



Virtual Marriage Retreat: National Marriage Week 2020

Join us in celebrating National Marriage Week (February 7-14, 2020) by taking a few moments each day, together with your spouse, to reflect and pray. This year's theme is **Stories from the Domestic Church**. This retreat will help you further reflect on how you and your spouse share in the particular calling to build up the Body of Christ and form a domestic church (cf. LG, 11).

For more instruction or inspiration, visit foryourmarriage.org or marriageuniqueforareason.org.

Day One: Ten Years of "I Do"

A Story about Love's Promise

A memorable moment in our marriage was the celebration of our 10th wedding anniversary. Our parish priest had agreed to perform a special blessing and renewal of our commitment to our marriage vows during morning Mass. Following the homily, he called us both up before the altar, facing one another, hand in hand, just like at our wedding a decade before. Unlike our wedding, however, the weight of the words was profoundly different. As a blissfully hopeful engaged couple preparing for the sacrament, we thought we understood "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health" - even perhaps imagining what forms these highs and lows might take. Ten years later, they were no longer words of anticipation but a reality.

Our shared gaze as newlyweds captured the promise of new opportunities that would fade, however, many times over... into job loss and debt through unemployment; into uncertainty as the foundations of our first home gave way to near foreclosure during the housing crisis; into the joy of new life and the disillusionment that came through our daughter's extended NICU stay and major life changes to support ongoing medical issues; into the hope of growth within our family and the wounds of loss through our first miscarriage.

To bring the whole of ourselves before the altar, not just the joys but also the sorrows, beneath the crucified Christ, and to verbally express our renewed commitment to our vows was a source of strength and a powerful reminder of our sacramental calling as a husband and wife that still ripples through and carries us today. Our family has certainly been blessed with times of great joy, of course, but the things that seemed so overwhelming and difficult to carry at the time, have been the very experiences that knit us closer together.

The "I do" of our wedding should never become an "I did," it will never be past tense. Our vows, like the covenant God swore to us, are a promise to always say "I do," to choose the other, in every moment of our lives, the good and the bad. By doing so, the life-giving love of Christ becomes

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realized within us and we allow grace to heal our wounds and draw us ever closer to His merciful heart.

- *Mike and Evie*

To Think About

To start this week of reflection, ask yourselves individually and as a couple:

- (a) Reflect on your wedding day and the vows. How have you seen these lived out in your marriage? Which have new meaning?
- (b) What are sources of strength in your marriage? Where are possible opportunities for growth?
- (c) In what ways has your experience of marriage and family life revealed the presence of Christ?

Prayer to the Holy Family (page 10)

Day Two: Christ in Our Midst

A Story about Home Life

Pope Francis often speaks about the importance of having an encounter with Christ, especially for a Christian's journey. He never tires of repeating the words of Benedict XVI: "Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction." (EG, 7)

Our prayers always begin with gratitude for the visible signs of Christ's presence in our lives. Encounters with Christ often come when we least expect them, through the little people who provide us unique challenges: our kids.

Like most Catholic families, our home life celebrates the beauty of the liturgical year with traditions. We read stories about the saints and celebrate their feast days. We light the Advent wreath and set up the nativity figures at Christmastime. These moments are the highlights of our year as we live the seasons of the Church in our own home.

On any given day, however, our home life is also messy and frustrating (not unlike the history of the Church!). Spaghetti stains on Sunday clothes, sticky kitchen floors, pouting and tears before bedtime or endless requests for stories that try a weary parent's patience.

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Every day God enters and encounters us in the brokenness of this world and in the messiness of our families. Even when our kids adeptly put our misery on display, we are being offered the opportunity to welcome humility and holiness into our midst. Our own parenting failures allow God's love and mercy to meet us right where we are.

- *Ramie and Jake*

To Think About

Choose one or more of the following questions to reflect on with your spouse:

- (a) How can you affirm, respect, and connect with your children or spouse as you go through your daily routines together?
- (b) Think back to a recent loss of temper you had with your child. Could that situation have been a moment of encounter with Christ?
- (c) How quickly and easily do I grant forgiveness and show mercy to my child/spouse? How quickly and sincerely do I ask for forgiveness from them?

