

The Best  
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To Be

*The Best  
Is Yet To Be*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|           |  |    |
|-----------|--|----|
|           | Introduction.....                        | 4  |
| Chapter 1 | Relationship with God .....              | 5  |
| Chapter 2 | Activity or More Quiet Time .....        | 8  |
| Chapter 3 | Locations, Lifestyle and Money .....     | 10 |
| Chapter 4 | Kenosis .....                            | 13 |
| Chapter 5 | Family Relationships .....               | 16 |
| Chapter 6 | Physical, Sexual and Mental Health ..... | 19 |
| Chapter 7 | The Ultimate Intimacy .....              | 22 |
| Chapter 8 | Communications in Marriage .....         | 25 |

## *Introduction*

### **THE SEASONS**

Years ago, Teams published a Study Topic called "*The Autumn of Life.*" Like this document, it was intended to help us reflect on conjugal spirituality during the "retirement years." This stage in our life is not precisely defined, but it generally means that our daily routine has changed drastically, the nest is empty, and our bodies tell us to slow down. Individual members of a particular Team may be well into this stage, getting ready for it, or viewing it from a safe distance!

It is interesting that the earlier document refers to this season of our life as "autumn." Several good books on this topic that will be quoted refer to the season as "winter:" Kathleen Fisher's "*Winter Grace,*" and Father Burghard's "*Seasons That Laugh or Weep.*" Call it what you will, the idea of seasons in our life is helpful. The seasons do not have precise boundaries and we know from our experience in nature that God accomplishes different things during different seasons. He uses them all!

Another excellent study topic on this same season was produced in French by a Belgian Team. It was entitled "*Stay With Us, For It Is Nearly Evening.*" Lk 24:29. It points out that this season in our lives is characterized as a time of detachment and a time for new choices ...and so it is. These new choices require discernment and the following chapters will help us to do just that. These decisions should grow out of our response to God's loving kindness in our lives. This is possible with a more intense prayer life, attentive listening to the Word of God, and truly living the Eucharist.

### **SPIRITUALITY**

Christian spirituality involves all dimensions of the human person. It extends to all of his or her activities and relationships. It has unique aspects and possibilities for married couples. Conjugal spirituality in the retirement years is what we explore in this study topic. In Fischer's term, it should and can be a time of "*Winter Grace.*"

Individual chapters will not be long. They are intended to suggest ideas, trigger your reflections, or introduce different approaches to an issue. Each chapter will present a few references from scripture that should be read in preparing the study topic.

There will be questions for reflections and discussion. It is important that both husband and wife develop their individual answers to these questions and then discuss them together before sending them in to the discussion leader. *This is the most valuable part of the entire process.* In fact there is great material in each of these chapters for your monthly sit-down. It is a time for new choices. These choices require discernment which needs prayer and increased conjugal communication.

Just like the other seasons of our life, this one is a gift from God. It is meant to be a time of joy, a time of wonder, gratitude, solitude and prayer. Throughout this topic remember that each couple is different, each individual is different, and God's gifts to each are different. There is no "right" answer. The answer may and perhaps should change...even within the season!

## Chapter 1

### RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

#### SCRIPTURE READINGS

1 Jn 4:7-16

1 Cor 13

Eph 3:14-21

Song of Songs

If the passing years and the experience they bring impart any wisdom, one obvious nugget is this: relationships change.

#### CHANGE IN OUR MARRIED RELATIONSHIP

Marriage is a veritable school of this truth. For example, how different after 25 or 40 years is that love which initially relied so heavily on youthful enthusiasm and a vision of unending bliss. Individuals change, their relationship to one another changes, and throughout their years together their relationship with God singularly, and as a couple, changes. Before the wedding what had been an individual journey with God now takes on a companion. The sights and sounds along the way, while always perceived from a uniquely individual perspective, are now looked at and heard from another viewpoint wherein each is asked to see and seek God in the person of the other.

In that favorite wedding passage from the first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul speaks of growing up and putting aside childish ways. He does this in the context of a definition of love, forever linking the maturing of love with the maturing of the person. He is speaking of our love of God. When it comes to the love of spouses for each other at the deepest level of their being, love of God and love of one another are of one piece. All things are one in that deepest level of love... for "God is Love."

#### CHANGE IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

If love grows and spouses mature, God will be seen in a constantly changing light. The biblical images of God, at first only words on a page, take on new meaning as one advances from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood. Married life should be a time when those images move from the head to the heart. God as Father watches over and cares. God as Mother who will never forget her child, God as Lover, as provider, as one who suffers with a suffering child, who must punish but does so reluctantly, who rejoices in the success of her offspring...these are images of God that take on new meaning in the course of a loving relationship with spouse and children. The innate generativity of the bonds of love is more than enough to provide material for a new wisdom of the life of God and God's love for individuals.

#### EXPERIENCE DEEPENS OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

One of the blessed results of the Incarnation is that we are now *expected* to think about God in human terms and to learn about God from human experience. Thus, everything that is truly human, sin excepted, is meant to add to our understanding of divinity. This divine

learning scheme, if we may call it that, is rooted in the fact that the Second Person of the Trinity became one of us and forever changed the way we look at God, learn about God, and consequently the way we relate to God.

Nowhere is this truer than in learning about God's love for us. Nowhere is that love better exemplified than in marriage and family. *Everything* that is truly loving in our human relationships...its intensity, its fidelity, its forgiveness, even the feelings that accompany it... is *a lesson about God's love*.

It is the wealth of the experience of a long and faith-filled marriage in all its changing aspects and extensions that give married people, individually and together, unparalleled grounds for deepening their ever-changing relationship with God.

Marital sexuality can be one of the most powerful forces in the spouses' changing relationship with God. God first loved us and all love is a reflection of God. Sexual love has the unique capability of giving one a sense of God's deep passion for us, of the intensity of God's union with us, of God's desire for us that is greater than the most passionate bond between a man and a woman. Married love at its best is only a faint shadow of God's love for us. As sexual love itself changes through the years, becoming less ego-centric and spiritually deeper while no less sexual, it can carry one into an understanding and acceptance of God's love that is truly contemplative. The sensuality of God's love for us can be appreciated by reading "Solomon's Song of Songs" in the Bible.

