

Reflections on Pope Francis' Amoris Laetitia (AL) by Two in One Flesh (TIOF): couples and a priest seeking to increase the profile of marriage.

Authors of *Two in One Flesh*, I AM WITH YOU and MARRIAGE MATTERS

See www.twoinoneflesh.org.uk for further information on the above.

The following is material taken from Pope Francis' words in Amoris Laetitia (AL), specifically relating to 'couple-ness'. It then aligns his 'teaching' with the reflections, written and published by the couples from TIOF. First though, some observations on the document itself:

"You and your Wife"

AL 9. Let us cross the threshold of this tranquil home, with its family sitting around the festive table. At the centre we see the father and mother, a couple with their personal story of love."

In the beginning of this wonderfully inspired document is an example of a recurring area of confusion: the lack of clear differentiation between marriage, couple and family. Having headed the paragraph "You and your Wife", it goes straight into the image of a family, parents, then couple. Before ever there is a family there is a married couple. Indeed some married couples are unable to have children, but even when couples have been blessed with offspring, when they leave the family home the married couple remains. Children or no children, there is always the couple striving to live according to their call to a fruitful and life-giving (sacramental, vocational, unitive) way of life.

Throughout the Church, and Amoris Laetitia, there is a tendency to subsume marriage under the general heading of 'family', which covers many different realities today. This paragraph (**AL 9**) is a minor example of how 'marriage' and 'family' come across, often as interchangeable. So, from the beginning of these 'reflections' on AL, we wish to set out the fundamental focus TIOF seeks to highlight as an area that needs addressing in the life of the Church, especially among our priests and those involved in marriage preparation. Noticeably, Pope Francis indicates some concern about this in **AL 36** ...*We need a healthy dose of self-criticism. Then too, we often present marriage in such a way that its unitive meaning, its call to grow in love and its ideal of mutual assistance are overshadowed by an almost exclusive insistence on the duty of procreation.*

Marriage is not just about procreation, and we therefore pray that your reading of this material, will encourage you to add your 'voice' to our efforts to heighten the profile of marriage.

“Striving for the best for the benefit of your relationship”

AL 13...*The marital union is thus evoked not only in its sexual and corporal dimension, but also in its voluntary self-giving in love. The result of this union is that the two “become one flesh”, both physically and in the union of their hearts and lives...*

41...*Marital problems are “often confronted in haste and without the courage to have patience and reflect, to make sacrifices and to forgive one another.”*

It is so easy to be drawn into what the world sees as success. When we marry we naturally want the best for each other. In striving for this we can become completely involved in the chase for material goods and, sadly, lose sight of why we married. Was it not because we so loved each other we couldn't bear the thought of not spending the rest of our lives together?! The vitally important thing in our marriage is our love relationship. Without it everything else will fail. It's so easy to fool ourselves that we are doing the best by saying: “I'm working all the hours I can for us” or “I'm doing this so we don't have to worry about our future!” Life is hard work but if we strive so hard and long that we don't see much of each other and when we do, we are too tired for love making, our marriage will not thrive. Let us work hard at making ourselves rich in our relationship with one another and with God. We must keep our focus on us as a couple, putting our love for each other before anything else, and work hard to live out what God has planned for our marriage, which is ‘unity.’

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year C, Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, pp.98-9)

“He chose us to be holy and spotless”

AL 69...*in his Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris Consortio... Pope [JPII]...offered a general vision of the vocation of men and women to love...In particular, by treating conjugal love (cf. No. 13), he described how spouses, in their mutual love, receive the gift of the Spirit of Christ and live their call to holiness...*

How can we be ‘holy and spotless’ with all the messiness in our lives? There is that pile of clothes to be ironed, the cleaning and the washing-up to be done, the shopping to get and people to see. But you can! Your home might not be spotless, and you know that you aren't perfect, but holiness is all about loving. You show your love for each other, for your children, your family and friends in so many ways: through your work to earn enough money to provide shelter, food, heating, clothing and transport and through the many efforts you daily make. When you have your time together as a couple, you have many reasons to thank God for the love you share, the children He has given you and all the other gifts you have received. Remember, you are holier than you think!

