
ONE

Marriage: Evidence of God's Love

Gather

OPENING PRAYER

*Lord, guide us as we share our faith with one another.
Send your spirit to inspire our discussion. Help us to
make informed observations and wise judgments.
Open our ears to your call to serve others and give us
the courage and conviction to reach out in action.
Amen.*

Scripture Reflection

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

—Matthew 5:13-16

—What properties do salt and light possess that make them such good metaphors for Christian living?

Have you ever felt like salt and light?

—When has the good example of another person brought you light?

SOCIAL INQUIRY

Every marriage, the committed love of a man and a woman, can be inspiring and foundational to society. The reasons for marriage have been numerous over the ages. They include survival, security, convenience and political power. In earlier times, and still in some societies, marriage was a contract joining families. The state has an interest in marriage and makes laws governing it.

Most Christians revere marriage as a sacred union. The Catholic church teaches that marriage is also a sacrament, a visible sign of God's presence and activity in the world. In Catholic tradition, the mutual self-giving of the couple is a mirror of Christ's love for the church. At the same time, Christ's love for the church is a model for the loving relationship that should exist between husband and wife.

In sacramental marriage, the couple's relationship has a mystical dimension, signifying the union of Christ and the church. It is a vocation entered into freely and honestly by both parties. Sacramental marriage gives spouses the grace to love each other with the love with which Christ loves his church. The grace of the sacrament thus perfects the human love of the spouses, strengthens their indissoluble unity, and sanctifies them on the way to eternal life (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1661).

Sacramental marriage has three essential characteristics: It is life-long, it is faithful and it is open to children. As a sacrament, marriage reflects the Paschal

Mystery, taking its inner meaning from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Like Jesus, the spouses in sacramental marriage "die" to self and "rise" to selfless service to one another, their children, their extended family, and beyond the doors of their home into society.

Christian marriage is transformative—of the spouses and of those whose lives they touch. As they work together to succeed in their marriage, the couple is an example of God's unconditional love for the world. A marriage preparation program, *Today and All the Days of Your Life* (Liguori Publications, 2002), reminds engaged couples, "How we love each other, sacrifice for one another, forgive each other and respect each other, makes a difference to those around us." In the sacrament of matrimony, the spouses have the potential to "put flesh on God," allowing others to experience Jesus' love by witnessing their sacramental love.

Christian marriage is based on the natural complementarity between a man and a woman and presumes that the couple can achieve the sexual union that brings forth children and cooperates with God in creation. The church sees marriage and same-sex unions as essentially different realities. When we speak of marriage, here and throughout *Marriage Makes a Difference*, we are speaking only of the union of one man and one woman.

Observe

1. What married couple has inspired you? Identify some characteristics of their marriage.
2. Ask two people: What hampers married couples from being a convincing sign of God's love today?
3. Research news items about marriage. Bring the items to the meeting to share.

4. Read "Between Man and Woman: Questions and Answers About Marriage and Same-Sex Unions" by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (www.usccb.org/laity/manandwoman.shtml).

Judge

1. How is a sacramental marriage counter-cultural?
2. How can married couples live as a sign of God's love, forgiveness and joy?
3. Why do same-sex unions not satisfy the Catholic church's understanding of marriage?

Act

1. Visit www.foryourmarriage.org and review the articles and other resources there. Encourage others to visit it, too. The site features public-service announcements promoting the idea that couples should do something for their marriage each day. Ask your local TV and radio stations to use them.
2. For further inquiry about the same-sex marriage debate, visit www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/same-sex-unions.shtml. CFM has a complete Social Inquiry on-line meeting on this topic, at www.cfm.org/special6.pdf.
3. Volunteer to help out at your parish's marriage preparation or enrichment programs.
4. Write a letter to your state government in support of traditional marriage between a man and a woman.
5. Recall your marriage vows and discuss with your spouse how your understanding may have changed since the day you were married. The Catholic vows are: I (...), take you (...) to be my wife/husband. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life.

Look Ahead to Next Meeting

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CLOSING PRAYER

God of joy and forgiveness, help us to be a mirror of your love to all whom we meet in our daily lives. Gift us with compassion, wisdom and empathy in our encounters with our brothers and sisters. Empower us to reach out and touch those who are hungry for friendship, love and support. Bless our homes, our families, and all who walk with us on our Christian journey. Amen.

TWO

Keeping Promises

Gather

OPENING PRAYER

O God, you have promised to care for your people and never abandon us. We pray that we may learn from you to be faithful and honest in our relationships. May the love that we give and receive in our families radiate to all people. We pray for all married people and all those contemplating marriage that the promises they make will lead to a joyful life. Jesus, we trust in you. Amen.

Report on Actions

Scripture Reflection

"I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an

alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God."

God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised."

—Genesis 17:6-10

And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD.

—Hosea 2:19-20

At that time, says the LORD, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people.

Thus says the LORD:

The people who survived the sword
found grace in the wilderness;

when Israel sought for rest,
the LORD appeared to him from far
away.

I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my
faithfulness to you.

—Jeremiah 31:1-3

—Define "covenant." How does our marital covenant differ from a simple promise between two people? What do you give to God as your part of the covenant?

—Why is it sometimes difficult to keep a promise?

SOCIAL INQUIRY

In the Bible, God makes a covenant, a solemn promise of partnership, with the people of Israel. Christians recognize that this covenant is reflected in the permanent and loving relationship between a man and a woman in marriage. In the alliance God made with them, Israel was the weaker partner, continually wandering away and pursuing false gods. They got distracted from their relationship with God and focused on comfort or power or wealth. They built and lost whole kingdoms in the course of their journey of faith. God continually brought Israel back to himself, forgiving and teaching the people how to keep their part of the covenant.

Every marriage is a legal contract, but Christian marriage goes far beyond that. It is a covenant for life-long, exclusive, fruitful love between a man and a woman. In business, a contract articulates what goods are to be exchanged and engages the services of people for a specified time period. The marital covenant is a sacred promise between God and a man and a woman, who freely consent to the agreement until the death of one of the spouses.

