honest with each other when you marry concerning the true state of your wealth, including salary, debts, 'reserves' and investments, and throughout your marriage, deciding together how your combined financial resources are to be spent.....and sticking faithfully to what you have mutually agreed on!
- Holiness is building a shrine, a place in your home, where from time to time you can pray as a couple, read the Bible, teach your children. You can show by your example, the importance of praising and thanking God for all his gifts, and show them that you as individuals and as a couple need His help.
- Holiness is about ensuring that your children are taught the richness of the Christian faith, and the importance of joining with other Catholics (or with Christians of another denomination in the case of a Mixed Marriage) on Sunday
- Holiness is about balancing work and family, making sure you have time during their formative years to share with your children the joys of being together as a family, playing games together, having fun together, sharing holidays together, showing them by your example how a husband and wife relate to each other: what it means to be a father to your sons and to your daughters, and what it means to be a mother to your sons and to your daughters.
- Holiness is preparing your children for Baptism, First Reconciliation, First Communion and Confirmation, and making them aware of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, and how these 'marks of the Church' are present in the 'domestic Church' of the family.
- Holiness is about saying 'no' to your children when appropriate, and explaining why
- Holiness is asking forgiveness when you caused hurt to your spouse or to children by your words, your actions and your omissions,
- Holiness is about telling your children the effect on you of their words and actions, that you will never stop loving them whatever they do, and the importance of learning through their mistakes so as not to repeat them.
- To demonstrate unity of purpose as a couple in correcting your children, and to support each other in the difficulties experienced with individual children at different stages of their life
- Holiness is seeking to enrich your marriage by taking part in Marriage Enrichment Days or Weekends, like those provided by Marriage Encounter, 'Celebrate Love', or Teams of Our Lady,
- Holiness is taking part in Parenting Courses to share with others your experience of Parenting, and being willing to learn how to be a better parent.
- Holiness is building relationships with, and caring for members of each other's extended families, especially as they grow older and in need of special care.
- Holiness is avoiding criticism, sarcasm, inappropriate forms of 'wit' and humour that can wound others, especially your spouse.
- Holiness is asking your spouse to share with you, in a kindly and considerate manner, aspects of your ideas, behaviour and attitudes that they find difficult to cope with, and being willing to make the necessary changes..
- You are holy when you continue to show steadfast love when your spouse is indifferent to you, rejects your expressions of love, suffers from addiction to sport, to drugs, alcohol, gambling etc.
- You are holy when you share with your spouse how important they are to your happiness as a person, to the quality of your life, and how you would feel in the event of their death.
- Holiness is about being aware of your 'language' when you raise issues. Avoid aggressive behaviour by using only 'I' language when raising issues. Share the feelings that arise **in you** when a topic or issue is discussed

It is worth repeating that we are not just talking about the ways a Married couple share their love. We are talking about how a Christian Married Couple, aware of the vision of marriage set before them by

11.1 the Bible and the Catholic Church, are striving to live by that vision on a daily basis. So progress is likely to be slow. Pope John Paul II said we only progress in holiness 'by the law of gradualness'

11.2 These are just a few ways of loving that are part of **Marital Spirituality**. If you use your mind and your imagination you will no doubt discover lots of other ways by which your loving constitutes your holiness and thus your Spirituality as a Couple.

M & M have some difficulty owning some of these 'bullet points'.

11.3 The following scriptures give examples of what loving means. They can be applied to couples in their relationship with each other, and in their relationship as couples with their children:

Romans 12:9-21; Romans 14:1-6; 1 Corinthians 12.38 – 13.8 Galations 5:13-26;

Ephesians 4:14-5:33; Ephesians 6:11-20; Colossians 3:12-21

11.4 The summary of the ideas of over 1000 Engaged Couples concerning **What Helps or Hinders a growth in relationship** (available on request from Fr Frank) provides some very useful pointers to what constitutes the everyday 'stuff' of Marital Spirituality. They reveal the complexity and the challenge for couples. Facing the challenges, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, provides the motivation for change, and the spiritual strength to enable us to change our behaviour and our attitudes.

11.5 It is evident that many of the expressions of love mentioned above are shown by couples who co-habit, who are divorced, who have divorced and remarried, who are single mothers or single fathers.

11.6 But we set out to discover what is involved in **Marital Spirituality**. **The Holiness of the Couple** provides the securest foundation for ensuring **Home is a Holy Place**

WHAT FOLLOWS FROM ALL THIS?

11.7 In our efforts to avoid saying anything that might occasion hurt to those whose cohabitation or marriage has broken down, there is a danger that we end up down-playing marriage. It is important to keep in mind the fact that surveys conducted in this country show that most people are in stable loving relationships, and among those whose relationships have failed, the vast majority still believe in marriage and hope to find another person with whom they can share their life, and in most cases, have children. So it's Christian Marriage we must promote.

11.8 Sadly, so many couples have little or no vision for their relationship as a couple. Many Christians have little or no idea of what it means to be committed Christian Sacramental couple, all of which shows the need for couples to take part in Marriage Preparation courses and courses to assist their on-going formation' as couples and as parents.

11.9 So our priority as Marriage and Family Life Teams is to promote the beauty of Christian Marriage and to provide couples, before and throughout their relationship, with opportunities to grow as couples and to become effective parents to their children.