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Day Three: The Mystery of Marital Faith and Its Fruit

A Story about Adoption

Faith is the willingness to set off on a journey, without knowing exactly where we are going or how we are going to get there. If there is anything resembling certainty, it is in the companions we choose to share our journey.

Saint Paul speaks of husband and wife becoming "one flesh" as "a great mystery" (Ephesians 5:32), a mystery that mirrors Christ and his bride, the Church. Part of the mystery, we think, is that God makes our hearts capable of letting go of our past relationships, however beautiful or broken, in order to enter freely into the shared hope that our marriage will be life-giving.

In our experience, that fundamental faith of husband and wife - setting off on a journey together - has also come to mean faith in what God is doing to knit our family together. Ours started as a common story: boy meets girl, wedding bells ... but, the baby carriage... it took a while. We waited year after year, eventually going through all the invasive and heartbreaking testing that accompanies infertility. Yes, God was with us through it all, and sustained us with extraordinary graces which, in retrospect,

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were often exquisitely timed. But He does not always spare us from suffering. Instead, we have found that God draws near to share our suffering.

Going to that place of suffering with God was what opened our hearts to the seed that God had planted—the seed of adoption. Once it began to bear fruit, wonderful things began to happen. There was new hope, discernment of possibilities, and new discoveries. After much struggle, we brought our oldest daughter home from China, slowly discovering that a place on the other side of the world could begin to feel like another home. Three years later, we brought our second daughter home. And surprise of surprises, nine years later we returned to China and brought home our son.

Every year, we celebrate three adoption days in addition to three birthdays, so we have constant reminders of how odd and yet beautiful our journey with God has been. Seldom has the road ahead been clear, and still we draw courage from the faith that God will lead. “I do not ask to see the distant scene,” wrote St. John Henry Newman, “one step enough for me.” That has been our experience.

- *Tim and Sue*

To Think About

Choose one or more of the following questions to reflect on with your spouse:

- (a) Where has your marriage proven fruitful in ways you least expected?
- (b) What are new forms of fruitfulness that God may be calling your marriage to bring forth?
- (c) When has God drawn near to share in your suffering as a couple?

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Day Four: Parenting Among Friends

A Story about Spiritual Parenthood

John and Patti, good friends of ours, are great examples of how marital love is called to be, and can be, fruitful both biologically and spiritually. In addition to their immediate family, their domestic church, their marriage has borne spiritual fruit for countless others, including ourselves.

When we first met John and Patti, they had already been married a few years and had three (of their now six) children. We became instant friends and soon found ourselves at their home most Friday

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nights for a delicious dinner, a decade of the rosary with their family, and then, after the kids were tucked into bed, a relaxing evening together. We have many fond memories of sinking into their comfortable living room couches with a glass of wine in hand to simply catch up on the past week and enjoy each other's company.

They also invited us to join their group of friends who had been meeting monthly for a few years for prayer and dinner. We were honored to be invited and their friends quickly became our friends. And they, like John and Patti, helped to nourish the seed of faith in our lives. Besides the monthly gatherings of prayer and fellowship, we were all soon celebrating joys together (births, birthdays, playoffs, etc.) and we accompanied one another in trials (illnesses, unemployment, family difficulties, etc.).

Five years ago, however, with the advent of a new job opportunity 1,200 miles away, we left this amazing group - fortified in the faith but doubtful that we would ever find friends who nourished our faith as much as they had. But we did - by God's grace. Inspired by that group, we invited a few couples at our new parish to start a similar group. For four years now this new group of couples continues to grace our lives in rich and meaningful ways. And, some members of our group have continued to spread the gift by helping other groups begin in our parish, as well. And, because of that, we have now created materials for new groups to begin anywhere in the country.

We thank God, therefore, for John and Patti and for all of the couples in both groups, old and new, and for the spiritual fruit that these relationships have borne in our lives. Truly, all of these couples have been spiritual parents to us, giving us and our marriage a more meaningful life. And, we praise God for the fruit it is now bringing to many other couples, too!