In certain cases, one or both parties may be unable to fully or freely give such a consent, which can result in the covenant not being realized. When such a marriage ends in divorce, a marriage tribunal may grant a declaration of nullity, known as an "annulment," if there is evidence of some impediment in the intention to make a sacramental marriage, which would indicate that the marriage was not valid or binding at the beginning. For more information about the tribunal process, contact your diocesan office.

The covenant of Christian marriage touches the very mystery of the couple and the love that motivates them. It joins them in a unique type of life-long compact that reflects in God's love for his chosen people and Christ's

sacrificial love for his Bride, the church. Once entered into with full awareness and proper disposition, this nuptial covenant cannot be dissolved. This disturbs many people in contemporary society, who live in a culture of impermanence.

Today's Christian husbands and wives are called into a partnership of equal dignity and value. "Follow the Way of Love," the U.S. Bishops' pastoral letter to families (1994), calls couples to honor the different gifts and abilities each brings to the marriage. "True equality, understood as mutuality, is not measuring out tasks (who prepares the meals, who supervises homework, and so forth) or maintaining an orderly schedule. It thrives at a much deeper level where the power of the Spirit resides. Here, the grace of the vowed life not only makes the shedding of willfulness possible, but also leads to a joyful willingness."

The church, as Christ's faithful witness, speaks a truth that is often resisted by the cultural values of our times. The world needs the witness of married love that shows in a tangible way God's unchanging, never-ending love for all.

Observe

1. Bring an example of a contract to the meeting. Compare the contract's features with the concept of covenant described above.
2. Research how the media portrays male-female relationships before and within marriage. Bring examples to share.
3. How did your parents, or another couple who has been married 30 years or more, share tasks and responsibilities? Compare with the experience of a younger married couple.

Judge

1. Compare the media portrayal of marriage you uncovered in Observe #2 to covenant marriage.
2. In what ways can marriages based on a covenantal relationship strengthen society?
3. How can the give and take of marriage lead a person to a deeper relationship with God?
4. What qualities do people need to bring to marriage for success?

Act

1. Arrange a "mutual appreciation dinner," either at home or on the town, celebrating the gifts and talents of each person that builds up your family. This could be expanded to a group event, with recognition of one good quality of each person present.
2. Nurture your marriage by participating in a marriage enrichment program such as a Covenant Weekend (see www.cfm.org) or Marriage Encounter, or plan your own time away together.
3. Sponsor an event for married couples at your parish. Engage a speaker on the topic of covenant love.
4. Talk about your marriage with your children: Watch the wedding video or look at the photos. Explain why commitment is so important to a happy, successful marriage. Discuss how your understanding of your marital covenant has changed and deepened over the years.
5. Invite a tribunal representative to present an informational meeting about the annulment process at your parish.

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CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, you graced the wedding feast at Cana and taught the value of married love. Help us to be Christians convinced of the importance not only of our own marriages but of the renewal of the institution of marriage in our society. We ask this in union with your human parents, Mary and Joseph, as we become more effective and dynamic witnesses to your truth and love. Amen.

THREE

United to Serve Others

Gather

OPENING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you are the light of the world. You let your light shine through your warm, compassionate love for humanity. Help us to manifest your love as we express our love toward one another. We ask this, Lord, in your name. Amen.

Report on Actions

Scripture Reflection

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine."

And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purifica-

tion, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward."

So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

—John 2:1-11

- Why is it so important for weddings to be among the largest celebrations we host as people?
- Tell about an experience you had at a wedding that was a particular sign of God's love for you.
- What part of the wedding ceremony means the most to you and why?

SOCIAL INQUIRY

In his first encyclical message, "God is Love," Pope Benedict XVI reminds married couples of their responsibility to reveal God's love to society. Married couples are a special example to all Christians of this responsibility: "Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbor. The concept of 'neighbor' is now universalized, yet it remains concrete. Despite being extended to all mankind, it is not reduced to a generic, abstract and undemanding expression of love, but calls for my own practical commitment here and now" (15).

What is the public face of your marriage? When peo-

ple see you as a couple, do they see qualities that they wish they had? Does your relationship remind them that true love is possible? Can young couples point to you and say, "I want to be like them"?

Most of us will be quick to say that our marriage is not perfect. Our lives declare that perfection is not a requirement. Mother Teresa told us, "God doesn't require us to succeed; he only requires that you try." We can rely on God to fill up what is lacking in each of us, and we rely on our vows to one another. We work at being married in the ordinary course of life. That is all that can be asked of any married couple.

Cardinal Joseph Cardijn said: "[Husband and wife] are consecrated by God as they were consecrated by their baptism and their confirmation, and as the priest is consecrated when he is ordained. Marriage, the sacrament, consecrates the husband and wife for the ministry which they have to exercise in the church, and in view of the mission which they must exercise in the church.... Marriage is really a call from God, it is not caprice or passion, but a vocation and a call from God, just as there is a vocation to the priesthood. It is a divine vocation; it is holy and it makes holy, it is apostolic and missionary."

Observe

1. Identify some active couples in church and civic life in your town. What unique contributions do married couples make to your parish? To your community?
2. Think of couples you know who work together to serve others. How does marriage impact the types of service they do and how they approach and accomplish tasks?
3. What barriers to service outside the family have you observed in the married people with whom you have worked as a volunteer? How are singles sometimes more available to engage in service?

Judge

1. How does marriage serve family, church and society?
2. Cardijn says that the marriage vocation is apostolic and missionary. What does this imply about the necessity of service?
3. What are some unique aspects to the service of a married couple? How does it differ from the service of someone who is not married?
4. What are the challenges for a married person in living a life of service to one's neighbor if that includes "Anyone who needs me?"
5. How do you experience the grace of God to help you live your vocation (married or single)?

Act

1. If you are married, be aware of the public face of your marriage. Do you use negative humor, cutting comments or take your spouse for granted? Look for ways to treat your spouse with more kindness and respect, both when alone and in public.
2. Contact your church or civic leaders and ask them to support marriage enrichment education.
3. Evaluate how you share home responsibilities and look for ways that you can serve in your parish.
4. Share the blessing of your marriage and family with others. Invite guests to your home for an evening of food, fellowship and fun.