11.10 Everyone approaching marriage, or who decides to enter into a cohabiting relationship, has the responsibility to be aware of what it is they are entering into, the influence on their relationship of the personal 'baggage' they are bringing, what helps and what hinders a growth in relationship, the 'tools' that enable them to deal with issues that arise in their life as a couple, and the personal and social consequences of relationship breakdown.

Because the Catholic Church calls couples to live out on a daily basis what everyone acknowledges to be a challenging relationship, it has the duty to make them aware of these things, and an additional responsibility to inform Catholics of the nature and beauty of Marriage as God intends it to be, and to

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provide couples with the psychological and spiritual 'tools' to help them 'grow into' this Christian vision of Marriage.

THERE ARE LIVING SAINTS

12.1 In the Preface for the Mass of Holy Men and Women (who were, with just a few exceptions, all single people, mostly Priests and Religious Brothers and Sisters) we as a Church Community '*give thanks that you renew the Church in every age by raising up men and women outstanding in holiness, living witnesses of your unchanging love. They inspire us by their heroic lives, and help us by their constant prayers, to be **the living sign** of your saving power.*

12.2 How strange that the Church, in the 2000 years of its history, has only included just two married couples, Mary and Joseph and Joachim and Anne, within its official list of those **whose heroic lives have been living signs of your saving power.**

12.3 Apart from the Blessed Virgin none of these Saints lived sinless lives. Their 'Sanctity' did not mean they were sinless. It meant that the Pope of the day, having read the report of a 'Commission' set up to examine all aspects of the person's life, decided that the quality of their loving far outweighed any faults of which they had been guilty. I suggest that this is true of the majority of people today, including married couples.

WHAT OF CATHOLICS MARRIED TO NON-CATHOLIC BELIEVERS OR TO NON BELIEVERS?

12.4 If both spouses are committed to a life-long relationship, and to all that is involved in living out on a daily basis the covenant commitment to take each other 'for better for worse etc' ;they are living God's plan for marriage. This being so, it is hard to imagine that God will deny them the 'actual' graces they need in order to assist them to continue to do so

IN CONCLUSION

12.5 I do not wish what has been set down in this paper to be seen as intending to diminish the evident holiness of Bishops, Priests and Religious, and the contribution they make to the holiness of the Laity. What follows is intended to highlight how important it is for the Church to give greater recognition to the 'wisdom' of the Laity.

12.6 The Second Vatican Council Decree on the Laity, and '**Christifidelis Laici**', laid the foundations of **The Theology of the Laity**. They showed the dignity and the privilege of being 'a son and daughter of a loving Father' and the hope vested by the Church in the future role of the Laity. I see little evidence that the Theology of the Laity has permeated through **the structures** of the Church. This paper is the fruit of what I have learnt from over forty years of listening to the ideas and the experiences of the Married Couples I have worked with in CFM (The Christians Family Movement), Family and Social Action, Grail Family Circles, World Wide Marriage Encounter, Engaged Encounter and Teams of Our Lady. It shows the 'riches' that exist in the lived theology of Christian Married Couples.

12.7 What I have discovered makes me now ask:

- Should not more effort be directed to promoting the Theology of the Laity, especial the living theology of Marriage?
- Should not the Church reflect **in its structures** the fact that most of the members of the Church are Lay people, not Priests or Bishops;

- Since, for the most part, it has only been possible to continue the work of the Church because of the financial contribution, the time and the effort of millions of Lay people, should there not be more openness and accountability with regard to policies and financial matters?

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- Since the Holy Spirit is at work in the whole Church, not just in the lives of Bishops and Priests, should not Bishops and Priests listen more attentively to `what the Spirit is saying to the Church', especially about all that loving means – from the real experts!
- Since Jesus came to establish `the kingdom': - to bring about the `reign' of God in the minds and hearts of every person, through their obedience to His law of love -should not more recognition be given to the fact that it is above all, married couples, who are the first evangelizers of their children, the people about all who are making the Kingdom a reality, by allowing God to reign in their own hearts and opening the hearts of their children to receive his love.

13.1 We know that `The Church is not a democracy'. I am aware that the Bishops have been seeking to learn from those exercising leadership in the secular sphere. The `Captains of Industry' have discovered that `Hierarchical' structures are most effective when workers and leaders adopt a **co-responsible model**. Not from the top downward but from both the top and the bottom

13.2 After the Second Vatican Council `Co-responsibility' was the `buzz word', not Collaboration, Collaboration smacks of the people helping `Father' to do his job. Whereas Co-responsibility means Bishops, Priests and people **looking together** at what is involved in The Church's Mission of bringing the Good News of God's love to the world, and **deciding together**, what it involves, who does what and how it is to be done, what resources in terms of personnel, buildings and money will be needed and how they are to be found

13.3 The Deanery structure, and the Parish structure needs to be changed to reflect co-responsibility for mission. The Deanery should be Priests and People meeting together. Priests need to meet together, but they should not be the one's who decide matters and then take them back. This leads to a situation in which both Priests and People do not `own' the decisions made, so they opt out. and their skills and talents are not engaged by the Church. Structural changes are necessary if the Laity are to `own' what is really `their' Church, and be willing and ready to take responsibility for it, and its mission.

13.4 M & M how is it that the most prolific, dynamic relationship in history, given the millions upon millions of holy, heroic married couples who have lived and gone before, can in fact draw up two largely mythical examples as significant guidelines for living out our daily lives together.

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