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year A, Second Sunday of Christmas, pp. 30-1)

“Our prophetic way of spreading the Good News”

AL 94. *Throughout the text, it is clear that [Saint] Paul wants to stress that love is more than a mere feeling. Rather, it should be understood along the lines of the Hebrew verb “to love”; it is “to do good”. As Saint Ignatius of Loyola said, “Love is shown more by deeds than by words”. It thus shows its fruitfulness and allows us to experience the happiness of giving, the nobility and grandeur of spending ourselves unstintingly, without asking to be repaid, purely for the pleasure of giving and serving.*

What about us and our calling to be prophets? What has God chosen us for in our married relationship with each other? The Church teaches that each of us will only discover our true self through ‘sincere self-giving’. Isn’t that what marriage is all about? We don’t have to ‘cry in the wilderness’ or speak a prophetic word on street corners, both of us are just asked to give and give and give again, to each other! We need to listen to what the other one has to say. We need to ask each other for forgiveness when we fail to listen. We need to work together, plan together, and share ourselves together. Let us love each other in every way possible – Spiritually, Physically, Intellectually, Creatively and Emotionally. This means let’s bring some spice into our marriages. This is inherent in what God is calling us to, as our prophetic way of spreading the Good News.

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year C, The Birth of John the Baptist, pp. 146-7)

“The seed that grows to become a shelter”

AL 90... *(1 Cor 13:4-7)...Love is experienced and nurtured in the daily life of couples...*

92... *Love always has an aspect of deep compassion that leads to accepting the other person as part of this world, even when he or she acts differently than I would like...*

93... *love benefits and helps others. For this reason it (chrestéuetai) is translated as “kind”; love is ever ready to be of assistance.*

“The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows into the largest shrub of all...”

Each of us has a seed of love in us at our birth, which is fostered as we grow to value others in our relationships. As we learn to love ourselves and each other more deeply the seed of love swells. As we learn about the qualities which give us and others freedom to be themselves, we can love ever more tenderly and discover God’s peace and joy in our hearts. Seeds need sunshine and rain, periods of cold and warmth in order to grow, and so it is for us. In our marriage relationship we have a calling to continue deepening our love and intimacy. The ways in which we reach out to each other gently and tenderly, the experience of being listened to, the striving to listen and understand, the confidence which grows as we experience being understood, loved and accepted, as well as the forgiveness and healing we experience in times of hurt, are all ways in which the tree of our love can grow. It becomes a ‘shelter’ for our children, our families and all those whose lives we touch – a place where they find safety and acceptance. What a wonderful and awe-inspiring invitation we have received to continually increase the depth of our love and yet at times it is difficult to do, but with God’s help, we can achieve it.

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year B, The Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, pp. 80-1)

"Two in One Flesh"

AL 80. *Marriage is firstly an "intimate partnership of life and love" which is a good for the spouses themselves, while sexuality is "ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman". It follows that "spouses to whom God has not granted children can have a conjugal life full of meaning, in both human and Christian terms". Nonetheless, the conjugal union is ordered to procreation "by its very nature". ...From the outset, love refuses every impulse to close in on itself; it is open to a fruitfulness that draws it beyond itself.*

88. *... "The unitive end of marriage is a constant summons to make this love grow and deepen. Through their union in love, the couple [usually] experiences the beauty of [parenthood]..."*

When we look at the world around us it would be easy to draw the conclusion that we are still unteachable. Nobody wants to see a couple locked into a loveless marriage and many of us will be aware of the damage done to the children where the parents have stayed in a marriage that has broken down. In today's world, how does the Bible's teaching apply to our own marriages? Have I asked myself recently who is this person that I live with, that I call husband or wife? Do I really know you, my beloved? When was the last time that we celebrated our sexuality, the pinnacle of our being two in one flesh? How much of a priority is our lovemaking in our life currently? How much of a priority are you?

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year B, Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, pp. 112-3)

"You are my chosen one"

AL 113. *Married couples joined by love speak well of each other; they try to show their spouse's good side, not their weakness and faults... This is not merely a way of acting in front of others; it springs from an interior attitude. ...it sees those weaknesses and faults in a wider context. ...We have to realise that all of us are a complex mixture of light and shadows. ...Love does not have to be perfect for us to value it. The other person loves me as best they can, with all their limits... If I expect too much, the other person will let me know, for he or she can neither play God nor serve all my needs. Love coexists with imperfection. It "bears all things" and can hold its peace before the limitations of the loved one.*

Sometimes, we just have the wrong focus. We can be acutely aware of the ways in which our partner annoys us, and makes mistakes, without recognising the efforts they are making. Sometimes we are not aware of his/her accomplishments. It would be better at such times to look for good things and affirm our spouse for who they are, their qualities and achievements, rather than taking them for granted or criticising them. It is good to work things out together instead of doing our own thing. When we feel critical we need to develop a sensitivity that will flag up danger signals in our heads so that we remember that 'this is my chosen one', and by affirming our husband or wife, tell them how much they mean to us.

