

Couple Reflection Exercise



Convalidation

Bringing YOUR Marriage
into THE Church



DIOCESE OF TRENTON
Department of Youth, Marriage & Family Life



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Take Home Exercise for Convalidating Couples (Adapted from the work of Terence E. Tierney and Joseph J. Campo)

Instructions: Congratulations on your decision to marry in the Catholic Church! The following worksheet is designed to help you evaluate your marriage in light of the unique requirements and blessings of sacramental marriage. We ask each of you to complete this worksheet separately, and then come together as a couple to discuss your responses. You may want to find a quiet place away from home to hold your discussions, and perhaps deal with a few sections at a time. After completing this assignment together, contact your pastoral minister to set up a meeting (or meetings) for the three of you to go through the worksheet together and discuss how your marital relationship will be enriched by marrying in the Church.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church is a helpful resource for understanding Catholic doctrine, and is especially useful in explaining the qualities of sacramental marriage. The entire Catechism is available on the website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (www.usccb.org), but we have included a few paragraphs on marriage to show the differences between a non-Church marriage and sacramental marriage, and help you apply these sacramental principles to your own marriage.

1601 “The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament.”

1643 “Conjugal love involves a totality, in which all the elements of the person enter—appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will. It aims at a deeply personal unity, a unity that, beyond union in one flesh, leads to forming one heart and soul; it demands *indissolubility* and *faithfulness* in definitive mutual giving; and it is open to *fertility*. In a word it is a question of the normal characteristics of all natural conjugal love, but with a new significance which not only purifies and strengthens them, but raises them to the extent of making them the expression of specifically Christian values.”

1642 *Christ is the source of this grace.* “Just as of old God encountered his people with a covenant of love and fidelity, so our Savior, the spouse of the Church, now encounters Christian spouses through the sacrament of Matrimony.” Christ dwells with them, gives them the strength to take up their crosses and so follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another’s burdens, to “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ,” and to love one another with supernatural, tender, and fruitful love. In the joys of their love and family life he gives them here on earth a foretaste of the wedding feast of the Lamb:

How can I ever express the happiness of a marriage joined by the Church, strengthened by an offering, sealed by a blessing, announced by angels, and ratified by the Father?... How wonderful the bond between two believers, now one in hope, one in desire, one in discipline, one in the same service! They are both children of one Father and servants of the same Master, undivided in spirit and flesh, truly two in one flesh. Where the flesh is one, one also is the spirit.

1656 In our own time, in a world often alien and even hostile to faith, believing families are of primary importance as centers of living, radiant faith. For this reason the Second Vatican Council, using an ancient expression, calls the family the *Ecclesia domestica* (domestic church). It is in the bosom of the family that parents are “by word and example... the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children. They should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each child, fostering with special care any religious vocation.”

1657 It is here (in the family) that the father of the family, the mother, children, and all members of the family exercise the *priesthood of the baptized* in a privileged way “by the reception of the sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, and self-denial and active charity.” Thus the home is the first school of Christian life and “a school for human enrichment.” Here one learns endurance and the joy of work, fraternal love, generous—even repeated—forgiveness, and above all divine worship in prayer and the offering of one’s life.

The following bolded statements describe the qualities of Catholic marriage that are essential to a fulfilling marital relationship. Please read each statement and detailed description, and respond openly and honestly to each of the questions:

- A. **Respect and encouragement for the mutual practice of the faith:** The most important element of Catholic marriage is the shared faith life of the couple, and the openness to the indwelling of Christ in the midst of daily married life. In situations where both spouses don’t share the same faith, each spouse should encourage the other to deepen their faith in God through daily prayer and practice of their faith. Remember that every family is a domestic church.

1. Why have we made the decision to marry in the Catholic Church at this time?

2. Is our decision to have our marriage celebrated in the Catholic Church a free choice for both of us, or have we been compelled by others toward this decision?

3. In what specific ways will we invite God's love to dwell in our marriage?

4. In what specific ways will we respond as a couple to our vocational call to serve God, each other, our children, our faith community, our civic community and the world?

5. (For parents) In what ways do we encourage each other and our children to practice their faith and to be active members of our faith community?

6. For interfaith couples: As we each honor our own faith expression, what do we see as the challenges to our relationship in living out our sacred union? How is our marriage enriched by bringing together two faith traditions?

B. Self-giving love that provides for the welfare and happiness of both spouses:

This is an interpersonal sharing of mind, heart and body; through a conscious effort to supply for the other's needs and the promotion of mutual self-fulfillment which brings happiness to both parties. This mutual blending of lives constitutes a sign of God's Kingdom and establishes the community of life and love which characterizes Catholic marriage. Marriage requires the parties be able to provide the love and sharing that is necessary for a blending of hearts.

1. In what specific ways is our marriage a mutual blending of our lives? In what ways do we strive to share our minds and hearts completely?

2. What are some things we do to provide mutual fulfillment (strive to make each other happy)?

3. In what ways do we try to maximize one another's potential to grow?

4. How well do we recognize and affirm each other's gifts and talents?

- C. Mutual respect and trust in the total gift of self in the sexual relationship:** The sexual dimension of matrimonial love forms the highest degree of marital sharing. In marriage, if a person truly loves the other, he or she shows an abiding respect for the spouse's needs in matters that are sexual.