The diminishment of old age are without question a cross to carry. The cross of aging in marriage is both doubled and halved: doubled in the helplessness of seeing a spouse physically or mentally suffering, halved when there is the energy for sharing and sympathy. These experiences, personal or vicarious, will change our relationship with God in a radical way... for the good if they are integrated into our life-death-resurrection vision... for the worse if they are sloughed off or crowded out by distractions that offer temporary relief from reality.

The experiences of the wider world... friendships, educations, vocations, professions, concern for the poor, political involvement, exposure to arts and science... everything that can be called human... enriches the experience and deepens our understanding of the Creator through exposure to every facet of creation. These experiences are all the broader for having been experienced not just directly but also through the eyes and ears and heart of a beloved partner on the journey.

## **PRAYER IN OUR RELATIONSHIP TO GOD**

Experience must first of all be acknowledged to be the catalyst on the growth of one's relationship with God. To recognize it as a wealth of knowledge and not just time spent, reflect upon it, and relate it in its specifics, not just generally, to God acting in one's life... all this is to mine the riches of the years gone by for the purpose of growth in God. Experience is a gift that God lays gradually at the feet of a couple as a marriage matures. Like all gifts it must be picked up and unwrapped. The thoughtful and reverent unwrapping is nothing less than prayer.

Prayer is where experience and time converge and thus prayer becomes the focus of a retired couple's relationship with God. We instinctively feel that the integration of life and

the coming to peace with opposing forces of life is the work of one's later years. It is definitely the work of prayer.

Should one's prayer differ in retirement? Perhaps it shouldn't. Some people develop habits of prayer that move naturally with them through life and fit comfortably into the later years. For others, it may be a time for change. In prayer you *can* "teach an old dog new tricks." Later rather than sooner may be the time to learn about centering prayer, various meditative techniques, contemplative prayer and how it is not just for a few favored souls. Later rather than sooner may be the time to do more spiritual reading, nourish prayer, and especially to prayerfully read the Gospels. Later rather than sooner may be the time to learn that prayer is entirely a personal *and* couple thing. How you are comfortable with prayer is how you were meant to pray, alone or together. The old and basic rule "to pray as you can, not as you can't" is truer in retirement than ever. Later rather than sooner, however, is not the time to get all tied in knots trying to force yourself into a form or technique of prayer that is uncomfortable. Retirement is a time to get into comfortable clothes! It is also a time to get into an easy and suitable mode of prayer.

As work and family pressures diminish in later years, there is more time to spend as one wishes. Retired people often complain that newfound time can drip away into trivialities more easily than in a busier time of life. One has to *take* time, not let it slip away. The catchword some years ago was "quality time." It described time that was consciously directed toward a specific person or purpose. Not half-hearted or distracted by other cares, quality time was mindful... even contemplatively aware of the reality at hand. That is the kind of time that must be taken and directed toward one's relationship with God. To set aside a specific period of time to pray, together or individually to be quietly alone with each other, is a prelude to prayer and prayer itself. Taking time to reflect upon and pray with the experience of a lifetime is an incomparable mingling of God's gifts and a singular gift given to maturity.

Prayer at its best is simply a long, loving look. What a grace to be able to look back leisurely and see life lived in God's fidelity, to look back and see God's love from the perspective of a life of love, to look back and see the reality of life, even with its hardship and sin, but always with forgiveness, God's and yours. If there is a second childhood at the long end of life, it should be a conscious one, recapturing the wonder of creation and the Creator in those slower and quieter moments only retirement can afford.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. As best you can remember, what was your earliest mental image of God? How was it conditioned by your parental relationships?
2. How has your experience as spouse, mother, or father changed your image of your relationship with God?
3. What elements of aging/retirement have influenced or could influence your relationship with God?
4. What are you doing to increase your quality time with God and your spouse?

## Chapter 2

### ACTIVITY OR MORE QUIET TIME

#### SCRIPTURE READINGS

John 14:16-18

John 15:27

John 16:13

Psalm 46

Should we strive for free time and solitude or should we try to keep active and involved? What can we expect? What should we aim for? Every couple faces these questions as they approach retirement... and probably over and over again thereafter.

#### QUIET TIME

One can argue that God intended us to have more quiet time and less involvement during this season of our life so that we can pay more attention to Him. "Be still and know that I am God." We live in a society that prizes speed, youth, action, and above all productivity...some of the idols that we have focused on during much of our life. Now the Lord is saying to us, as He did through the prophet Hosea, "I will lead her into the wilderness and there speak to her heart."

We need lots of quality time to "contemplate the Real" which Burghardt translates into "a long loving look at the real." Each word is significant. "Long" means gloriously unhurried and peacefully unharried. We need a surplus of time to achieve this. The word "real" refers to "reality living" people or things of nature... things we can apprehend and enjoy with our senses. It can be a small child, an animal, a garden, a mountain, a symphony, or a ruddy glass of wine. We must take time to see or sense this glorious reality. In our busy younger lives, we often missed the reality around us.

We need time to communicate with the Lord. We need time together, husband and wife, to reflect on what the Lord is saying to us. We need time to distribute the wisdom we have accumulated over the years and to be confident that we indeed have wisdom to give others.

Unless we make a conscious effort, we will find that we instinctively fill our life with "activity" just like we always did. We won't feel comfortable without it. Nevertheless, it's a great time for new choices.

#### THE OTHER SIDE

There is also an argument for activity. Our society seems to say that if you are not active, you are not alive. You have no value to society. There is also a question of attitude. If I think of myself as used and useless, I'll become that. Most of us will stay healthier and happier if we have activities to get up to each morning. We also feel comfortable with a calendar that is reasonably full with future events. So the question becomes: what is appropriate activity? This is very subjective but here are a few thoughts from others who have written about the subject.