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year A, The Baptism of the Lord, pp. 34-5)

“The need for gratitude and trust”

AL 115... *Love trusts, it sets free, it does not try to control, possess and dominate everything. This freedom...can only enrich and expand relationships. The spouses then share with one another the joy of all they have received and learned outside the family circle. At the same time, this freedom makes for sincerity and transparency, for those who know that they are trusted and appreciated can be open and hide nothing. Those who know that their spouse is always suspicious, judgmental and lacking unconditional love, will tend to keep secrets, ...and pretend to be someone other than who they are. On the other hand...loving trust, come what may, helps its members to be themselves...*

We reflect self-righteousness in different ways. Perhaps we all experience times when we focus on the faults of our partner rather than any fault of our own when things go wrong. Fr Henri Nouwen, in his book ‘The Return of the Prodigal Son’, encourages all of us to look at the ways in which we are like the elder brother. He urges us to pray for gratitude and trust. When there is a distance between us, we find that it helps to reflect on all the loving things that our partner has done for us over the years and to trust that love is still alive and strong. When we do this it gives us the confidence to acknowledge our own failings, to say sorry, to ask for forgiveness and to forgive each other. Gratitude and trust cannot suddenly be switched on. In order for us to have these gifts, we must reflect on the love of our partner and make the decision to trust every day.

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year C, Fourth Sunday of Lent, pp. 44-5)

“Your Sacrament – a sign of grace”

AL 121. *Marriage is a precious sign, for “when a man and a woman celebrate the sacrament of marriage, God is, as it were, ‘mirrored’ in them; he impresses in them his own features and the indelible character of his love. Marriage is the icon of God’s love for us. Indeed, God is also communion: the three Persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit live eternally in perfect unity. And this is precisely the mystery of marriage: God makes of the two spouses one single existence”. This has concrete daily consequences, because the spouses, “in virtue of the sacrament, are invested with a true and proper mission, so that, starting with the simple ordinary things of life they can make visible the love with which Christ loves his Church and continues to give his life for her”.*

You entered into a Covenant in which you promised to take each other – for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish ‘til death do us part’. That presents challenges most people regard as impossible even to attempt. But you took on an even greater challenge, promising to BE a Sacrament. You promised to allow the love within the Blessed Trinity to flow into your minds and hearts, so that you, as a couple, might become a sign to the Church community of God’s love, goodness, compassion, mercy and forgiveness. You took on these challenges, because you knew that God was not asking you to live this lifestyle without His help. The priest promised that ‘the graces of the Sacrament’ would give you the wisdom, courage and strength to face the difficulties that life would bring. Your witness is something the world desperately needs!

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year C, Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, pp. 102-3)

“Finding the joy in our sacramental relationship”

AL 129. *The joy of this contemplative love needs to be cultivated. ...This joy, the fruit of fraternal love, is not that of the vain and self-centred, but of lovers who delight in the good of those whom they love, who give freely to them and thus bear good fruit.*

130. On the other hand, joy also grows through pain and sorrow. In the words of Saint Augustine, “the greater the danger in battle the greater is the joy of victory”.¹³¹ After suffering and struggling together, spouses are able to experience that it was worth it, because they achieved some good, learned something as a couple, or came to appreciate what they have. Few human joys are as deep and thrilling as those experienced by two people who love one another and have achieved something as the result of a great, shared effort.

Jesus says “if a man takes you to law and would have your tunic, let him have your cloak as well”. The call to go the extra mile in loving our spouse is clear; another call is to identify attitudes that are encouraged by the world we live in that may cause harm to our relationship. We are encouraged to stand on our own two feet, to be able to control our own lives, to make our own life choices, to develop our talents to the full and to live an interesting and fulfilled life. All of this is good, yet, when we got married, we committed ourselves to finding our joy and our fulfilment in our sacramental relationship. It is so important to take time to pray together, to listen to each other, to affirm and encourage, to share hurts, reconcile and forgive each other and to celebrate the people that we are. Then, our expectation that our growing love for one another will make us more fully human and more fully alive, becomes a reality.

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year A, Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, pp. 76-7)

“Thanking God for each other”

AL 127. *The love of friendship is called “charity” when it perceives and esteems the “great worth” of another person. Beauty – that “great worth” which is other than physical or psychological appeal – enables us to appreciate the sacredness of a person, without feeling the need to possess it. ...Tenderness...is a sign of a love free of selfish possessiveness. It makes us approach a person with immense respect and a certain dread of causing them harm or taking away their freedom. Loving another person involves the joy of contemplating and appreciating their innate beauty and sacredness, which is greater than my needs.*

“Stay awake for you never know when the time will come”. This reminds us that we are called to live each day loving those that touch our lives, full of warmth, compassion, forgiveness and joy in each other, especially with our spouse. When we married we made a covenant to love, honour and serve each other. The Gospel calls us to remember that our lives together will not go on for ever and to thank God for the wonderful gift we are to each

other, one of the greatest gifts that the Father has given us. As Isaiah reminds us, 'You are our Father. We are all the work of your hand.' It is therefore so important that we thank God every day for each other.