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CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious God, we pledge to renew our efforts to serve you in our families, our church and society. May we always be aware of our responsibility to care for those who need us because we are all children of one Father. We pray now, as Jesus taught us, ("Our Father...).

FOUR

Reality Check

Gather

OPENING PRAYER

Father God, in a world that fears risking commitment, give us the grace we need to grow in dedication to one another day by day. We need courage and creativity to meet the challenges of life together and, most of all, we need love. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Report on Actions

Scripture Reflection

So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us.

—1 John 4:16-19

—Tell about a person or an experience that has shown you the love God has for you as an individual.

—When has the love of God or someone close to you given you courage?

SOCIAL INQUIRY

We are living in a culture where people struggle with fear when it comes to making a permanent commitment to one another. This is evident in today's attitude toward acceptance of cohabitation or living together without a marriage commitment. Currently 60 percent of all marriages are preceded by cohabitation, according to *Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children's Family Contexts in the U.S.*, by Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu (2000).

For her book, *Between Two Worlds* (2006), Elizabeth Marquardt conducted a national study over three years, interviewing 1,500 young adults (ages 18-35) from both divorced and intact families, in order to determine the effects of divorce on the children. She concludes that children's lives are forever changed by their parents' decision; they are left with a profound and lasting inner conflict. The children of divorce in the study described the painful emotional, moral and spiritual challenges they faced and their difficulties in trying to determine their own identity and what really matters in life.

Since adult children of divorce have not had parents as role models of how to build and sustain a healthy marriage, they often do not know how to create and maintain a healthy marriage themselves. The idea of marriage can be as much frightening as it is joyful. Statistics reported by researcher John Trent in *Breaking the Cycle of Divorce* show that adult children of divorce are at least two to four times more likely to experience divorce themselves.

Many 12-Step programs use the acronym FEAR. It stands for "False Evidence Appearing Real." Fear can be the thing that keeps a person from trying, from growing...from truly working at and creating real love and happiness. In his book, Trent explains that facing our fears is "a matter of reprogramming our thinking, of focusing on—so we can build on—the positives in our lives rather than the negatives that grow out of a legacy of divorce."

The concern that commitment may not last actually can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Marriage educator Scott Stanley, in *The Power of Commitment: A Guide to Active, Lifelong Love*, describes how commitment makes the difference between a good relationship and a great marriage: "[Real commitment] lays the firm foundation for the attachment between partners. Without that security, partners don't feel safe, and they will not invest as much in the future...a deliberate choice brings the fullest sense of mutual dedication in life together, which in turn causes marriages to thrive!"

Observe

1. Tell about a time you made a commitment that was really worthwhile. What helped you to keep it?
2. Ask several teens for their observations on marriage. Do they think most marriages lead to a happier life? Ask a young adult what it means to be committed to another person. Ask a person over 50 the same question.
3. Contrary to what many people think, infidelity does not invalidate a marriage. Tell about a couple that recovered from serious marital troubles.
4. Ask a friend who comes from a divorced family: What two things challenged you in your relation-

ships with others after your parents' divorce? If you come from a divorced family, share your answer to this question with the group.

Judge

1. Why is it important for a man and a woman entering into a marriage to not consider divorce an option?
2. What can be done to encourage young people to believe that the benefits of a good marriage are worth the risk?
3. Contrary to popular perceptions, Scott Stanley's research (and the research of many other social scientists) indicates that living together before marriage can undermine a later union, especially if there is no firm commitment between the couple before cohabitation begins. How would you encourage someone to wait before taking this step?
4. When is it acceptable, even necessary, to break a commitment made to another person?

Act

1. Take the opportunity to talk to your children about keeping commitments to a team, your family, or later, in a marriage relationship.
2. Make a commitment to regular prayer, fasting or sacrifice for the intention of another person's marriage or for the renewal of marriage in society.
3. Reach out to a newly engaged couple in your parish. Congratulate them on their upcoming marriage. Inquire about their plans.
4. Read *Breaking the Cycle of Divorce* by John Trent (New Leaf Press Nova, 2006) or *The Power of Commitment* by Scott Stanley (Jossey-Bass, 2005).

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CLOSING PRAYER

Dear Lord, you know the challenges faced by those who come from broken families. We look to you for the healing and hope we need. Strengthen our dedication to one another and help us model love and commitment as you designed it. We all desire to live the "perfect love that casts out fear" and this is only possible through the Holy Spirit. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

FIVE

“Be Fruitful and Multiply”

Gather

OPENING PRAYER

Divine Creator, your first spoken words to all humanity were to “Be fruitful and multiply.” Give us your grace, O Lord, to better understand this command and the courage we will need each day to trust you and obey. We thank you for the families you have chosen for each of us and pray you instill in us the desire to embrace all life as a gift from you and the witness of your blessing in our lives. Amen.

Report on Actions

Scripture Reflection

Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.
Unless the LORD guards the city,
the guard keeps watch in vain.
It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for He gives sleep to his beloved.

Sons are indeed a heritage from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb a reward.
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the sons of one's youth.
Happy is the man who has his quiver full of
them.
He shall not be put to shame
when he speaks with his enemies at the gate.
—Psalm 127

—In some cultures, it is said that children are to be "seen and not heard." How has knowing and talking to the children and teenagers God has put in your life been a blessing to you?

—Prior to the Industrial Revolution at the end of the 19th century, having many children meant that the family homestead could keep running at minimal cost. The grown children, as inevitable heirs, were not paid for their work. How has our view of the value that children bring to our homes and families changed? Do we see them as arrows in our hands? Why or why not?

SOCIAL INQUIRY

"Be fruitful and multiply."

God gave this command to Adam and Eve in the garden, before sin entered the world. In fact, it is interesting that this was the first spoken command that God gave humanity. In *Be Fruitful & Multiply* (Vision Forum, 2003), Nancy Campbell points out that God did not say, "I want you to spend your early marriage getting to know one another first, then you'll be ready to start a family." Nor did he say, "I want you to spend time together, travel, fulfill all your plans and aspirations, then begin your family." Nor, "I want you both to work until you have enough money to purchase your own

home and accumulate the material possessions you need. Then I want you to be fruitful." His first command was simply, "Be fruitful and multiply."