In trying to cultivate a sense of wonder and gratitude, Fischer in *Winter Grace* recommends taking "walks of thanksgiving." Walking is not only good exercise; it's free and can be done together. It can also be an occasion of seeing and hearing creation around us.



She also recommends gardening and raising plants as a way to increase our wonder and gratitude.

For developing our capacity to "contemplate the Real," Burghardt suggest reading more. "Make friends with remarkable men and women" ...and he gives us a list.

Eugene Bianchi in *Aging as a Spiritual Journey* urges the pursuit of new interests. "Older persons can learn new skills and hobbies. Some have found new ways of working in the community, performing valuable services, and enhancing their own self-esteem."

What about travel? If our children are dispersed, some travel is necessary to keep in touch with them and our grandchildren. If our health and finances permit, travel can enrich our lives with new perspectives and new experiences.

The question really is: how do we establish the right balance? How do we know where the Lord is leading us? As in the other seasons of life, this calls for prayerful discernment. We should be getting good at it by now!

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you see as the "Graces of the Winter Season?"
2. What activities/responsibilities would you like to eliminate during the retirement years?
3. Do you see free time as a blessing or as a curse?
4. What projects/causes/hobbies would you like to devote more time to in your retirement years?
5. What criteria would you use in trying to establish a balance between activity and quiet time?



## *Chapter 3*

### **LOCATION, LIFESTYLE AND MONEY**

#### **SCRIPTURE READINGS**

Ps 34:9-10, 18-20

Lk 9:3

Lk 21:29-36

Lk 12:34

Our spirituality includes every aspect of our life. It certainly includes our financial concerns which are closely linked to questions of location, lifestyle, and money. Conventional "Preparation for Retirement Seminars" deal with these issues at great length. Most couples spend lots of time discussing them both before and throughout their retirement years. This chapter tries to address these questions as they relate to our spiritual growth, i.e., God's perspective of these nitty-gritty issues.

#### **LOCATION**

Sometimes there may be little choice. We don't always have options. Often we *can* choose a new location or we may want a smaller house or may need a different climate. These have many implications.

Consider the sale of a house and the selection of a new residence. There are financial issues. What can we afford? Should we rent or buy? How long will we be there? What are the tax implications? If we move, there are social considerations leaving the old neighborhood, friends, and our Team. How about our proximity to our children and grandchildren? If we select a new area there are many things to think about. What kind of activities will be possible? What will the community and the parish be like? What about transportation and the convenience of important facilities such as hospitals and adequate health care?

Often husband and wife will have different dreams for their ideal retirement location. One prefers the city and the other loves the country! One wants the seashore and another the mountains or proximity to many golf courses. One wants to stay put in the old neighborhood; the other wants out. Location then becomes a difficult decision. Lots of honest communication is called for.

#### **LIFE STYLE**

Team literature has occasionally challenged us to simplify our life style or at least explore what that might mean. Remember "*Take Nothing for the Road*"? It was our focus for an entire year including one of our national meetings in Long Island, New York. Probably we had a good excuse then to do no more than talk about it during our more active years. One of the Winter Graces is new freedom, however. We can give things away now. We don't need as much. In fact it might be a help to have fewer things to use, store, move and maintain.

Simplifying our life style touches a lot more than our material possessions. We could also think about simplifying our activities or commitments. What does that mean? When we step back and look at our lives, most of us conclude that we're too busy. Our calendars are too

full. Are all these things *really* that important? Our minds are caught up in these activities also. We're making preparations for one activity. We're coordinating plans for another activity and so on. Cutting back is not easy to do because we have established a pattern as creatures of habit.

Lifestyle also relates to the face that we show to the rest of the world. It relates to the comforts and "extras" that we treat ourselves to. All of these are good things or at least are not "bad," but are they what the Lord wants of us now? Our children and friends tell us, "You've worked long and hard, you deserve all these things." In a sense they are right but there is a need for balance and prayerful discernment as in many things.



## **MONEY**

Money might seem like a brash word, a word out of context on this topic. It *is* important and we *can't* ignore it. Many of our decisions are constrained or motivated by considerations of money.

Hopefully we have accumulated some money reserves in one form or another and have some regular retirement income. We do have multiple concerns that can affect the adequacy of our financial resources. For some there may be serious needs or obligations among our relatives... elderly parents, children, or siblings. There are always uncertainties about the future: health considerations, economic conditions, unexpected liabilities, etc. One person noted that during our retirement years we will be called upon to practice a "spirituality of the unexpected!" Usually we like to think about leaving some sort of "estate" for our children. All of these questions and issues will be different for each family. They need to be discussed honestly by husband and wife. Both should be aware of all major assets and liabilities. Both

should know the financial implications if one or the other spouse dies. Both should pray for wisdom in being good stewards of the resources entrusted to us.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What characteristics do you think are important in your retirement location/home?
2. Can you think of some ways to simplify your life in the retirement years? Can you make some suggestions for your spouse?
3. How do you feel about the desirability of leaving an "estate" to others? How would you feel if your last check "bounced?"
4. What are your favorite charities and how do you choose them?

## Chapter 4

### KENOSIS

#### SCRIPTURE READINGS

Phil 2:5-11

Is 53:4-8

Matt 5:48

People reading this study topic do not need any reminders about mortality! Every day we, in the autumn/winter of life, are brought face to face with this fact. Daily we deal with diminishment!

There are two broad types of loss. One is the inevitable erosion of physical and mental agility over which we have little control...discussed in a later chapter.

The second type of diminishment is our voluntary giving up of anything within us that is not of God and our efforts to simplify our life. This is called *kenosis*. This kind of letting go is not limited to older folk but it often takes on a special meaning for married couples during retirement years.

Both kinds of letting go are roads to sanctity. While sometimes painful or difficult, they need not in any way reduce our underlying joy in life. Fully embraced, they can only increase our joyful union with God.

