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KEEPING IT REAL: WHAT NO ONE EVER TELLS YOU ABOUT MARRIAGE

Supplemental Article: “After Twenty Years of Marriage”

This personal testimony was given as a live talk to married couples by a Catholic wife and mother. She and her husband have been married over twenty-five years and they have homeschooled their six children. Two of their children are now married and another is in the seminary. Proper names have been altered so as to preserve anonymity. This is printed with her permission.

Finally, I want to circle back to a point Sebastian made earlier in this section on couple prayer – about us dropping off in our praying time together as a couple.

While the previous couple explained how things got messy for them at the ten-year mark, it happened for us around the twenty-year mark. Now, separation was nowhere on the horizon; we weren't miserable or real unhappy. In fact, most of the time, things seemed to be going pretty well. We would go out for coffee as a couple almost every week, and that was continuing for the most part. We had some weekend getaways, our intimate life was normal, we weren't arguing or being ugly with each other. I would say it really was marriage-as-normal. But underneath, stuff was brewing that was not being addressed, because it was easier not to. While Sebastian is more phlegmatic than I am, I have a healthy streak of it too, and I hate conflict. So when conflict arose, if we let a few days go by, the problems did seem to blow away. While arguments would happen occasionally, I figured I could just deal with my stuff, and given enough time, it would probably go away.

But one February afternoon in 2012 – I was forty-six years old, had twenty-one years of



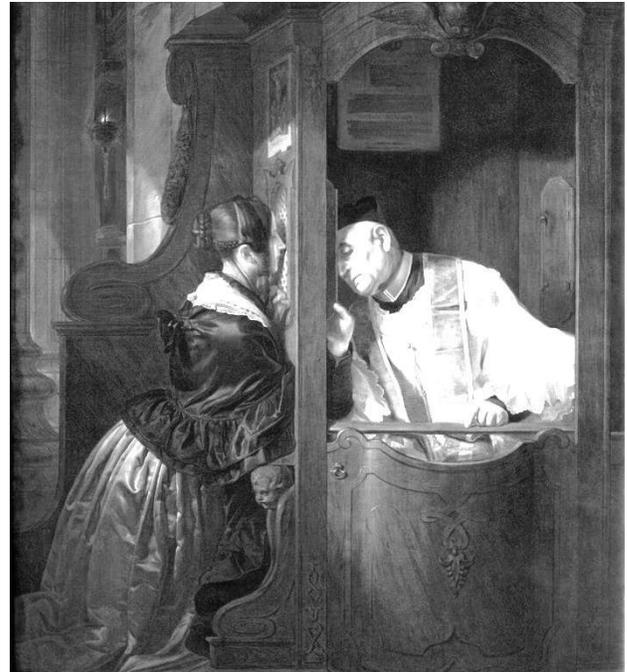
marriage under my belt and six children, ages twenty through six – I was absolutely livid with Sebastian. I do not get fuming mad very often, but I was fuming. I distinctly remember sitting in our walk-in closet on the floor, eyes clenched shut, hot tears of anger welling up, my mouth muscles tight, and I was FURIOUS. I was SO ANGRY. Whatever it was – and I honestly have no recollection what the issue was – I did not see how the situation was going to improve.

And in MY mind, it was HIS fault. And I felt stuck. And that got me angrier. And then this thought just hit me out of seemingly nowhere – “Oh my gosh. This is it. THIS is how the path to divorce starts. Right here. Angry woman. On a closet floor.”

And I... was... *scared*. I could not believe I had even had that horrible word cross my mind. And that it had crossed my mind in conjunction with my husband’s name. That had never happened before.

A year earlier, our next-door-neighbor had gotten divorced. “I’m just not happy, it’s too much to work through,” was her reason. I’d heard that from others, too. And I never thought that could be me. Ever. And here I was thinking the same thing, “I’m just not happy; there’s no way it can get better” – just like those people that I was *not* going to be like. But I knew I would never get divorced. And neither would Sebastian.

But then, that would give us a marriage like my parents and some of their friends. My parents have been married fifty-three years and many people have told them how much they admire their marriage. I do not. It is always a challenge for me to buy them an anniversary card, because I have to find one that doesn’t say something like, “You have a marriage that is one to emulate”. My mom has her own insecurities which leads her to emasculating my dad. And it frustrates me to see my dad take that from her. And I know that my “default” is to be like my mom, and Sebastian could end up being like my dad. And that also scared me.