From the beginning, God wished to associate men and women in a special way with his own creative work, blessing them with the words: "Be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). The Second Vatican Council reaffirmed that the procreation and education of children are integral to marriage. "Indeed children are the supreme gift of marriage and greatly contribute to the good of the parents themselves" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965). The church does not underestimate the importance of married love to bond the couple in their relationship. Instead, it encourages married couples, within their means and the needs of their children already born, to be generous in welcoming children into their families, "valiantly with the love of the Creator and Savior, who through them will increase and enrich his family from day to day."

The Catholic church teaches that marital intimacy, in order to reach its fullest potential to bond and unite the couple not only with one another but also with God, should never be deliberately isolated from its procreative nature. Pope Paul VI in his encyclical on human life, *Humanae Vitae* (1968), articulated that since all forms of artificial birth control remove the possibility of conception from the act of marital love-making, they are not an option. However, the church understands that couples may sometimes have very serious reasons for spacing or limiting the number of children. In those times, the church recommends the use of the Natural Family Planning (NFP) method, which limits intercourse to the times during the woman's cycle when she is not fertile. NFP can also be used to increase the likelihood of conceiving. Much like fasting from certain foods during Lent can strengthen one spiritually, opting to abstain from sexual intercourse during the fertile times can

strengthen a couple's marriage as they talk, learn and pray together.

During the '60s and '70s, there was much talk about over-population and the population explosion. In *Be Fruitful and Multiply*, Campbell discusses the theories of Theodore Laetsch (1877-1962), a Lutheran theologian who wrote extensively on Christians and birth control. Laetsch proposed, in his "Arguments Against Birth Control," that the two-child model quickly leads to population shrinkage and eventually the people vanish. He reasoned that 10 percent of all marriages are naturally childless, and single people, in general, do not contribute to the population growth of a nation. While it is true that the two-child model replaces the parents, no replacements are made for unmarried people, childless couples and even couples who have only one child; hence the population shrinks and the nation dies out.

Furthermore, the concept of world over-population is debatable. If all of the world's landmass of 148.94 million square kilometers (57.5 million square miles) were evenly distributed among the earth's 6.6 billion people, each individual would have over 5 acres. Admittedly, this is a simplified calculation, but it raises the question: Is the world really overpopulated or is the consumption of resources out of balance?

Observe

1. Do a quick survey on the group's family composition by sharing the answers to these questions:
 - How many children do you have?
 - How many siblings?
 - How many children do each of your siblings have?
 - How many siblings do your parents have?

2. To the extent that you are comfortable, share with the group the factors that have influenced the size of your family.
3. What accommodations does your parish make for larger families through its organizations and support structures?
4. Ask couples you know with many children, few children or no children how others in their extended families and community have commented on the size of their nuclear family, whether positively or negatively.

Judge

1. What trends in family size can be seen in the group? Do you think your group conforms to the norm?
2. In your judgment what are factors that have contributed to family size in the United States in each of the following categories: economic, scientific, societal/cultural and religious?
3. Why is it so important to God that people be fruitful and multiply? Understanding the strong sexual drives and desire for companionship and intimacy that men and women have, why would God speak this command first?
4. How do couples who are naturally infertile and those who marry much later in life obey God's command to be fruitful and multiply? What are other ways that marriage produces fruit for the Kingdom of God?
5. How can the Christian community support parents as well as infertile couples?

Act

1. Look for ways to celebrate and affirm families when they announce new pregnancies.
2. Pray for those struggling with infertility.
3. Read the first chapter of "Gaudium et Spes," The Dignity of Marriage and the Family.
4. Have a date night with your spouse. Reflect on the many ways your marriage has been and continues to be fruitful. Talk with your spouse about where you need to trust God more with your fertility, finances and every aspect of your life together.
5. Learn more about Natural Family Planning at www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp and inquire about training in the latest methods through your diocesan office.

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CLOSING PRAYER

Lord God, we come before you and surrender ourselves to you.

Please forgive us for the times we have failed to trust you with our finances, our fertility, our lives.

Help us to trust you in every aspect of who we are and to affirm new life in every form as the gift that it is from you.

Please bless all of the families in our lives, those with many children, those with few, those with none.

Make all of our marriages fruitful, and we pray that you take that fruit that we co-produce with you and use it to bless your people, ushering in the reign of God. Amen.

To Have and To Hurt?

Gather

OPENING PRAYER

O God, you are the author of marriage, and you know that husbands and wives sometimes hurt one another deeply. The hopes and dreams of the wedding day are dimmed, and conflicts put stress on marriage vows. Some spouses endure unhealthy relationships based on power and control. Teach us how we can support struggling marriages and help those we love to find healing and strength for the future. Amen.

Report on Actions

Scripture Reflection

Give ear to my prayer, O God;
do not hide yourself from my supplication.
Attend to me, and answer me;
I am troubled in my complaint.
I am distraught.

It is not enemies who taunt me—
I could bear that;
it is not adversaries who deal insolently with
me—
I could hide from them.
But it is you, my equal,
my companion, my familiar friend,
with whom I kept pleasant company;
we walked in the house of God with the
throng.

Evening and morning and at noon
I utter my complaint and moan,
and he will hear my voice.
He will redeem me unharmed
from the battle that I wage,
for many are arrayed against me.
—Psalm 55:1-2, 12-14, 17-18

—Why do emotional wounds inflicted by those we love
always seem to hurt so much more?

—Share about a time you mended a damaged relation-
ship. What role did prayer play?

SOCIAL INQUIRY

Without an attitude of mutual respect, couples can hurt one another deeply. Respect can break down when couples get into the habit of speaking disrespectfully to each other, holding grudges, insisting on having one's way, or being overly critical and complaining. People drift apart. A marriage can die the death of a thousand cuts.

The website sponsored by the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Marriage, www.foryourmarriage.org, asks the question: What have you done for your marriage today? The bishops make the point that "successful marriages don't work on automatic pilot—at least not for

long. Like a garden, they require constant attention: fertilizing, watering, and weeding. Healthy marriages, like gardens, don't die suddenly. More often they fade away from a gradual lack of attentiveness, letting things slide, taking each other for granted." This lack of attention causes pain for the spouses that could seriously damage their relationship if not corrected.