#### WHY LET GO?

The vocation of the Christian is to be like God. God is love. Jesus is love incarnate. In marriage we are called to nourish and perfect our conjugal love and we, like Jesus our brother, are called to make love visible and tangible to all who see us and particularly to our spouse and immediate family. This vocation is not a static thing, like a label we wear. It is rather the dynamic living presence of God within us. Followers of Jesus grow each day in holiness until they make the final gift of themselves to God.

In order to go to a better place, we have to leave the familiarity and security of the place where we are. When Jesus called Peter, he had to leave his father and his nets. Matthew left his tax collector's office. In order to grow into our adult friendship with Jesus, we must give up the various "nets," "offices," and "teddy bears"... the obstacles to true maturity which we all have accumulated. We must free ourselves from the contemporary idols that our culture invites us to worship. This is the practice of *kenosis*.

*Kenosis* is a Greek word that has passed into English. It has come to mean the self-emptying that is essential to the Christian journey. It is often associated with the beautiful passage in Philippians referring to Jesus. (Phil 2:5-11) Note the first phrase: "*Your attitude must be that of Christ.*" This is not optional! This is basic. Our task, of course, is to empty ourselves of visible and invisible obstacles to love. In speaking about the winter season of life, Walter Burghardt says that *kenosis* is essential to the pilgrim and pilgrimage. "You have to let go, and to let go is to die a little."

This is a paradox. To empty ourselves of selfishness is to fill ourselves with love. Loss is gain.

With Paul we die daily so that the life of Christ may flourish in us. Poet May Sarton wrote, "I am lavish with riches made from loss."

## **HOW TO LET GO?**

Our spirituality can be very focused now and very "concrete." Our remaining years can be the richest, deepest, and happiest of our lives. There is no vocation that asks more "letting go" than marriage. What specifically do we let go of? In Teams, we have probably left behind our most deadly sins. There are few adulterers or extortionists among us! That type of sin is easy to identify and easier to renounce. Sin is no longer seen as some "act." It is whatever interferes with the totality of love. Sin can be a selfish state of mind. Indeed Paul told the Philippians to have the same attitude as Jesus.

It is our oldest and most tightly held "teddy bears," the collection of faults that mire us in mediocrity, that now requires our unblinking attention. These are the habits that we and others, particularly our spouse, have lived with so long that they seem a part of our personality. They are things like gossip we tend to slip into with certain people, the refusal to forgive an old hurt, the refusal to forgive ourselves, the pretenses we put on with certain people, our little pharisaisms, and on and on. They are hard to recognize as sinful precisely because we are so used to them.

So what do we do as we look ahead to spiritual growth? First of all, let us recognize that we are always dependent on God's grace. Our efforts to empty ourselves must be preceded by and accompanied by prayer. With the blind man of Jerico, we can ask Jesus to open our eyes. Let us ask for enlightenment, openness, and courage.

Secondly, let's check our motivation for this effort. Is it just to "save our souls?" By now we realize that Jesus won that prize for us and God bestows it on us out of pure boundless love. The motivation for our liberation from spiritual mediocrity should be our freely given response to the love of God. That response, said Jesus, must occupy all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength...all! No falseness, no obstacle to love, however "venial" as it may seem, may be taken for granted by any Christian.

Thirdly, we must believe we can do it. Many of us were taught that sanctity was for a chosen few. Let us believe with total confidence that there is no limit to our freedom from sin which is the same as our ability to love. Sanctity... deep, lasting, and always growing... is our common vocation.

Fourth, let us recognize that the road to ever-deeper holiness is a happy one. Jesus said that those who give up various possessions for his sake including such things as idiosyncrasies that annoy others, will have a hundredfold reward even in this life. He was telling us that joy is a hundred times better than pleasure. We may even have to give up the pleasure we get in playing the long-suffering martyr!

How do we know what habits and attitudes need to be uprooted? How do we know what contemporary idols command too much of our attention? Discernment and absolute honesty are required. As married couples we are fortunate to have each other. Who else knows more about these habits, attitudes and idols? Communication on these delicate matters is not easy, however. Even after dozens or hundreds of sit-downs, we may not be able to say what needs

to be said or be able to listen to what is painfully said.

A spiritual counselor can be a big help in such areas that need discernment especially in those areas where husband and wife share the same idols or attitudes.

## **FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS**

Kenosis is not morose. It is not self-flagellation. While we accept responsibility for our failings, let us avoid taking a guilt trip. Trappist Father Keating, a contemporary spiritual master, says that any guilt feeling that lasts longer than thirty seconds is neurotic. Any negative feelings that we experience may point to areas that need attention. Feelings of anger at something said or done to us, envy of another's success, anxiety when we are with certain people, judgmental feelings with regard to people who are different from us...these and other unpleasant emotions can be enormously helpful if we look within ourselves to see what lies beneath them.

Kenosis at this level is difficult. There is often a painful rending required to give up patterns of thought or conversation that have been with us for a long time. Freedom is never easy. Ask any saint! Ask Jesus!

Many of us wish the Divine Potter would just stop reshaping our clay! Just when we begin to think that we are quite handsome vessels, he seems to punch down the moist clay and start anew. Our task is to keep ourselves moist and yielding clay until the Potter is satisfied. This will probably happen as we draw our last breath.

The freedom to love is the greatest gift we can offer to the Body of Christ. Our growth in holiness affects every refugee, every homeless person, every young woman in agony over her pregnancy, every couple struggling to be faithful, every lonely priest, every political figure trying to achieve peace, every victim of racism, every child abuser, every sinner and every saint of all time. Let us take heart!

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What effect does age have on your call to grow in the freedom to love? Is it easier in the retirement years?
2. Is there anything in your life so important to you that it competes with God for first place in your heart? Ask your spouse for his/her opinion.
3. Can you identify any harmful attitudes that you have successfully addressed during the past decade? Has there been progress? Are you aware of others that need attention?
4. What is the relationship between your prayer and your efforts at kenosis?