- Kari and Stephen

To Think About

Choose one or more of the following questions to reflect on with your spouse:

- (a) What does spiritual parenthood mean to you? How can it be lived in different ways?
- (b) Who has helped you and your marriage? Whom have you helped to have a better marriage?
- (c) What can you do to find couples who can accompany you as mentors and guides? What can you do to accompany couples who may need help along the journey?

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Day Five: The Tree that God Grows

A Story about Perfect Imperfection

This past Advent I started a Jesse Tree. I was tempted to go all in, DIY style, with the help of more seasoned mommy crafters who host their annual Jesse Tree swap in town. But, the temptation wasn't strong due to my complete lack of skill and patience to deal with anything calling for glue, paint, or toothpicks. Instead, I was lured by the beautiful display of perfectly hand-painted wooden disks portraying each symbol of the Jesse Tree that I found at a local gift shop. For a few dollars I could opt out of the messy affair of gooey toothpicks and paint-smearred fingers; it sounded like a glorious plan.

Later at a White Elephant Party, I happened to notice a simple but radiant little Jesse Tree on the hostess's piano. It was decorated with homemade symbols of different proportions, colors, and textures. It was multi-dimensional and dynamic; it made my Jesse Tree seem flat and uninspiring.

As I behold my children – each unique and exquisite in their own way – I'm reminded of the homemade Jesse Tree. Each branch held a symbol sculpted by a different person's hand, bearing the stamp of the crafter's creativity and cleverness. Each child bears the mark of the Creator and bears His image in a unique way. Each child is a blossom upon my family tree or a young sapling that needs to be cultivated, watered, and pruned. But, like the challenge of the Jesse Tree, I often feel inadequate before the challenges of raising these young saplings. My craftiness isn't tested, but my calmness is. My inner Etsy isn't tested, but my self-control is!

Part of the great parental privilege is that God provides His grace, and it suffices. It is enough to rely on His gracious help to assist us in every challenge. Yet, with social media awash in images that deliver a message of external perfection – so much so that "Instagrammable" is a new word – it is hard not to feel inadequate and insufficient. It is hard to admit that I am not 'the Etsy type' and my children's nursery is not "Instagrammable." Likewise, it is hard to admit time and time again in confession that I have failed to be patient and forbearing with my children.

Time and time again, however, with the grace of God, as a couple, we are reminded to simply love each of our children well and to recognize that He is the Crafter of our tree, our little domestic church, and of each of its blossoms, and He will make it grow.

- *Julia and Francis*

To Think About

Choose one or more of the following questions to reflect on with your spouse:

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- (a) In what areas of your marriage or family do you feel inadequate or incapable?
- (b) How can you and your spouse or family establish greater trust in God's grace?
- (c) Think about a present challenge in your life. How will you and your spouse meet this challenge with the help of God?

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Day Six: Love in Truth

A Story about Unexpected Challenges

We have been blessed in our 42 years of marriage with four beautiful and amazing children. Our children, the source of our greatest pride and joy, have also been the source of our greatest suffering. With the sudden death of our first son, at only six months old, we experienced our first crucible. The first fruit of our love had withered, testing our own love as a couple. It was a life-changing experience in our marriage, but, fortunately, our grief led us to a deeper commitment to one another and to our faith. This prepared us to meet other challenges that were to come, testing our unity as a couple and family.

While still in college, our daughter announced that she was pregnant with our first grandchild, outside the bond of marriage. Although stunned and saddened by the circumstances, we welcomed the gift of new life that would bless our family. During the turbulent time that surrounded these events, we accompanied our daughter in her struggle to recognize and follow God's plan. We are proud to be the grandparents of a young man with deep faith who now serves our country overseas as a U.S. Marine.

One day, our youngest son announced that he experienced same-sex attraction and had embraced a lifestyle that was contrary to his human dignity in the eyes of God. The pain of losing our son to the lies of the world is hard to describe.

As our son, we made him know that our love is unconditional. However, we also needed to remain steadfast in truth, as true love warrants. When we did not attend the same-sex union with his partner, a deep hurt was felt on both sides. His departure from any practice of a life in the Catholic faith is our greatest sorrow, which elicits a constant prayer rising from our hearts for Mary to lead him back to her Son.