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year B, First Sunday in Advent, pp. 12-3)

“Risk our star of hope... or make our dreams come true”

AL 134. *...a process of constant growth. The very special form of love that is marriage is called to embody what Saint Thomas Aquinas said about charity in general. “Charity”, he says, “by its very nature, has no limit to its increase ...Saint Paul also prays: “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another” (1 Th 3:12), and again, “concerning fraternal love... we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more” (1 Th 4:9-10). More and more! Marital love is not defended primarily by presenting indissolubility as a duty, or by repeating doctrine, but by helping it to grow ever stronger under the impulse of grace. A love that fails to grow is at risk. Growth can only occur if we respond to God’s grace through constant acts of love, acts of kindness that become ever more frequent, intense, generous, tender and cheerful. ...The gift of God’s love poured out upon the spouses is also a summons to constant growth in grace.*

St Paul’s exhortation to ‘make more and more progress in the kind of life that you are meant to live: the life that God wants ...you are already living it’ ...reminds us that our relationship is never static. We have the choice to grow closer every day, to express our love, to listen and seek to know each other better. In this way, the ‘star of hope’ on our wedding day will continue to shine. Or we can choose to avoid expressing our love and fail to reach out and ask for forgiveness when we hurt each other, with this choice our star will slowly grow weaker. Luke reminds us to ‘Watch ourselves or our hearts will be coarsened with the cares of life’ or we risk our star being extinguished. When we let the cares and difficulties in life weigh us down, we can become short and irritable with each other. If this happens it is a reminder that it is time to focus on each other’s special qualities and gifts, and not let our worries become more important than our love.

(Excerpt from I AM WITH YOU Year C, First Sunday of Advent, pp. 16-17)

“Giving each other life, giving thanks”

AL 136. *Dialogue is essential for experiencing, expressing and fostering love in marriage...Yet it can only be the fruit of a long and demanding apprenticeship. Men and women, young people and adults, communicate differently. They speak different languages and they act in different ways. Our way of asking and responding to questions, the tone we use, our timing and any number of other factors condition how well we communicate. We need to develop certain attitudes that express love and encourage authentic dialogue.*

When we experience being deeply loved and when we love deeply in response we are both fully human and fully alive. There is no doubt that this is what God wants us to be. We must always remember the commitment we made on our wedding day to bring life to our spouse every day to the best of our ability. In his book *The Five Languages of Love*, Gary Chapman points out that each of us hears love most effectively in a number of different ways: praise,

quality time, gifts, acts of service and physical touch. Every day gives us an opportunity to discover or rediscover the way our partner best experiences our love. Let us make a special effort to love him/her in the most effective way.

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year C, Easter Sunday, pp. 50-1)

“Listening is a way of loving”

AL 137. *Take time, quality time. This means being ready to listen patiently and attentively to everything the other person wants to say. ...Do not be rushed, put aside all of your own needs and worries, and make space. Often the other spouse does not need a solution to his or her problems, but simply to be heard, to feel that someone has acknowledged their pain, their disappointment, their fear, their anger, their hopes and their dreams. How often we hear complaints like: “He does not listen to me.” “Even when you seem to, you are really doing something else.” “I talk to her and I feel like she can’t wait for me to finish.” “When I speak to her, she tries to change the subject, or she gives me curt responses to end the conversation”.*

Before you were married you wanted to know everything about each other. You listened intently to everything that was said, and you felt loved and cherished as a result. But, with the passage of time, and the pressures of everyday living, the quality of your sharing and especially your listening might have declined. For all of us, there is a constant need to reflect on the quality of our listening, especially to overcome the temptation to butt in. When we listen with our heart and our eyes, as well as our ears, we begin to recognise aspects of our behaviour and our attitudes that we need to change. Listening is a way of loving and so is willingness to change. Ask yourself this question: When did I last feel listened to by my spouse? And share your answers with each other.