## *Chapter 5*

### **FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS**

#### **SCRIPTURE READINGS**

John 15:12

Matt 5:43-48

Matt 15:3-6

Matt 22:34-40

The Scripture references remind us how much Jesus stressed the importance of love in our lives. Family relationships are at the core of us realizing love here in the world. They can support the love and acceptance that permeates our human nature. They are *also* filled with tension, conflict, ambivalence, and a lot of ambiguity. Families include multiple generations and the expectations that we have about ourselves and each other often tend to be troublesome across the generations. Loving and appropriate ways to relate to family members may be difficult to discern.

#### **PARENTING**

Holding a newborn infant in your arms may have aroused the feelings of wonder, fear, awe, a heart filled with love...a love that reflects the love that God has for us. For a moment at least there may have been an inkling of what Jesus meant when He told us to love others as He loves us. When children are young, parents normally expect to nurture their dependent children. In return, parents expect obedience and devotion and most children are happy to oblige. As children mature, especially into adolescence, they expect to have greater freedom and autonomy. Parents may resist their children's growing up by clinging to them as dependent children or they may abdicate responsibility by turning them loose prematurely into the world.

Relationships with adult children and their spouses are especially complex. Ideally our adult children would be among our best friends because of the shared experience of growing together. Old expectations and habits relating to dependence and rebellion tend to persist, however, even though they are no longer appropriate.

#### **GRANDPARENTING**

A popular myth is that the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren is automatically loving and harmonious. A little exposure, however, can create tensions. For example, how do the grandparents and the parents of the children come to agreement on such matters as to the "hows" of disciplining, babysitting, eating together, giving gifts. Should grandparents take any initiative for the baptisms and religious training of unchurched grandchildren?

#### **AGING PARENTS**

We are admonished by Jesus to honor our father and mother. As our parents age, how do we follow through on this commandment? Traditionally, children were expected to, and did, take care of their aging parents. Today, having parents move in with us permanently may result in an undue strain on all sides. Nursing homes, even if affordable, are frequently



viewed as a dereliction of responsibility, or at best an uneasy compromise with family obligations.

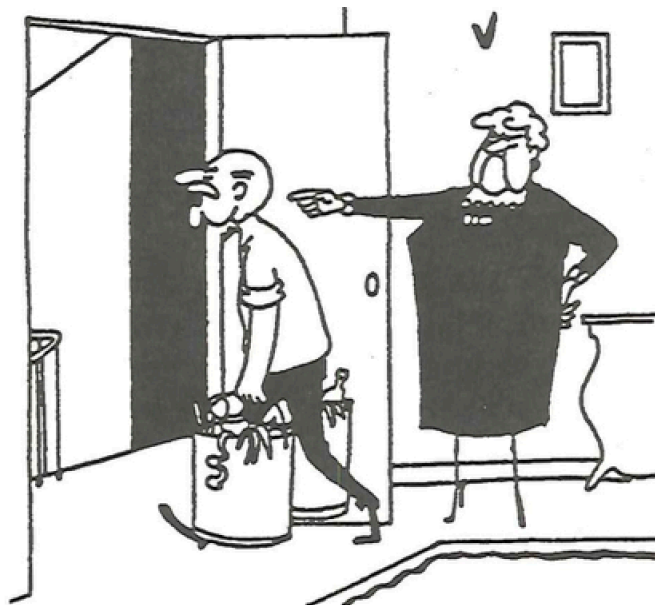
## **BLENDED FAMILIES**

In this age of increasingly broken homes, remarriages, and live-in arrangements, the rules we grew up with may no longer apply. Our generation is often faced with complex choices and decisions we would rather not face. They are thrust upon us and somehow we must cope.

## **OPENING TO LOVE**

In truly loving family relationships, there is the need to prayerfully examine, re-evaluate, and modify our boundaries, expectations, and assumptions about family. As caring human beings, we want more for ourselves and our families than mere biological relationships. Trying to follow Jesus, we want to love and be loved. Jesus' message is that God loves us unconditionally and that we are to love as we are loved by God. We are finite, sinful human beings and therefore not able to absolutely experience and live God's unconditional love. The best we are able to do is to have a heart and mind that are willing to become open to God's unconditional love for us in total trust and surrender. As we grow in our openness to God's unconditional love, we become more able to respond to our own true nature and to the true natures of those in our family. We come to appreciate that we ourselves and those who God gives us are created in God's image which, of course, is love!

Love makes us vulnerable. In loving relationships, we can reach heights of joy, peace, and intimacy; but we can also reach depths of judgment, hurt, and division. The tensions and conflicts that arise in families can serve as opportunities for love to grow as we work through the issues that divide us. In the family the bond of love is a given even though it gets buried at times. By becoming open to the love of God working, we can find the love that is at the heart of family relationships.



## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. When have you experienced the fruits of living God's unconditional love in your family? What learnings have you realized from the divisions within you family?
2. How does fear of being vulnerable get in your way of open, honest, intimate relationships?
3. When have you found that taking care of others is the responsible loving response? When have you found that a hands-off attitude is the loving response? How do you discern what it is that God would have you do?
4. When praying for family members, are you honestly willing to pray "Thy will be done" instead of trying to impose your own agenda on God's will?

## *Chapter 6*

### **PHYSICAL, SEXUAL AND MENTAL HEALTH**

#### **SCRIPTURE READINGS**

Ps 71:9-21, 92:14-16

Is 46:3-4

2 Cor 4:16-18

1 Cor 13:4-7

Growing older brings about bodily and mental changes that reverse the development we experienced during child-hood and adolescence. Adolescence brought about changes that were perplexing for most people. Limbs suddenly grew longer and often awkwardness ensued. Sexual prowess developed and the expression of sexuality was fraught with difficulties. Personal relationships assumed new dimensions and intensity. Mental reasoning powers expanded to include abstract theoretical relationships. During our mature years, we expanded and consolidated the growth of our earlier years. Now in our older years, we experience the loss of our powers and abilities and, just as during adolescence, we may feel perplexed and wonder what is transpiring within us!