On our wedding day, we promised each other that we would accept children lovingly from God and

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educate them according to the law of Christ and His Church. Little did we realize the great gift we were agreeing to receive, nor the tremendous responsibility it entails. We continue to educate our children and grandchildren in the faith, challenging them to true discipleship.

While our work to build our domestic church is not done, we trust that the faith that we set as the foundation of our family will be as a reminder to our children of God's unwavering faithfulness and unfailing love. Even the greatest blessings can blossom in the midst of thorns.

- *Christine and Rick*

To Think About

Choose one or more of the following questions to reflect on with your spouse:

- (a) How have you dealt with the challenges and disappointments experienced in your marriage or caused by your children? Where have you found God's grace and mercy present in those times?
- (b) In what ways may God be asking you to give greater witness to truth in love within your family?
- (c) How have you noticed God's hand in the midst of suffering and loss?

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Day Seven: Learning at a Later Stage

A Story told by Grandparents

Early on as grandparents, we learned a lesson about teaching children to pray while babysitting our 4-year-old grandson. Come bedtime, the parents had not yet re-appeared, so we had the chance to do bedtime routine with little Antonio: story, snack, bath, pajamas. We had lots of experience with that, although we hadn't remembered how much energy it took!

When he finally climbed into bed, we were exhausted. We quickly said a short rote prayer with him, "Now I lay me down to sleep..." Ok, kisses and lights out. Right? No! Antonio started to wail, "I want the long prayer! I want the long prayer!" He cried and cried. We were mystified. What could the long prayer be? We sat on the bed and shared our own nighttime prayers with him, beginning with Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be, special intentions, blessings all around. Antonio calmed down and went

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to sleep like a lamb.

When the parents came home, we told them about the drama and asked “What’s the ‘long prayer’?” They laughed and said, “Oh, we usually do a longer bedtime prayer routine with him, including a whole litany of intentions, followed by the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be, just like you taught us. It’s our special time together, and he looks forward to it. But when he is being rowdy, and we are at the end of our rope, we just say a short simple prayer with him. He must have thought you were punishing him by not saying the long prayer!”

By praying together as a family, we had instilled in our son a love of shared family prayer that he had passed on to his own family. We had witnessed how the habit of prayer, instituted when our children were young, was still resonating with them as adults.

Our parental responsibility to foster the faith in our home continues as grandparents - now in the homes of our children and children’s children. Prayer is an excellent way to foster the faith, even when it has grown weak in our next of kin. Praying together is a time to reconnect, renew, and reconcile. At bedtime, meal time, car time, in sickness and in health, a family builds the bonds of love when they turn to God together.

Customs, traditions, and celebrations are all potential opportunities for prayer and faith building. Drawing on the homemade spiritual practices of yesteryear, a future of faith can be forged for next generations, one celebration at a time.

Just as God was with us through the long nights and exhausting days of our own parenting journey, He is with us in this new chapter of life in the bigger domestic church. We now say the “long prayer” for our children and grandchildren, sharing the comforting and encouraging love of our heavenly Father.

- *Lauri and John*

To Think About

Choose one or more of the following questions to reflect on with your spouse:

- (a) What traditions can you share with your grandchildren to foster the faith? Do you pray regularly for your children and grandchildren?
- (b) How does the faith and prayer shape your responsibility as a grandparent?
- (c) If you are not a grandparent, what are other forms of ‘grandparenting’ that you can provide to someone who needs it?

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Prayer to the Holy Family

*Jesus, Mary and Joseph,
in you we contemplate
the splendor of true love;
to you we turn with trust.*

*Holy Family of Nazareth,
grant that our families too may be places of
communion and prayer,
authentic schools of the Gospel
and small domestic churches.*

*Holy Family of Nazareth,
may families never again
experience violence, rejection and division;
may all who have been hurt or scandalized
find ready comfort and healing.*

*Holy Family of Nazareth,
make us once more mindful
of the sacredness and inviolability of the family,
and its beauty in God's plan.*

*Jesus, Mary and Joseph,
Graciously hear our prayer.*

Amen.

(AL, 325)

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Church Documents

AL – Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, March 19, 2016, Vatican,
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EG - Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24, 2013, Vatican,
http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

LG - Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964, Vatican,
http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.