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year B, Fourth Sunday of Advent, pp. 18-9)

“Let us build our house on rock to last”

AL 142. *...a love lacking either pleasure or passion is insufficient to symbolise the union of the human heart with God: “All the mystics have affirmed that supernatural love and heavenly love find the symbols which they seek in marital love, rather than in friendship...the reason is to be found precisely in its totality”. Why then should we not pause to speak of feelings and sexuality in marriage?*

143. *Desires, feelings, emotions, what the ancients called “the passions”, all have an important place in married life. They are awakened whenever “another” becomes present and part of a person’s life.*

Our marriages are the rock on which we build our lives. When we said ‘yes’ to each other on our wedding day the foundation stone was laid; each ‘yes’ since then has strengthened our building. Each time we make love, we renew our wedding vows, saying ‘yes’ to the way of life that God has called us to. Our intimacy bears fruit in ways which we can hardly comprehend, but this is at the heart of our calling. Let us give and give again to each other, so that everything in our life is a fruit of our love. This building of relationship can be difficult – are we both willing to say ‘yes’?

(Extract from I AM WITH Year A, Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, pp. 80-1)

“Choosing to be open and honest”

AL 156. *Every form of sexual submission must be clearly rejected. This includes all improper interpretations of the passage in the Letter to the Ephesians where Paul tells women to “be subject to your husbands” (Eph 5:22). ...“Be subject to one another” (Eph 5:21). In marriage, this reciprocal “submission” takes on a special meaning, and is seen as a freely chosen mutual belonging marked by fidelity, respect and care. Sexuality is inseparably at the service of this conjugal friendship, for it is meant to aid the fulfilment of the other.*

The mention of ‘submit’ in the passage from Ephesians raises many hackles in today’s world of equality issues. ‘Submit’ does not mean obey. In fact the passage begins by saying that husbands and wives should submit themselves to each other. In this context ‘submit’ is about choosing to be open and honest with each other.

Open, honest and trust-filled communication brings about intimacy. Christ showed His love for His bride, the Church, by submitting Himself to the Father’s will for the sake of the blessings His death would bring to us all. This is a reference to the holiness that comes about through husbands and wives living their lives in a way that is open to the word of God and the actions of the Holy Spirit.

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year B, Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time, pp. 100-1)

“The Holy Spirit is always there to help us”

AL 162... *Many married couples remain faithful when one of them has become physically unattractive, or fails to satisfy the other’s needs, despite the voices in our society that might encourage them to be unfaithful or to leave the other. A wife can care for her sick husband and thus, in drawing near to the Cross, renew her commitment to love unto death.*

The Holy Spirit is living within us and communicates God’s presence in us. So, if one of us is facing a difficult decision, or a financial crisis, or illness of any kind, our spouse can be a channel for the Holy Spirit through his/her gentle tenderness, listening and commitment. Our partner’s faithfulness, and willingness to walk with us on a dark path, shows a strength which seems beyond all expectation. At times like this we become really aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our relationship.

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year A, Second Sunday of Christmas, pp. 30-1)

“When you give love away it grows”

AL 183. *A married couple who experience the power of love know that this love is called to bind the wounds of the outcast, to foster a culture of encounter and to fight for justice.*

One of the things of which we have become more aware over the years is that the more you give love away the more it grows! When we try to love each other in the way the Lord invites us to, we experience fullness of life. If we give ourselves in love to each other this does not diminish who we are but enriches and increases our capacity to love even more. The strength we gain when we live this lifestyle together enables us to reach out in love to other people. Again, the Gospel says, "If anyone gives so much as a cup of water to one of these little ones because he is a disciple, then I tell you solemnly, he will most certainly not lose his reward". When we experience being loved, this enables us to love in our turn.

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year A, Thirteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time, pp. 88-9)

"To share what it is really like to be us"

AL 210...*couples need to be able to detect danger signals in their relationship and to find, before the wedding, effective ways of responding to them. Sadly, many couples marry without really knowing one another. They have enjoyed each other's company and done things together, but without facing the challenge of revealing themselves and coming to know who the other person truly is.*

When we got married, we promised "to love one another till death do us part". Little did we realise it at the time but our call was and is to believe in and have confidence in our love. We are called to trust in our partner and to be honest about how we feel and think, and to share what it is really like to be us, not only the good bits but also those we think may not be acceptable. It does not mean venting or dumping our feelings to relieve pressure inside us. It means believing in the goodness of our partner so that even if he/she reacts we will try to listen gently to their hurt, believing that our perseverance will draw us closer together. Let us not take the easy road of independence when our relationship gets tough, of keeping quiet, doing our own thing or sharing with friends rather than our husband/wife.