Thankfully, God was good to me that night. It was the night of a Lenten Mission and Fr. Tarcisus was in the confessional. He got me started. I confessed my anger and my very scary thoughts. He got me off the proverbial ledge and convinced me divorce would not solve anything. Now, I was not actually thinking “divorce,” but I think it was still good to have someone explain why I shouldn’t let that thought ever cross my mind again. And it was good to be able to speak to the priest about those horrible thoughts. Then I had some incredibly helpful confessions and was given some books in the confessional that got me further down the path I needed to take.

One thing I’m incredibly grateful for is that priests at our Traditional Latin Mass parish have consistently repeated this message: **that all the grace you need for your marriage you have received from the holy Sacrament of Matrimony, BUT YOU HAVE TO ASK FOR IT.**

You have to ask for it. You HAVE to ask for it. I never knew this; and so I started asking God.

And that asking, became, quite literally, a five-year pilgrimage for my marriage, although I didn't know it was going to be five years. I want to say again that our marriage was not in a bad place; for example, our kids would likely be surprised hearing this story, but Sebastian would agree with me that our marriage is now in a better place.

Here's what my pilgrimage consisted of: Although it started in 2012, the idea of a "pilgrimage" came to me in 2013 when I took a two week trip to Europe with our eldest. It was going to include a lot of cathedrals and magnificent churches, so I decided that at every church we visited, every adoration chapel, every altar I looked at, I would pray for my marriage. I would offer the simple prayer, "God, help me to be the wife that Sebastian needs me to be, no matter the cost." I didn't pray for him to change, but for me. Even though, to be honest, when this all started, I was of the mindset that it was mostly him, not me, who needed changing.

I ended up going to Europe again with our two eldest two years later and did the same thing. Sebastian and I then went to Rome for our 25th anniversary, and I did it again. That was a lot of altars! Additionally, Fr. Longinus has often mentioned the practice of praying for your marriage or spouse whenever you play with your wedding ring. So I made a "formal" prayer to God that whenever I did that, it was my intention to pray for my marriage and spouse.



I also started getting serious about going to Confession every two to three weeks, instead of waiting four to five. Every time I went to Adoration, every time I went to Mass, every time I prayed in a church, I prayed for our marriage. Some books that were key for me included: *Humility of Heart* by Fr. Cajetan Bergamo, *Searching for and Maintaining Peace* by Fr. Jacques Philippe, *True Devotion* by St. Louis de Montfort and *Introduction to the Devout Life* by St. Francis de Sales.

So what was it that happened at twenty years into our marriage? And what changed with all this prayer? To answer the first question – I think – and I've talked with enough women now to know I'm not alone in this – that a life can come crashing in all at once at the twenty-year mark. At least for women. So first of all – age. I was forty-six, closer now to fifty than forty. Just dealing with getting older, being out of my prime, and all that comes with that makes for a tumultuous time. I also came to terms that year of having had two miscarriages since my last pregnancy (at age forty), and that I was not going to have another baby. Our

family size was set. This was a very big and difficult thing for me to let go.

Second, we have a somewhat large family and it was stretching me. In 2012 we had one child in college, two in high school, one in middle school, one in elementary, and a kindergartner. We had a lot on our plates and I was feeling very taken for granted.

Third, I had long not helped getting my own 'love tank' filled. I was not communicating my needs to Sebastian and how I needed to be shown that I was loved by him. I was expecting him to essentially read my mind. And then I was getting bent out of shape when he didn't.

And I wasn't doing very well at filling his tank either. My bitterness led me to increase my sarcasm, which Sebastian HATES. One of his love languages is 'Words of Affirmation,' and instead I was using biting words and bringing him down in front of the kids in a teasing way. I thought it was funny, but he certainly did not. He told me more than once that I was not nice. Ouch. I had him on what I would call "maintenance mode." I knew he wasn't going anywhere, so to speak, so I gave him what he needed – namely, food and intimacy – and figured I was doing well enough if he didn't complain. But I had stopped doing some little things – like regularly greeting him when he came home or complimenting him when he looked nice for church.

So what changed with the prayer? Well, primarily, I would say that I just grew in humility. I will be the first to tell you that I still have so very, very long to go down that road. But, with humility, it does seem that a little



goes a long way. My eyes were opened to my responsibility in the weakened marital relationship. I became aware of the part I played in what was going on. I came to know – and accept – that I needed to make some changes in myself.