When people recognize they are struggling in married life, they should seek counseling. But how should they choose a counselor? If they hope to save their marriage, couples should look for a counselor who believes in marriage. They should ask friends, family members, pastors or doctors for referrals to narrow down their search. They should seek a licensed professional with advanced degree work in counseling, psychiatry or social work from an accredited university, and interview the prospects to find a good match. The local Catholic Charities organization may also have counseling services available.

In addition, couples may elect to participate in a Retrouvaille Program, a Catholic program to help couples heal and renew their marriages (www.retrouvaille.org). There is hope for the hurting. Many couples in seemingly cold, unloving relationships have found help for their marriages through counseling or Retrouvaille programs. Healing is possible.

Observe

1. List some examples of disrespectful or hurtful behavior in relationships.
2. Where do young men and women hear messages of disrespect and inequality in relationships today?
3. Has anyone asked you for help or guidance in a troubled marriage? What did he or she need? What did you do?

4. What resources does your parish or diocese offer for couples struggling in their marriages? For those experiencing domestic violence? What are the community resources? What is the cost associated with these services for those of limited means?

Judge

1. What is needed for reconciliation in marriage when spouses hurt one another?
2. Why is it often difficult for people to seek marriage counseling or marriage education?
3. How can friends or relatives help someone who is experiencing difficulty in marriage?
4. Are some marriages beyond help? Explain your views.
5. Why is it important to "mourn the loss" when a marriage ends?

Act

1. Find out about workplace employee assistance for couples in need of counseling. Visit www.foryourmarriage.org for more information about choosing a counselor.
2. If you are part of marriage or baptismal preparation, include discussion on domestic violence.
3. For more on recovering from divorce, read *Healing the Wounds of Divorce: A Spiritual Guide to Recovery*, by Barbara Shlemon (Ave Maria Press, 1992) and *Making Your Way After Your Parents Divorce*, by Lynn Cassella (Liguori Press, 2003).
4. Identify the crisis counseling and shelter services in your community. Encourage your parish to post this

information in a public place: bulletin board, restrooms, etc. Find out if these services need supplies, donations, education or volunteers.

5. Read "When I Call for Help" (USCCB, 2002) or "Follow the Way of Love" (USCCB, 1994).

Look Ahead to Next Meeting

1. Date _____
2. Time _____
3. Place _____
4. Phone or e-mail host if you cannot attend _____
5. Look ahead to the Observe section for the next meeting.
6. Who could we invite to join our group?

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. May we speak to others with respect and love; may we work to nurture healthy relationships, our own and those of friends and neighbors. O Divine Master, let us be a source of support and consolation to those who are hurting. Help us to understand the pain others go through when their trust is betrayed. May we be your messengers of life in our society. Together, we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

YOUR SAFETY COMES FIRST

Additional information
regarding domestic abuse

The church calls husbands and wives into a partnership of equal dignity and value. While many spouses understand this call to mutuality and equal authority in marriage, others enter marriage with potentially destructive attitudes about how men and women should relate to one another. Many may have misunderstood some Bible passages, like "Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph 5:21-25), to be a call for domination and submission. Instead, each spouse should seek to outdo the other in kindness (cf. Phil 2). Catholic teaching says, "Marriage must never be a struggle for control" ("Follow the Way of Love," U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1994, 19).

The battle of the sexes can escalate into domestic abuse. In "When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women," (2002) the U.S. Bishops note that intervention by church ministers has three goals, in the following order:

- Safety for the victim and children;
- Accountability for the abuser; and
- Restoration of the relationship (if possible), or mourning over the loss of the relationship.

Church ministers are encouraged to see themselves as "first responders" who listen to and believe the victim's story, help assess the

danger to the victim and any children and refer the victim to counseling and other specialized services. The document suggests specific steps to take when someone you know is being abused.

These behaviors should not be a part of the way husbands and wives relate to one another:

- Using intimidation: destroying property; smashing things; abusing pets; displaying weapons
- Using emotional abuse: putting one another down; calling each other names; humiliating one another
- Using isolation: controlling what the other does; whom he/she sees and talks to; where the other person goes
- Using children: threatening to take the children away; using the children to relay messages
- Using economic abuse: preventing a spouse from getting or keeping a job; making the spouse ask for money; concealing family income
- Using coercion and threats: threatening to leave or commit suicide; involving the spouse in illegal activities

The National Domestic Violence Hotline provides crisis intervention and referrals to local service providers. Call 800-799-SAFE (7233) or 800-787-3224 (TTY). E-mail assistance is available at ndvh@ndvh.org.

SEVEN

Children and Parents: Growing Together

Gather

OPENING PRAYER

O God, you gave us the Holy Family as a perfect model of marriage and parenting lived in faith and obedience to your will. Help us to be examples of faith and obedience in our families and in our world. Guide us in our mission of passing our faith on to our children. Open their hearts so that the seed of faith planted at their baptism may grow. Strengthen our young people as they grow in their knowledge of Jesus and their openness to your call. Increase the love and faithfulness of all marriages. We ask this through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Ideas for meetings including children

Your CFM gathering is another opportunity to pass on your faith! Borrow a children's film about Jesus' life or the life of a saint and then have the children share what they have learned before you close the meeting. Or, provide simple rosary kits, make placemats with the "Prayer Before Meals" on one side and the "Prayer After Meals" on the other, or use a shoebox to make a shrine to Mary by adding a statue and other decorations. Before you close the meeting, have the children show off their contribution to your domestic church!

Report on Actions

Scripture Reflection

Now, every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was 12 years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety."

He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all of these things in her heart.

—Luke 2:41-51

—Describe a time, past or present, when you were a challenge to your own parents.

—How did Mary and Joseph confront the task of parenting Jesus?

—What elements of the life of the Holy Family are revealed in this story?

SOCIAL INQUIRY

In his 1994 "Letter to Families" Pope John Paul II wrote: "In God's plan, the family is in many ways the first school of how to be human." He referred to the family unit as the "domestic church," echoing ancient church teachings that the family is the most fundamental building block of the church. In fact, St. John Chrysostom called the family the most basic unit of the church way back in the fourth century! When we marry and baptize our children, we pledge publicly to teach and model for our children the most basic Christian values—love, forgiveness, human dignity, obedience, and charity. Quite a responsibility! Parents are called to embrace the responsibilities that come with having children, trusting that God will provide the grace that they need. In this, parents will discover true joy.