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year A, Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, pp. 102-3)

"Chosen to be for His greater glory"

AL 216...*couple[s] can ...meditate on the biblical readings and the meaningfulness of the rings ...and the other signs that are part of the [wedding] rite. ...to [pray] together, one for the other, to seek God's help in remaining faithful and generous*

218. *Another great challenge of marriage ...is to help couples realise that marriage is not something that happens once for all. Their union is real and irrevocable, confirmed and consecrated by the sacrament of matrimony. Yet in joining their lives, the spouses assume an active and creative role in a lifelong project.*

When we married, on our wedding day, our lives were changed. We were no longer just a single man and woman but a husband and wife, a couple, with a completely new title and a

new mission ahead of us. That mission began there, at the altar, when we said ‘yes’ to each other and to God. We promised to love and to cherish each other from that moment on, to be a shelter and a haven throughout all of life’s storms. We were to become one flesh in honour of each other and in honour of the Lord and to become the loving parents of the children we were to have, to love them and to ponder on all that was to take place. Our lives are a mirror of the life planned by God for Mary! St Paul reminds us: “...it is in him that we were claimed as God’s own, chosen from the beginning; chosen to be for his greater glory.”
(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year A, The Immaculate Conception, pp. 132-3)

“Let us radiate His life and light and goodness”

AL 219...*Hope is the leaven that...makes it possible to look beyond arguments, conflicts and problems and to see things in a broader perspective. It harnesses our uncertainties and concerns so that growth can take place. Hope also bids us live fully in the present...for the best way to prepare a solid future is to live well in the present.*

Let us allow our light to shine today. Let us radiate His life and light and goodness. Let us acknowledge Jesus as our Lord and our King. Let us make evident, in all the ways we share ourselves with the people around us, the reason for the great hope we carry inside. Let us thank God together for the great gift of our marriage to us both. Let our marriage be a witness to those around us of God’s goodness, kindness and mercy. Let us rejoice that we have journeyed this far, but can still hope and still dare to believe that the best is yet to come.
(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year C, Last Sunday- Ordinary Time: Christ the King, pp. 130-1)

“Putting each other first”

AL 220...*The pleasure of belonging to one another leads to seeing life as a common project, putting the other’s happiness ahead of my own, and realising with joy that this marriage enriches society.*

221...*Each marriage is a kind of “salvation history”, which from fragile beginnings – thanks to God’s gift and a creative and generous response on our part – grows over time into something precious and enduring.*

The invitation for us, is to be willing to work at removing all the self- centred behaviours and attitudes which are obstacles in our relationship. These prevent each of us from becoming a better husband or a better wife and from putting each other FIRST in our life together. When we prepare a way for each other we become a little more powerful, brighter, a clearer signpost of the way ahead for each other, our children, our families and the world around us. In human terms we can point the way to a New Heaven and a New Earth and the days stretch into infinity.

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year B, Second Sunday of Advent, pp. 14-5)

“Too tired... where is our treasure?”

AL 224...*Love needs time and space; everything else is secondary. Time is needed to talk things over, to embrace leisurely, to share plans, to listen to one other and gaze in each other's eyes, to appreciate one another and to build a stronger relationship. Sometimes the frenetic pace of our society and the pressures of the workplace create problems. At other times, the problem is the lack of quality time together, sharing the same room without one even noticing the other...be present to one another, even by sharing moments of meaningful silence.*

In this busy world we can be tempted to forget the significance of spending time with each other. It is easy to let life get out of balance: work, church activities, clubs, even family and friendships can become more important than our spouse and we can too often fall into bed too tired to talk or to make love. Are we treasuring the gift of our love for each other and fostering it with time to listen, cherish and romance each other? If our love for each other really is our greatest treasure we need to give it time each day, even if it is just half an hour to have a cup of tea together when we come home from work. Spending time lovingly with each other every day helps, but sometimes it is best to set aside an evening, a day, or even a weekend on our own to come together again, and to rediscover the joy of our treasure.
(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year C, Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time, pp. 100-1)

“Cherish the gift”

AL 226...*married couples should be encouraged to develop a routine that gives a healthy sense of closeness and stability through shared daily rituals...Yet it also helps to break the routine with a party, and to enjoy [couple and] family celebrations of anniversaries and special events. We need these moments of cherishing God's gifts and renewing our zest for life. As long as we can celebrate, we are able to rekindle our love, to free it from monotony and to colour our daily routine with hope.*

Future events, like birthdays and weddings, create this air of expectancy. Remember the months of preparation, looking forward to your wedding day, until the moment when you covenanted your love and 'married' each other. On that day Christ, through His bride the Church, promised to give you, daily, all the help you would need to live out the commitment you had made to each other before God, your family and your friends. They say that love is blind, but your love was not blind. You could see beyond any flaws in each other, because you had glimpsed an inner beauty, revealed in the intimate moments you had experienced together. You have built trust between you and created a priceless bond through sharing your deepest thoughts and feelings. You are giving yourself to each other every day; what more can you give or receive? Cherish the Gift!