1. In what specific ways is our sexual relationship truly a joining of mind and heart, body and spirit?

2. How well are we able to communicate to each other our sexual needs and desires?

3. Have we always felt completely respected by each other in terms of our sexual relationship? If not, how might we work to resolve issues related to our sexual fulfillment so that our one-flesh union becomes a sign of God's boundless love?

D. Respective responsibility of both husband and wife in establishing a friendship in marriage:

For a marital union in the true sense of the word, love, and above all, *friendship*, is needed! Couples who enjoy each other as two inseparable friends will be able to withstand difficulties and grow from marital challenges. Only that "staying power" so characteristic of true friendship will allow the spouses to live in that bonding which was God's intent: that "two become one." Nothing as important or as treasured as friendship can be built up easily. The lover who chooses to build a marriage which will last, invests his or her full energy in fashioning a loving friendship. Nothing short of this will do.

1. In what ways do we both work toward establishing and maintaining the necessary elements that make up our marital friendship?

2. Describe some of the best qualities of our marital friendship.

E. **Respective responsibility of both husband and wife in providing for the material welfare of the home:** stability in work, budgetary foresight, etc.

1. How well do we work together as a team when it comes to domestic responsibility?

2. Do we both feel comfortable with the sharing of household roles and domestic chores?
Are there any concerns with financial responsibility within our marriage?

F. **Moral and psychological responsibility in the rearing of children:** The contemporary social and financial circumstances of many married couples force them to consider seriously the issue of family size so as to bring their lived marital union into line with the demands of practical living. For Catholics who are faithful to both the letter as well as the spirit of Church teaching, the issue of family planning takes on serious moral implications as well.

Married couples have a responsibility to raise a family. They must provide a suitable environment for the physical, mental, moral and emotional well-being of their offspring and must see to their spiritual development as well. Both husband and wife must discuss their prospects for a family in an atmosphere of mutual love and sharing.

Preparedness for marriage includes the ability to carry out the demands of married life. One of the “burdens and responsibilities” of marriage is the generation and care of the children to be born of the union. A father must become a father in the truest sense of the term and execute the role proper to him as father. The same holds true for the mother.

1. Are we both comfortable with how well we both understand and assume our proper marital role as husband and wife, mother and father?

2. In what ways are we both conscientious in rearing our children?

3. In what ways do we work together to plan for the growth and education of our children?

4. In what ways have we taken responsibility for passing the Catholic faith to our children?

5. Have we considered the use of natural methods of family planning, the only methods that are morally acceptable in the Catholic Church?

G. Personal maturity as expressed in one's daily conduct in the ordinary events of life:

Maturity requires responsibility – the ability to provide a decent and loving home, to secure and maintain a good job and adequate income, and to plan ahead and make provisions for the various options for the proper upbringing of children. Dependability is a sure sign of maturity. Another aspect of maturity is accountability – willing to stand up and answer for his/her actions.

In marriage husband and wife must provide for the needs and burdens of family life and to that extent are answerable to the family and to society for the way in which they meet those needs. Within the context of married life a mature and responsible individual is aware of the need for gentleness and kindly love. It is the crucial factor in nourishing marital love.

Maturity is characterized by personal stability, which allows for the responsible handling of life's pressures, tensions and accelerating change. The manner in which we handle our troubles will signify our degree of maturity. A good test of marital maturity is how spouses will react to the changing circumstances which turn their lives upside down.

1. In what ways is our union characterized by sound and responsible living?

2. Consider our approach to work, family, housekeeping, the children, relatives and friends. In what ways do we both show signs of maturity and common sense in these areas? In what ways can we improve our approach in these areas?

3. In what ways does our marriage exhibit to others the signs of gentleness, kindness, patience and understanding?

4. In what ways have we needed to adjust to changing circumstances and pressures which entered our life together?

5. Describe a situation in which I needed to take responsibility for hurting our marital relationship?

6. Describe a situation when I needed to forgive my spouse? Forgive myself for causing harm to our marriage?

H. **Self-control over behaviors that could endanger marital harmony:** Both substance abuse and the abuse of the gift of human sexuality are among prime abuses when it comes to lack of self control, but there are many other behaviors that can have a negative impact on marriage. Inability to channel anger properly and out-of-control spending are common examples. Excessive time spent using digital media can be a source of infidelity and becomes a serious problem when pornography is involved. In general, lack of personal mastery and self-control lead to marital troubles. It is a blessing when couples can be themselves and act and live responsibly.

7. In what ways is our marriage based on mutuality, sharing, selflessness and sacrifice?

8. If our marriage has ever shown signs of irrationality, selfishness, excessive anger or lack of self-control, how have we handled it?

9. In what ways have we worked to ensure that the marital relationship always comes first, especially when it comes to use of technology, and our individual interests and activities?

“Christ dwells with them, gives them the strength to take up their crosses and so follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another’s burdens... and to love one another with supernatural, tender, and fruitful love.” (CCC #1642)