#### **ARE THE PROBLEMS REAL OR IMAGINARY?**

During our adult years we experience occasional losses of abilities but usually we return to our normal state. The mind may have temporary lapses. We lose strength when sick. Sexual desire or performance may wane for a while. When we first begin to recognize a pattern of diminishment, our fear may lead to denial. When we finally admit diminishment, we may find ourselves frustrated and angry.

#### **COMPENSATION**

A healthy reaction to a recurring loss may be to try to fix it. For example, if our hearing is going, a hearing aid usually is a good remedy. As our memory becomes faulty, we can be more careful in preparing written and mental notes. As our sexual drive wanes, we can become more patient. For many losses, compensation is an effective means of coping with the loss and our lives remain relatively normal.

#### **INCORPORATION**

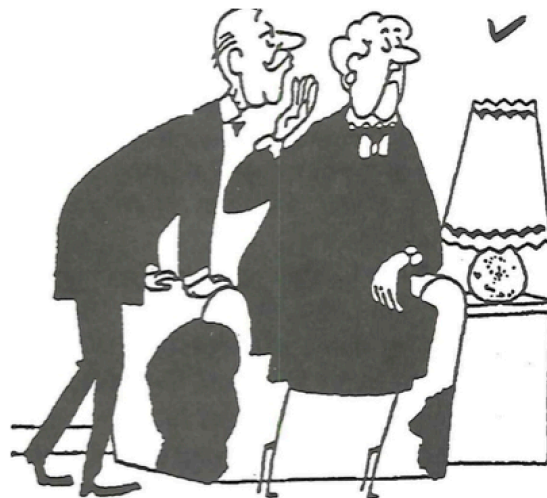
The diminishment of physical, sexual, and mental powers and abilities is inexorable. Sooner or later a more profound response is called for than denial or just fixing each loss as it arises. At some stage, a question may arise that could be phrased as follows: is nature playing dirty tricks on us in old age or are these diminishments part of God's plan for human development?

To the extent that our attitude toward diminishment is negative, we tend to become sour, resentful, perhaps even embittered. To the extent that our orientation is to see old age as part of God's plan, we can more easily let go of the lost abilities, adapt new life styles, and recognize that we cannot solve all the world's problems or even our own!

The process of incorporating our losses may be characterized as detachment...let go and let God. In the earlier responses of trying to fix our losses, a lot of attachment to abilities and our self-image was in place. The transition from attachment to detachment generally is a major step toward relaxing and living in peace.

## **EMBRACING**

Detachment from the loss of our powers and abilities can set us free to live in new meaning and fulfillment. As we come to accept our increasing limitations, we may find them accompanied by many blessings, especially in our marriage. In not having as much stamina, we may find ourselves gratefully slowing down, lingering longer over meals, and taking time for extended conversations with our spouse. We could even find ourselves laughing and joking with each other over happenings that accompany our diminishments! In relaxing, we may find that we have less to prove about ourselves and that we have fewer expectations about the way that our spouse "ought to be." This can lead to greater appreciation of who we are and who the other is. The frustration we felt in the past when our spouse could not hear what we said or was forgetful or tired when we were ready for some excitement may be transformed through a growing sense of compassion. As our sexual desire and powers wane, love for our spouse may grow in new dimensions as we find creative ways to express tenderness. We may find new intimacy in stimulating conversations, sharing the beauty of creation, mutual learning and interests, caring or being cared for in an illness. We may realize that old hurts and resentments occupy less of our consciousness, that there is increasing willingness to forgive the other and our self, and a melting away of old fear and pain that we have carried through life. Our hearts may fill with joy and unexpected prayers of gratitude for our spouse. Fear of growing old can be tempered by trust as we learn to say "yes" to whatever is now and live the sacramental reality that the Church has always taught...God is present in all things and all people at all times. God's justice is not to be denied.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In responding to physical diminishment, when have you tended to deny your limitations and when have you accepted them as part of God's plan for your life? Is it different now from 10 years ago?

2. When have your diminishments and those of your spouse led to frustration and anger? When have they lead to compassion and understanding? How do *you* express self-pity, anger, compassion, tenderness?

3. What has been helpful in letting go? What gets in the way of letting go? Of deepening love? Of intimacy? Of seeing diminishment as a gift?

4. How is God calling you to greater letting go, to deeper prayer for yourself, your spouse, and your relationship?

## Chapter 7

### THE ULTIMATE INTIMACY

#### SCRIPTURE READINGS

Phil 1:21-26

Mt 24:42-44

1 Jn 1:5-10

Col 5:12-15

The ultimate intimacy occurs at the instant of death because at long last "we shall see Him as He is." (1 Jn 3:2)

A few years ago our Team used a booklet "*Partners in Intimacy*" for our discussion material. It made us realize that *intimacy...all* kinds of intimacy...is what married love is all about. The title of this chapter can also refer to another kind of intimacy. Many of us will experience a special... maybe not welcome... kind of intimacy when the one we love most is dying, must be bathed, changed, or fed day after day. Perhaps this loved one may not even recognize us on our daily visit!

Recently we were vividly reminded of the inevitability of our own death one day. A brother-in-law, who had a long history of heart disease including by-pass surgery, suffered a heart attack and died two weeks later. Do we let this reality be a conscious part of everyday life? At least occasionally is it a part of our sharing, sit-downs or prayer life? This chapter should help us explore our attitudes toward death and suggest concrete preparations for this time.

#### ATTITUDE TOWARD DEATH

We cannot predict when death will occur for ourselves or for our spouse. Perhaps we will be in the smaller proportion of persons likely to leave this world suddenly from an accident or some fatal physical failure such as a stroke or heart attack. As in the majority of couples, we are more likely to progress well into old age together and witness our progressive handicaps or chronic disease. We will most likely be dying together slowing and progressively.