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year A, Third Sunday of Advent, pp. 20-1)

“What would the future hold for us?”

AL 231. *A word should also be said about those whose love, like a fine wine, has come into its own. Just as a good wine begins to “breathe” with time, so too the daily experience of fidelity gives married life richness and “body”. Fidelity has to do with patience and expectation. ...The love present from the beginning becomes more conscious, settled and mature as the couple discover each other anew day after day, year after year. Saint John of the Cross tells us that “old lovers are tried and true”. They “are outwardly no longer a fire with powerful emotions and impulses, but now taste the sweetness of the wine of love, well-aged and stored deep within their hearts”. Such couples have successfully overcome crises and hardships without fleeing from challenges or concealing problems.*

On our wedding day we too wondered what was ahead. As we set out on our married life together it was new and exciting but we were also filled with trepidation about what the future would hold. How many years together would we have, and how many children? Would they be boys or girls? Like the early Church we were very young and inexperienced. When I look at my beloved and thank him or her for being my lifelong lover we experience a renewed and reinvigorated spirit of togetherness; we are united in a deeper, richer way than when we were first married. Today, we are stronger in hope and more deeply alive to each other than ever before because the Spirit of the risen Lord is with us, as He was in those heady days when we first became a 'Little Church' on our wedding day.

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year A, Seventh Sunday of Easter, pp. 62-3)

“Courage and strength from the Bread of Life”

AL 232...*Couples should be helped to realise that surmounting a crisis need not weaken their relationship; instead, it can improve, settle and mature the wine of their union. Life together should not diminish but increase their contentment; every new step along the way can help couples find new ways to happiness. Each crisis becomes an apprenticeship in growing closer together or learning a little more about what it means to be married...when marriage is seen as a challenge that involves overcoming obstacles, each crisis becomes an opportunity to let the wine of their relationship age and improve...Each crisis has a lesson to teach us; we need to learn how to listen for it with the ear of the heart.*

God provides us with the Bread of Life, giving us the courage and strength to face up to and grow in each situation that occurs in our relationships. When we have the faith to place ourselves in God's hands, the gifts that come to us through his grace are many. Sometimes the demands of marriage on our energy, emotions and spiritual strength are so strong that it is very difficult to believe that Jesus is holding us in the palm of His hand. This has happened when one of us has suffered from mental or physical illness. There have been times when it has not seemed possible to communicate, when we rarely touched each other, and when we wanted to say things in our prayers that were difficult to say out loud to each other. At such times it was necessary for us to dig deep and find the trust that Jesus would pull us through and there would be a time in the future when we would be together again physically, emotionally and spiritually.

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year B, Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, pp. 94-5)

“A new beginning for us?”

AL 233. *Faced with a crisis, we tend first to react defensively...resort to denying the problem, hiding or downplaying it, and hoping that it will go away...[leading them to] grow apart and lose their ability to communicate. When problems are not dealt with, communication is the first thing to go.*

234. *Crises need to be faced together...Communication is an art learned in moments of peace in order to be practised in moments of difficulty. Spouses need help in discovering their deepest thoughts and feelings and expressing them.*

In our married life together, there are times when it is difficult to talk about what is going on inside each of us, times when we believe we are unacceptable and our feelings and thoughts are unreasonable. An inner voice says ‘I should not be like this’ and we are tempted to bottle up these thoughts and pray that they will go away. When our partner accepts our negative feelings and we experience being loved just as we are, it becomes easier to share them and then let go. Every day there is the chance for a new beginning, to discover new ways in which we can enable our partner to trust us and share themselves. When we invite Jesus into our relationship He helps us to discover new ways to be vulnerable, to drop our defences and to have the courage to really listen, to share and to change. In this way we grow closer and more loving towards each other and, through doing so, we grow closer to God.

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year A, Second Sunday of Advent, pp. 18-9)

“Seeking forgiveness helps us to love more”

AL 240... *Unresolved issues need to be dealt with and a process of liberation must take place. When problems emerge in a marriage, before important decisions are made it is important to ensure that each spouse has come to grips with his or her own history. This involves recognising a need for healing, insistent prayer for the grace to forgive and be forgiven, a willingness to accept help, and the determination not to give up but to keep trying. A sincere self-examination will make it possible to see how one’s own shortcomings and immaturity affect the relationship. Even if it seems clear that the other person is at fault, a crisis will never be overcome simply by expecting him or her to change. We also have to ask what in our own life needs to grow or heal if the conflict is to be resolved.*

David “flew into a rage” when, in the form of a parable, he was told of an injustice. At different times we too ‘have flown into a rage’ at some perceived injustice, without recognising our own huge failure. When we have asked for forgiveness from each other and from God, we have been granted that blessing. As painful as it can be to acknowledge our own failings, our Lord invites us to look at the ways in which we might be behaving in a hypocritical, judgemental and pharisaical way towards each other, and to seek forgiveness so that we might be made whole and love more.

