

It's Valentine's Day and National Marriage Week: Celebrating the joy of love

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"Since love grows within you, so beauty grows. For love is the beauty of the soul."

-Saint Augustine

Happy Valentine's Day!!

Today much of the world celebrates romantic love. It is a day marked by the delivery of expensive flowers, extravagant chocolates and candy, pricy greetings cards, and reservations at packed restaurants with overpriced menus. Lots of businesses are impacted by the economic benefits of Valentine's Day.

That's a lot of pressure to deliver the perfect emotion to let your loved one know that he or she has your heart... If you have to work or are sick or don't have the money, does that mean your relationship is doomed? What if this day is not your best day? What to do, what to do?

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How about a lifetime of celebrating love?

Every year the Church honors the sacramental commitment of love during the second week of February, National Marriage Week. For 2014 this celebration began

last weekend on World Marriage Sunday, which is sponsored annually by Worldwide Marriage Encounter. The purpose is stated on their website:

“World Marriage Day honors husband and wife as the foundation of the family, the basic unit of society. It salutes the beauty of their faithfulness, sacrifice and joy in daily married life.”

Started in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1981 as “We Believe in Marriage Day,” WMD celebrations spread throughout most of the United States in just one year, with Pope John Paul II imparting his Apostolic Blessing on this annual event in 1993. The theme each year is “Love One Another” (John 15:12).

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A work of art:

Being married and committing your life sacramentally to your spouse is an incredible gift. I have been blessed with eleven wonderful years (and counting) of marriage to my dear husband George. Between us we have four adult children, two sons-in-law, one future son-in-law, a seven-year old grandson, a six-week old granddaughter, our sweet pug Daisy, and three grand-dogs.... Life is good. Being able to combine two full lives and families is a work of art. And ours is one that we cherish each and every day. My heart is overflowing with gratitude.

Pope Francis on marriage and family:

Dear young people, don't be afraid to marry. A faithful and fruitful marriage will bring you happiness.

@Pontifex today on Twitter

Pope Francis told the young people gathered in Assisi with him back in October not

to be afraid to marry. While informally answering questions, the Holy Father addressed an inquiry about marriage and family life by telling the crowd that Christian marriage is a “real vocation, just like priesthood and religious life are. Two Christians who marry each other have recognized in their love story the Lord’s call, the vocation to form one flesh, one life from the two, male and female.” He told them that “it takes courage to start a family.” He shared that the “modern world not only doesn’t help, it seems to put obstacles in the way, ‘privileging individual rights rather than the family’ and trying to convince everyone that relationships should last only as long as there are no difficulties.”

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What’s the key to a successful marriage?

Indeed, what is the secret to a good marriage? What makes a marriage work in this day and age when the divorce rate is so high? There are so many important components: devotion, sacrifice, prayer, kindness, sensitivity, patience.... Where does one begin to explain the dynamics of a good marriage?

I asked for some input from family and friends to share with you today.

Wisdom and advice for married and engaged couples:

Reflecting on the Anniversary Dance and a Birthday Surprise:

My second cousin Joseph and his wife Theresa were married four years ago at Our Lady of Pompei Church in Highlandtown. Father Lou Esposito, the pastor and family friend, witnessed their wedding. He was also the celebrant for all the important sacramental moments in Joe’s life.

Joe shared with me a story that one of his colleagues told him about a heart warming

anniversary dance: A wedding DJ invited all married couples to the dance floor and slowly eliminated the dancing couples, starting with the newly married, and then working upward, until the longest married couple was the only one left on the dance floor. The DJ congratulated the last couple standing, who were married more than 55 years, and asked if they had any words of wisdom for the new bride and groom. The family and friends gathered around this long-married couple burst into laughter when the husband replied, "Take many trips..." But after the laughter died down he added "with your wife."

Joe told me that he often thinks of this story in relation to his marriage to Theresa. His marriage advice is to spend as much time with your spouse as possible "doing the things you love and experiencing new adventures. While exotic island adventures or exploring Europe cannot always fit into our busy schedule, we often make time together by having a simple date night out, a surprise getaway to a nearby bed and breakfast, or by clearing the furniture and dancing to Sinatra or Doo-Wop love songs."

Joe and Theresa now have an adorable 18-month old son, as well as Theresa's two older children, ages 10 and 13, who adore Joe, and live with him and their Mom.