Scripture tells us that we must be alert. "Be on your guard because you never know when the time will come...so stay awake, because you do not know when the master of the house is coming, evening, midnight, cockcrow, dawn. If he comes unexpectedly he must not find you asleep. And what I say to you, I say to all, STAY AWAKE." (Mk 13:33-37)

To stay awake during the process of diminishment and dying would mean that we are willing to embrace all of life, the fear and pain of suffering as well as the comfort and joy of knowing the love of God and others. An admirable and saintly lady, well into her nineties, said that the diminishments of old age were necessary to make room for God to come and take possession of her aging body. How do we live the everyday progressive shortcomings and growing handicaps of aging in ourselves and our spouse? Do we need special training to surrender? Do we become morose or too serious when considering these matters? Let's try to develop an attitude of physical stewardship, not nagging! Becoming more attentive to the increasing emphasis on preventive health, nutrition, education, and healthier lifestyles through food and exercise can reduce health risks even in our diminishments.

Is death a frightening, fearful or taboo area? What experiences have been associated with the deaths of parents, siblings, or even our own children? Have we discussed these ideas openly or indirectly with our children?

In these days of an expanding culture of death, are we aware of the growing pressures and orchestrated social acceptance of assisted suicide or active euthanasia in select cases?

## **CHURCH TEACHINGS**

From the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the meaning of death is presented in these words (N1011):

In death, God calls man to himself. Therefore the Christian can experience a desire for death, like St. Paul's: "My desire is to depart and be with Christ." (Phil 1:23) He can transform his own death into an act of obedience and love toward the Father, after the example of Christ (Cf. Lk 23:46): "My earthly desire has been crucified;... there is living water in me, water that murmurs and says within me: Come to the Father." (St. Ignatius of Antioch)

"I want to see God and, in order to see Him, I must die." (St. Theresa of Avila)

"I am not dying, I am entering life." (St. Thérèse de Lisieux).

From (N1014):

The Church encourages us to prepare ourselves for the hour of death. In the ancient litany of the saints, for instance, she has us pray: "From the sudden and unforeseen death, deliver us O Lord"; (*Roman Missal*, Litany of the Saints) to ask the Mother of God to intercede for us "at the hour of our death" in the Hail Mary; and to entrust ourselves to St. Joseph, the patron of a happy death.

In addition to the special support and inspiration from the Scriptures, the Church offers its sacramental support to us and our loved ones by the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the Eucharist, and the Anointing of the Sick. These three sacraments are healing and sustaining during our aging years and in the development of this special intimacy.

## **PREPARATION FOR THIS PERIOD**

As we ponder the mystery of death and our experiences of dying, these teaching of the Church can help inform our own attitudes and beliefs toward death. We need to reflect and pray about our mysterious transition of death. How should we prepare for the possibility of pain and suffering? What are our attitudes toward suffering? What relation do our sufferings have to Jesus' passion and death followed by the Resurrection? During this transition do we have a call to witness to our children and to those close to us? Can we show them how to live this time "gracefully?"

All of us were once in the womb of our mother. We heard things dimly and had no real concept of what awaited us. Suddenly and with some degree of hardship and shock we were thrust into a new world. Slowly we became accustomed to it and became relatively comfortable. Now we are facing a new birth experience of having to let go of the comfort and familiarity of the "womb" of the world. We know through faith and hope that "eye has not seen and ear has not heard what God has prepared." (Cor 2:9) Are we able to see the

surrender of all as a lightening of the burdens of life that allow us to be propelled into the very fullness of God's dream for us? Maybe we could look at it as preparing for the third stage and final fullness of life.

There are some practical matters that we should address and/or explore as a couple. There are legal and financial considerations. Do we both have up-to-date wills? Do we know where important papers and assets are located? Have we talked about burial sites, living wills, power of attorney? There are health care related issues. Do we have or do we want an advance directive or durable power of attorney in case of serious incapacitation? What about the disposal of our body, a gift to science, organ donation, etc.?

There may also be matters of the heart that need attention. We might ask ourselves in these latter years of our life if there is something left undone. There may be an unforgiveness of myself that needs to be acknowledged before God. Can I finally let go of any pain or guilt that burdens me? I may need to forgive someone else or ask the forgiveness of another to experience more fully our unity as children of God. There may be something that needs finishing before I die in order to realize a sense of completion in my life here on earth. How ready am I for this mysterious completion of my inward journey?

It would be helpful to prepare together with the family our loss rituals: funeral arrangements, selection of readings, and music. There is a natural reluctance to discuss these matters, much less make decisions in advance. Yet it will be a tremendous help to the one who is left behind if these things are done. During these autumn/winter years there is no good excuse not to do it.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What does death mean to you now? Personally, as a couple, as a family? Have you lost someone close to you recently? What were your reflections?
2. How can we prepare to be mutually supportive in our ultimate intimacy?
3. Do you wish your loved ones, children, and close friends to be involved in specific plans or preparations? How have you arranged this or how do you plan to?
4. What other practical matters need attention soon?



## *Chapter 8*

### **COMMUNICATIONS IN MARRIAGE**

#### **SCRIPTURE READINGS**

Luke 6:36-38

Romans 12:9-12

Matt 5:3-12

Matt 18:20

In discussing growth in marriage, whether it is growth in intimacy or growth in holiness, we are told by experts that the key to success is communication. We've heard and read again and again the need to "communicate, communicate, communicate!" In studying previous chapters, the importance of honest communications comes up frequently. In the Introduction, we see the need for discernment and conjugal communication in making new choices. In the chapter on kenosis, we see the value of spousal communication in addressing our "idols" and negative habits of many years. Preparation for the diminishment from old age and eventual dying requires some very painful communication. Prayer is seen as communication with God. There are money concerns, the ability to be able to joke about our loss of hair, hearing, etc. Every phase of this Autumn/Winter part of our lives is laden with the need to talk about it.

#### **FENCES**

One cannot help but wonder why, after so many years of marriage, this skill is not easy and automatic. Why do certain topics cause us pain, embarrassment and tension when we try to talk about them? Why are our sit-downs not always occasions of enjoyment and good feelings toward one another? Why haven't we learned these skills?