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year C, Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, pp. 84-5)

“Me becomes ‘we’, two in one”

AL 292. *Christian marriage, as a reflection of the union between Christ and his Church, is fully realised in the union between a man and a woman who give themselves to each other in a free, faithful and exclusive love, who belong to each other until death and are open to the transmission of life, and are consecrated by the sacrament, which grants them the grace to become a domestic church and a leaven of new life for society...*

We can find some help in grasping this great mystery present in the sacrament of Matrimony. Two people, a man and a woman, freely choose to unite their lives, to be as one. This goes even further; they are called to be formed into a Trinitarian relationship of man, woman and God. This is something that can be witnessed. A man and a woman, two independent people, choose to forgo their individual selves and become a new thing, a ‘couple’, to let go of ‘me’ and become ‘we’ – two into one flesh.

When a couple embraces a sacramental relationship, other people can see the transformation. They see that showing care and concern for each other’s welfare becomes more important than self-concern. What can also be visible is the way that sharing love in their daily lives is something that fulfils them. In this way the couple call their brothers and sisters in Christ to a depth of relationship that could otherwise have seemed impossible.

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year B, Corpus Christi, pp. 138/9)

“It’s the little things we do”

AL 317... *Gradually, “with the grace of the Holy Spirit, [couples] grow in holiness through married life, also by sharing in the mystery of Christ’s cross, which transforms difficulties and sufferings into an offering of love”. Moreover, moments of joy, relaxation, celebration, and even sexuality can be experienced as a sharing in the full life of the resurrection. Married couples shape with different daily gestures a “God-enlightened space in which to experience the hidden presence of the risen Lord”.*

The Latin root for the two syllables making the word sacrifice are, holy (sacri...) and making (...fice). There can be a very negative way of looking at ‘sacrificing’ within marriage, seeing it as suffering, giving in or giving up something of ourselves that is important or really necessary for us.

When we look at the context of [some Sunday] readings, it is easier to see clearly the ‘holiness’ inherent in the ‘sacrifices’ of all those involved. On reflection, the reality of our life’s experiences tells us that it is through giving that we receive so much. The small things that we do for one another each day produce wonderful and fruitful consequences in our marriage. It is our daily ‘yes’ to each other that is ultimately ‘making us holy’.

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year B, Thirty-Second Year in Ordinary Time, pp. 122-3)

“You are a love letter from Christ”

AL 318... *Jesus knocks on the door...to share with [married couples] the Eucharistic supper (cf. Rev 3:20). There, spouses can always seal anew the paschal covenant which united them and which ought to reflect the covenant which God sealed with mankind in the cross. The Eucharist is the sacrament of the new covenant, where Christ's redemptive work is carried out (cf. Lk 22:20). The close bond between married life and the Eucharist thus becomes all the more clear. For the food of the Eucharist offers the spouses the strength and incentive needed to live the marriage covenant each day as a "domestic church".*

The Scriptures are often called a 'Love Letter' telling the story of the ups and downs of God's love relationship with humanity. St Paul describes the Christians in Corinth as 'a letter from Christ drawn up by us'. He says that it was not written by us, but by a Covenant with the Spirit of the living God written 'on the tablets of your living hearts'. The 'Love Letter' theme recurs when Jesus, the 'Bridegroom', tells his followers that when the Bridegroom is no longer with them, 'the bridegroom's attendants', the Apostles and you as couples, will go out to the whole world with the 'new wine' containing the Good News of God's faithful, unconditional love for the human race, shown above all on the Cross. You are called to be a reflection, to 'mirror' the faithfulness of God's love for the human race. The help you receive through your Sacrament of Marriage and through the Eucharist enables you to take on this responsibility.

(Extract from I AM WITH YOU Year B, Eight Sunday in Ordinary Time, pp. 74-5)

Thank you for journeying with us on this material. We trust you have found Pope Francis' teaching in AMORIS LAETITIA (AL) as encouraging and inspirational as we have. We also hope that the reflections taken from our books (I AM WITH YOU Years A, B, and C) and set against AL, proved to be of interest and helpful.

Every blessing

Brian & Maureen Devine

Coordinators - Two In One Flesh