Caring for children brings with it the opportunity for parents to discover God working in their own lives. In his 1981 exhortation on the family, "*Familiaris Consortio*," Pope John Paul II talks about the educational exchange between parent and child and how children contribute to the sanctification of their parents. He challenges parents and children alike to recognize how they can help one another grow in holiness, help that is truly "ministry." Parents' ministry acts "as a service to the human and Christian well-being of their children, and in particular as a service aimed at helping them acquire a truly responsible freedom." At the same time, parents should "maintain a living awareness of the 'gift' they continually receive from their children" (#21 and #26).

Observe

1. Ask two people: What types of changes often occur in the relationship of spouses when children enter the family?

2. Ask yourself and another person: What do you see as the joys and challenges of parenting?
3. List some examples of how parents teach and model basic Christian values for their children.
4. What kind of support for parenting is offered in your church or community (classes, hotlines, support groups, books, etc.)?

Judge

1. What are some ways that children teach their parents? How did having a child change your understanding of yourself as an individual and a spouse? How has it helped you grow as a person?
2. What discouragements have you faced as a parent? How did this affect your relationship with your spouse? With God?
3. What would help parents fulfill their mission of teaching and modeling the Christian faith to their children? How can the Christian community respond to this need? What changes would you like to see in our society in response to this need?
4. What is the relationship between marriage and parenting? How can each be used to strengthen the other?

Act

1. Make a commitment to weekly church attendance as a family. Add family attendance to a weekday liturgy, reconciliation, adoration, recitation of the rosary or another spiritual practice to your regular prayer life.
2. Make a point to spend time talking to your children about how God is working in your life. Help your child recognize how God is working in his or her life, too. Know what is happening in your child's life.

3. Participate in a parenting program. Volunteer to organize such a program in your parish or help with an already existing program.
4. Volunteer to look after another couple's children so that they can spend some quality time together.

Look Ahead to Next Meeting

1. Date _____
2. Time _____
3. Place _____
4. Phone or e-mail host if you cannot attend _____
5. Look ahead to the Observe section for the next meeting.

CLOSING PRAYER

If children are present, they should stand or sit with their parents as everyone prays together.

*Blessed are you, O Lord and Father,
For sending your Son, Jesus,
To become part of the human family,
To share our joys and struggles,
And to show us the power of love.*

*Protect and watch over our families,
So that, with your help,
We may become, day by day,
a more perfect expression of the church in our homes.*

We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

EIGHT

Marriage Promotes Health

Gather

OPENING PRAYER

Praise be to you, Lord God, who has given us life! May we nourish our spiritual lives with prayer and good works and may we nourish our physical lives with healthful food and exercise. We rejoice in your gift of health and strive to be ever mindful of our brothers and sisters who are hurting. Thank you for the gifts you have so generously given us and help us to share your love and compassion with those who suffer. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Report on Actions

Scripture Reflection

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

—1 Corinthians 3:16-17

Happy is everyone who fears the LORD,
who walks in his ways.
You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your
hands;
you shall be happy, and it shall go well
with you.

Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots
around your table.
Thus shall the man be blessed
who fears the LORD.

The LORD bless you from Zion.
May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life.
May you see your children's children.
Peace be upon Israel!

—Psalm 128

—When something is holy, it belongs to God. What evidence have you seen of God dwelling in you?

—“Fear of the Lord,” in the Psalms, means realizing that God is God and that we are not. It is an attitude of respect for God that inspires us to be faithful. When has this fear kept you out of trouble?

SOCIAL INQUIRY

Healthy marriages promote healthy individuals. Recent research has shown that marriage encourages better relationships between parents and children, especially father-child interactions. The Center for Law and Social Policy, a child-advocacy organization, recently reported that “Most researchers now agree that...studies support the notion that, on average, children do best when raised

by their two, married, biological parents” (Couples and Marriage Series #7, 2006, 8).

On average, married men and women have fewer illnesses and are less likely to die from stroke, cancer, violence or car accidents. They have stronger immune systems, making them less vulnerable to colds and other routine illnesses. They also tend to have better mental health and are less prone to addiction, depression and suicide. Overall, they are likely to feel more connected, be more hopeful and be happier than are single people.

Children, likewise, benefit from living with their own married parents. On average, they have better physical and emotional health, achieve greater academic success and have longer life expectancies. (See resources on page 73 to explore this topic further.)

National Marriage Project researchers David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead at Rutgers University have found that the benefits of marriage extend beyond the benefits for children and individuals. There are significant advantages for couples. Married couples have more meaningful sexual relationships. They have sex as frequently as cohabiting couples and report higher emotional satisfaction in their sexual relationships. Men and women equally benefit from marriage but in gender-specific ways.

Research finds that marriage helps men to become better fathers, reduces their likeliness to quarrel and fall prey to addiction and provides many physical health benefits. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to gain financially, to be protected from crime and abuse and to receive psychological benefits.

These findings resonate with the teaching of the church on the complementarity of men and women, that is, that men and women are made “for each other” and meant to be helpmates to each other. The data also bear out teachings about the equality of men and women, as well as on the goods of marriage. Considering the

research that has been done showing the many health benefits of marriage, it seems obvious that whatever can be done to help people achieve satisfactory marriages, whether by church, family, government or other organizations, would be beneficial not only for the family members but also for society in general.

As a society and as committed Christians we must look at what we can do to promote healthy marriages while committing ourselves to finding ways to assist those whose families are different than ours and might have different needs.

Observe

1. How does the research that shows marriage to have health benefits for men, women and children reflect your own experiences and those of your neighbors?
2. Ask three married people these questions: How do you think marriage has affected your physical and mental health? How has it affected the health of your children? Report your findings.
3. Find a program that teaches the skills necessary for a healthy marriage offered in your parish or community and tell your group about it.
4. Research the Community Marriage Policy effort. Does your community have one? Do churches in your community collaborate on marriage preparation?