What were some of those things that I changed? I started to be able to listen without getting defensive. I caught myself when I was going to make a snarky or clever – but biting – remark and stuffed it, instead of 'scoring a point' with it. I started admitting more freely when I was wrong and apologizing. I started keeping my mouth shut. I really latched on to the idea of Interior Peace. That became a measuring stick for me – and it still is – as I prayed to attain it. So much of this was "Marriage 101" stuff – which I think many of us get lax in the longer we are married.

A HUGE thing I stopped was expecting him to read my mind. My love languages are Gifts and Acts of Service. So I started suggesting to him things he could do. And huh – how about that? – he did a bunch of them! But the thing is, he would have before all of this. It was just that now I was communicating this all to him instead of expecting him to be a mind reader. For example, He makes coffee for me EVERY ... SINGLE ... MORNING. That is a whiff of love I wake up to every day. But I had to ask him to

do that for me and not just assume he would figure this out.

And when it stopped becoming all about me... it actually became more about me. I saw a lot of the little things that he does do for me that I wasn't "crediting him" for. And since I was becoming a nicer person, he probably started wanting to do more for me, too. I truly came to realize that this man would lay down his life for me; he only wanted to make me happy. And he had told me this many times before when we would argue. But I had to help him do that, in the specific things related to me and to our relationship. Isn't that part of the role of a *helpmate*? (That's a term from the first chapters of the Bible.) I also had to ponder – would I lay down my life for him?

So I sought out how to appreciate him more. He is monumentally more of a husband and a father than his own Dad was. He is amazing as it is, but he is absolutely amazing when you consider the model he had for being a husband and father growing up. And I needed to consider that, and work with it.

I started asking for his help with various activities the kids were involved with. You see, I had to ask or make suggestions. Before I was just getting frustrated because he didn't know what to do. For whatever reason, I thought he should. He offered to do more driving without me asking. He paid more attention to the family calendar and asked how he could help with it.

All of this ties in with our couple prayer time. When all these difficulties were going on, I had started going to bed a lot later than him. He

ALWAYS has gone to bed right around 10:30. I'm a night owl and can easily stay up until past midnight. And I was. A lot. And our prayer life as a couple really suffered. And then, even when things were significantly more patched up, I still kept up with the late bed time. So when we were getting ready to write this talk, we looked seriously at our couple prayer time and how it was lacking. One way we could tell was how we scored on those indicators from the study (see the statistics below). A number of them were not as high as they have been in the past.

So we re-committed to our couple prayer time. In the past two months, I've had to be gone a few times while traveling, and we've called each other to get the prayer time in. It has made a noticeable difference. In just two months, we both agree that those category numbers have definitively gone up.

Our marriage is obviously not perfect, and I have not stopped praying for it. But it's in a significantly better place. What's more, I have reason to hope that our children will not struggle to find an anniversary card for us if we are blessed to hit the fifty year mark.



Benefits of Praying Together as a Couple

Praying together as a couple builds happier, more loving, more lasting marriages. Praying together as a couple is the most powerful correlate of marital happiness that we have yet discovered.

- *Faithful Attraction* (1991)

Virtually every one of the categories measuring marital bliss escalated significantly when couples prayed together “a lot” vs. “sometimes”. In some cases the swing is as high as 30%.

- *Couples Who Pray*, Rushnell & DuArt (2007)

<u>Statement</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>A</u>	
Our marriage is happy	60	78	S: “Couples who pray together sometimes”
We agree on how children should be raised	74	91	A: “Couples who pray together a lot”
We both try to make our marriage better	64	75	
My spouse makes me feel important	65	86	
My spouse delights in me	39	69	
We are very satisfied with our intimate life	67	82	
My spouse is romantic	42	63	
We have very good agreement on finances	58	69	
We have very good agreement on basic values	72	83	
We are greatly satisfied with our family life	30	54	
We are very confident in our marriage	76	92	

Divorce Rate Stats

50% - National Divorce Rate

16% - Divorce Rate of couples who weekly attend church services together (*1 out of 6*)

0.1% - Divorce Rate of couples who weekly attend church services together and pray together regularly (*1 out of 1105*)

-Retrouvaille International; Family Life Ministry