Some years ago, while on a retreat, the priest giving the retreat remarked that frequently early in marriage it becomes apparent that certain topics cause problems, anger, misery, etc. They can be related to the use of money, relationships with in-laws, discipline of the children... the list is endless. He suggested that many couples put fences around the troublesome topic to avoid conflict and do not enter into it again! After a few years, many or most topics have fences around them and only the most banal topics can be freely discussed. Obviously, a real breakdown in communication has occurred.

What about us? Do we look out on a field of fences in our lives? Are we fortunate enough to have never erected fences in the first place or to have knocked down those that were up initially? Let's hope so! Certainly a Team technique helps us to do that...specifically the sit-down. It is possible that some fences are still in place and need to be addressed.

#### **SKILLS**

There are skills needed for good communication. Many dioceses have workshops available for individual couples. Perhaps as part of a general Team gathering, this could be your topic. If there are still some fences in your life, this would be an excellent tool to help you! The art of communication is simply that...an art. It requires:

- a) Commitment to the process which means work. As we get older and have lived

together a long time, we tend to get weary of the work it takes to really communicate. We look at past failures and feel that it isn't worth the effort. That is when a mutual commitment is important and it *must* be mutual!

- b) An openness to one another which means that we really want to *hear* one another and anticipate learning more about each other which was such a vital part of our exciting early days together.
- c) Respect for each other and our opinions. Do we respond with courtesy and interest? Do we ask non-judgmental questions for clarification? These are indicators that we want to hear and feel that the other has something to say that is important.
- d) A great deal of honesty about ourselves and the other. Too often we obscure the truth hoping to avoid conflict. "I'll just keep quiet." "If I say that, there **will** be a problem...I'll let it go." This sweeping under the rug approach will only cause more serious problems later on.

## **HOW DO WE FEEL ABOUT OURSELVES?**

A feature of good communication that we seldom think about is the need to feel good about oneself in order to share with someone else. Matthew Fox said that many people are so preoccupied with their faults and failings stemming from original sin that they fail to recognize what he calls "original blessing"...our goodness and uniqueness. We *are* loved by God! Such negative feelings about ourselves can block communication. Only if we feel good about who we are can we really open up to another. Who wants to share their dark side with anyone, especially someone whose love and approval we want?

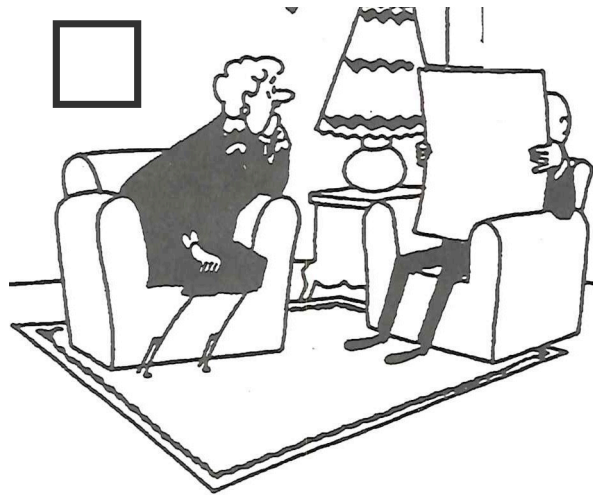
## **SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

*"Partners in Intimacy,"* a book that some Teams have used as a study topic, has some suggestions for good communication:

- a) Sincere listening. Are we guilty of "tuning out" our spouse and only half listening or listening with a preconceived notion of what the other is going to say? Do we make the effort to be truly present to the other? Good listening means being able to read between the lines, observing body language, and sensing the unspoken.
- b) Do we provide a proper environment and take an appropriate amount of time? Good communications cannot be done in a hurry or in front of a TV. Our pattern of "busyness" needs to be changed if we are to really "relax in the Lord" and be one with another.
- c) Sharing feelings. Feelings have a negative connotation for many. "I can't talk to you if you're upset." "You're not being rational." Emotions can take second place to rational thinking. Do we "allow" our spouse to show emotions or even encourage it? Is it OK to cry? Do we feel uncomfortable if this occurs?

## CONCLUSION

This chapter is meant to reinforce what has already been said in most of the previous chapters. Also it is meant to focus on some of the reasons why communication is not just important but essential to growth in your marriage. It reinforces the idea that in the retirement years, we are blessed with so many *wonderful opportunities*. We have dealt with verbal communication. We realize that there are a *variety* of non-verbal types of communication. The sex act itself is a powerful "language" that can and does represent a whole spectrum of communication.



The leisure and lack of "busyness" in these later years could be a springboard for a renaissance in our deeper understanding of one another. The image of quiet walks together, special dinners, shared prayer, and shared reflections on readings that we like is not a romantic fantasy. It *can* happen but we both must be convinced of the possibility and the desirability. *When* this happens, we can look at each other and honestly say as Browning said: "*Come my dear, grow old with me. The best of love is yet to be.*"

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do we have some "fences" that are still in place? What are they? Are we willing to break them down?
2. In communicating with our spouse, what are some ways that we show respect for the other and for what he/she is saying?
3. In what ways can prayer help us when we are having difficulty communicating?
4. Can a spiritual director or confessor help us in addressing our negative images of ourselves? How might that work? Should we have a spiritual director guide us?

**SOME GOOD REFERENCES:**

**Aging As A Spiritual Journey**

Eugene Bianchi, Crossroad, 1985

**Creative Aging**

Mary Baird Carlsen, Norton, 1991

**Homeward Voyage**

Emilie Griffin, Servant. 1994

**Learn to Grow Old**

Paul Tournier, Westminster John Knox, 1991

**Now That I Am Old**

Maria Reilly, Twenty Third, 1994

**Old Age**

Helen Luke, Parabola, 1987

**Seasons that Laugh or Weep**

Burghardt, Paulist, 1983

**The Inward Journey**

Marilyn Gustin, 1991

**Winter Grace**

Kathleen Fischer, Paulist, 1985