Judge

1. If having a good marriage is healthy, why is there a growing trend towards adult life without marriage?
2. Should social policy promote marriage? Give reasons for your answer.
3. How has being in a CFM group affected you and your family's physical, mental and spiritual health?

4. How can Christians, married or single, teach others about the health benefits of marriage?

Act

1. Sponsor a health fair at your church or in your community.
2. As a group, sponsor a marriage education program, such as *10 Great Dates* by David and Claudia Arp, for the married couples in your parish or community.
3. Join a fitness or dance class with your spouse.
4. Reach out to someone who has recently lost a spouse due to death or divorce. Include them in a social outing with your family.

Look Ahead to Next Meeting

1. Date _____
2. Time _____
3. Place _____
4. Phone or e-mail host if you cannot attend _____
5. Look ahead to the Observe section for the next meeting.

CLOSING PRAYER

God of wisdom, how can we thank you for your gifts of health and love? We thank you for friends and family that care for us. Thank you for all the gifts of the earth that help us to live happy and healthful lives. Thank you for the freedom and prosperity of our nation that provides us the opportunity to strive for health and happiness. Amen.

NINE

As Time Goes By

Gather

OPENING PRAYER

Lord God, you are our God in happy times and in sad times, when life is easy and when it is not. Be with us on our life's journey. Help us to walk joyfully in your ways and heed your call as we encounter all that life presents to us. May our faith remain strong even in the face of obstacles, knowing that you, O Lord, will sustain us until we meet face to face in your heavenly kingdom. Amen.

Report on Actions

Scripture Reflection

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and

a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

—Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.' "

—Luke 13:6-9

—When have you had to be patient? Tell about the experience.

—How are the lessons of the readings applicable to all relationships, especially marriage?

SOCIAL INQUIRY

Marriage is a process. It is a time of growth, a time for change. Not all couples grow at the same pace, and not all of the change is welcome.

Sister Barbara Markey, Ph.D., suggested in a 2005 presentation titled "The Lifecycle Stages of Marriage" that over the course of one's life, one will have multiple marriages—with the same person. As one progresses through the life cycle, there is a need to redefine and

renegotiate one's marriage. Some of these life-cycle changes are predictable. The transition from single life to married life, the birth of a child, life with an adolescent, the empty nest and life in retirement are a few of the predictable stages. But other changes may occur due to unexpected events—illness, unemployment or the needs of the extended family. What is ultimately important for the couple, however, is the realization that these transition events are natural; that to one extent or another, they are experienced in some way by many married couples; and that with change comes stress, tension and conflict.

Frequently, couples view the stress, tension and conflict that may occur in a transitory phase as a time of unhappiness. Many couples facing this unhappiness turn to divorce. However, at least one major study suggests a patient approach to these phases is more appropriate. In a large-scale study for the Institute for American Values by Linda J. Waite, Don Browning, William J. Doherty and others (*Does Divorce Make People Happy?: Findings from a Study of Unhappy Marriages*, 2002), 86 percent of people who said they were unhappily married in the late 1980s but stayed in the marriage indicated that they were happier when they were interviewed five years later. Indeed, three-fifths of the formerly unhappily married couples rated their marriages as either "very happy" or "quite happy."

A key to negotiating the waters of transitions in marriage is the recognition that they are normal and expected. It permits the couple to respond rather than react to changing life situations. Also, surrounding themselves with other couples with a similar commitment to marriage can help sustain the couple during these transitory phases. At the CFM National Convention in 2005, Andrew and Terri Lyke gave a presentation on the topic of "Godcouples." Their premise is that the relationship among Paul, Barnabas and Timothy in the New Testament provides relevance in our own relationships

with other couples. The "Paul" couple is a mentor couple to a "Timothy" couple. A "Barnabas" couple is someone who walks the journey with you—a contemporary, so to speak. By identifying your "Paul" couple, you can look to see the example of someone who has successfully made the transition you may be facing. By identifying your "Barnabas" couple, you can gain strength from facing the challenges of a particular life stage with a friend. Regardless of the titles, communities that are marriage- and life-affirming can be a potent weapon in battling the difficulties normal in a marriage of lasting duration.

Observe

1. Ask several couples about different life stages they have observed in their own marriages. What were the joys of each stage? What were the challenges? How did they weather the challenges?
2. Identify the life stage you are in right now and share with the group.
3. Ask several couples whether they ever had a mentor for their marriage or a contemporary who has transitioned through life stages with them? Have they mentored a younger couple? How have these relationships helped their marriage?

Judge

1. How has your marriage been affected by your current life stage?
2. Why are changes and transitions so difficult for some couples to manage?
3. Is the divorce option too easy to employ? Why or why not? Are there situations in which patience might not be the best option?
4. How can married couples better minister to one another?

Act

1. Most marriages that fail do so in the first five years. Develop a mentoring program for the newly married in your parish.
2. Discuss with your spouse the stages through which your marriage has traveled. Identify the joys and difficulties of each stage and recall the ways you personally grew in your relationship.
3. As a couple or as a group, use CFM's marriage enrichment program, *Your Marriage, the Great Adventure* as a marriage enrichment experience. Copies are available from the national office at office@cfm.org or (812) 962-5508. This may be a way to add new members to your group or start a new CFM group.
4. Learn more about marriage through the life cycle and mentoring. See www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/npim.shtml for more on the National Pastoral Initiative on Marriage and www.chicagolandmarriage.org/arusi/God-Couples.pdf on the concept of "God-couples."

Look Ahead to Next Meeting

1. Date _____
2. Time _____
3. Place _____
4. Phone or e-mail host if you cannot attend _____
5. Look ahead to the Observe section for the next meeting.

CLOSING PRAYER

Thank you, Lord, for all your generous gifts. We thank you especially for those people who have touched our hearts with their example, patience, kindness and love. (You may mention the names of those for whom you are particularly grateful.) Lord, please give us the strength and courage to share those same gifts with your people who may be struggling in their family relationships or in their faith. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Are you benefitting from this book?

Please send your individual or group comments to the CFM national office:

Christian Family Movement
P.O. Box 925
Evansville, IN 47706

or e-mail us: office@cfm.org

Thanks!

TEN

The Gift of Marriage: A Celebration

Prior to the meeting, every person writes a tribute to a married couple who has touched his or her life. Bring that written tribute and, if possible, a picture of the couple being honored.

OPENING PRAYER

Heavenly Father, creator of the universe, you made man and woman in your image.

Response: We thank you and we praise you!

Lord Jesus, you blessed marriage by making it a sacrament.

Response

Holy Spirit, you fill the hearts of husbands and wives with love and devotion!

Response

O most loving and caring God, we thank you for the gift of marriage. Fill all husbands and wives with love and devotion for their spouses. Grant them the gifts of patience and peace in their homes. Help them to reach

out to those who have been hurt in any way in their marriages with compassion and understanding. Help us all to honor and cherish our spouses and all our family members so that we may in turn honor you who have blessed us so generously. Amen.

Scripture Reflection

The voice of my beloved!
Look, he comes,
leaping upon the mountains,
bounding over the hills.
My beloved is like a gazelle
or a young stag.
Look, there he stands
behind our wall,
gazing in at the windows,
looking through the lattice.
My beloved speaks and says to me:
"Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;
for now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.
The fig tree puts forth its figs, and
the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.
Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away.
O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,
in the covert of the cliff,
let me see your face,
let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely."

My beloved is mine and I am his;
he pastures his flock among the lilies.
Until the day breathes
and the shadows flee,
turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle
or a young stag on the cleft mountains.

Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death,
passion fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.
If one offered for love all the wealth of his house,
it would be utterly scorned.

—Song of Solomon 2:8-14, 16-17; 8:6-7

—What word or phrase of this reading had special or new meaning for you?

SOCIAL INQUIRY

This will be a simple evening of sharing and celebrating. Leave time for conversation and refreshments after the prayer service.

Observe

Each couple should read their tribute to an inspiring marriage, or tell the group about an inspiring couple.

Judge

1. Discuss the qualities that the couples honored in the tributes displayed.
2. What did these couples have in common? What differences did you note?

3. Why is it important for married couples to model Christian principles?

Act

1. Send your tribute to the couple about whom you wrote. If this is not possible, say a prayer for the couple.
2. Continue your membership in the Christian Family Movement. If you are not yet a member of CFM, join by contacting the national office at office@cfm.org or call 812-962-5508.
3. Plan one of the following:

Option One

Plan a marriage celebration for your parish. This could be a Mass or prayer service where all married couples are welcome to renew their marriage vows. You would need to plan the liturgy, selecting appropriate readings for either the Mass or prayer service. This could be followed by: A candlelight dinner enlisting help from other parish groups such as the youth group, Knights of Columbus, or Altar Sodality. Plan your decorations and menu. Determine what the cost will be and ask couples for an appropriate donation. You also might want to plan some romantic music, a speaker, or other entertainment. This is your celebration. The group should decide on how simple or elaborate the celebration will be.

Option Two

Plan as a group to attend Mass together and then go out to dinner at a nice restaurant. Reserve a private room at the restaurant. Bring wedding albums and/or pictures to display. Each couple should be given an opportunity to tell about their wedding day. Close the evening with spontaneous prayers of thanksgiving and joy.

Option Three

Plan a celebration in cooperation with one or more CFM groups from neighboring parishes. Everyone could be invited to bring a snack or dessert to share. To find CFM groups in your area, contact the national office at office@cfm.org or call 812-962-5508.

CLOSING PRAYER

For this service have a lighted candle

Leader:

Lord Jesus, you are the light of the world. You let your light shine through your warm compassionate love for humankind. In this way you reveal to us the love of God, God who is love. Help us to manifest your love through the love we express toward one another. We ask this, Lord, in your name. Amen.

Scripture

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says, "I am in the light," while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness.

—1 John 2:7-11

Silent Reflection

Sharing of thoughts on the reading

Litany

This Litany reflects three different moods: thanksgiving, penitence and resolution. Participants should pause between the sections and allow themselves to settle into the mood of the prayer.

Leader: For calling us to be partners in Christian marriage,

Response: We thank you, Lord.

Leader: For allowing us to know your presence in our presence to one another,

Response: We thank you, Lord.

Leader: For inspiring us to reflect your love in the love of our marriage and family,

Response: We thank you, Lord.

Leader: For the sacrament we have been for each other,

Response: We thank you, Lord.

Leader: For all those unmarried people who support Christian marriage by their actions, prayers and friendship,

Response: We thank you, Lord.

Leader: For the times when we have failed to show Christ-like love in our marriage and family,

Response: Lord, have mercy.

Leader: For the ways in which we have lacked human warmth and sensitivity,

Response: Lord, have mercy.

Leader: For the occasions when we have been reluctant to serve each other's needs,

Response: Lord, have mercy.

Leader: For our lack of forgiveness and compassion,

Response: Lord, have mercy.

Leader: We pray for all couples preparing for marriage, that they become signs of your love in the world.

Response: Lord, help them, we pray.

Leader: We pray for our government and our culture, that they support marriage as a pillar of society and the foundation of family life.

Response: Lord, help them, we pray.

Leader: We pray for those who have been hurt in marriage and for those who struggle to raise their families after divorce.

Response: Lord, help them, we pray.

Leader: We pray for those whose spouses have died.

Response: Lord, help them, we pray.

Leader: We will strive to grow in our faith and love of Christ.

Response: Lord, help us, we pray.

Leader: We wish to give fuller sign of Christ's love in our marriage.

Response: Lord, help us we pray.

Leader: *We pray that CFMers everywhere will promote Christ-centered marriage and family life, help individuals and their families to live the Christian faith in everyday life, improve society through actions of love, service, education and example. This is the mission of CFM. We pray that we will be strengthened to advance this mission.*

We accept this mission in Jesus name.

Response: *Lord, help us, we pray.*

Light Ceremony

Each person, in turn, takes the lighted candle and hands it to the next person, saying these or similar words:

N. _____, *may Christ continue to shine through you.*

Person responds: I am grateful for the light you are to me.

Scripture

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

—John 15:12-14

Recite Together

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Sign of Peace

Refreshments

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