Not long after Joe spoke to me, I got a note from Theresa, a nurse, who shared a very similar story: "No matter how busy life gets, it's important to set aside some alone time with your spouse."

She told me about the creative surprise she gave Joe for his birthday yesterday: A coupon book called "Date of the Month Club." Here are two examples that she included:

March 2014:

Romantic dinner with entertainment:

Dinner at your choice of the following:

O Fleming's

O Bonefish

O The Outback
O Other_____

Entertainment:
O Walk under the stars
O Board game
O Red box movie
O Wii game fun

May 2014:

This winter gave us snow and ice, but now we can enjoy weather that it nice!
This month features a picnic at Patterson Park followed by a trip to the duck pond.
Be sure to bring extra bread. Kites are optional.

I love the creativity that Theresa used to come up with a fun and romantic gift for her husband's birthday. The memories of these dates will last a lifetime.

In good times and in bad:

Our oldest daughter Tracy has been married to Stephen for nine years. They are parents to our adorable grandson Tyler, age 7.

Tracy has some great advice about marriage:

"Marry someone with a good sense of humor who shares the same values. Marriage has its ups and downs, but you must be committed to one another and willing to work through challenges. You need to be able to love your spouse through the good and the bad. Show your love and appreciation for each other often."

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Tracy sent me the above quote last night: Marriage is about total giving and

sacrifice.

Never stop dating:

Jessica Baldrige Smythe, one of my former students, is a second grade teacher at St. Joseph School, Fullerton. She and her husband Nate have been married for four years. Jess is the proud step-Mom to their ten-year old son Nathan.

Jess shared: "I think one of the key parts of a successful marriage is to never stop 'dating'. Life can be very busy, so remembering to take time for a date where you can spend one on one time together really makes a difference."

Understanding and acceptance:

Phil Piercy, another terrific John Carroll graduate, is the principal of Archbishop Curley High School. He has been married to Michele, a long-term Math substitute teacher for Harford County Public Schools, for almost 18 years and they have three children. Phil shared:

"I think the key to marriage is finding someone who really understands you. While opposites attract, your spouse has to truly accept you for who you are. Find someone who treats you well. Kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and selflessness bring peace to each partner and to the entire relationship."

Don't forget to laugh:

Our daughter Meighan and her husband Jeff were married almost three years ago at the beautiful Marikle Chapel of the Annunciation at Notre Dame of Maryland University. They were blessed on New Year's Eve with a beautiful baby girl, McKenna Rose. She is delightful and has brought such joy to the entire family. Meighan told me that it is important to be patient and to always remember to laugh. Great advice both for new parents and for all married couples!!

The State of the Marriage:

Andrew and Rebecca Jansing-Kaestner, former parishioners at St. Stephen's, Bradshaw, moved to Tennessee about 18 months ago. An engineer and a science teacher, they have been married for 22 years and have two young adult children.

Rebecca shared that they discuss the various components of household and family obligations and know their specific responsibilities and expectations concerning money, chores, and time management. They realize that children grow up and will move onto their own lives, but one's spouse is there for a lifetime, hence they advise that children and their issues should never come between the parents.

Rebecca and Andy have an annual tradition that I really admire: Each year on their anniversary at a quiet restaurant with good food and good wine they have the annual "State of the Marriage" address. This talk is written alternately by one of them each year and touches on all the important aspects of their relationship and married life: goals, jobs, money, household, relationship, kids, as well as special events that took place that year. The purpose is to acknowledge what makes their marriage work and what needs improving for the future. The rule of this ritual is that the other spouse is not allowed to interrupt or speak until the State of the Marriage is delivered in full. Then the other spouse can make comments, ask questions, and dive into a good discussion about the perceptions and insights shared in the address.

Rebecca shared that it is importance to maintain balance: "Sometimes it isn't all about you; and sometimes it is....Create balance." Great advice!!

Reflections on lasting happiness and on married life as a camping trip:

Dean and Susan were married at St. Michael's Church in Toledo, Ohio in 1970. Parents of two adult children and grandparents of a precious little boy, they shared reflections on their marriage and why it is still going strong after 43 years.

"First, both of us were committed for a lifetime. When life threw us curveballs, we

worked things out. Remembering our early days and why we married rekindled feelings. It's a choice we made, not once, but many times!

Second, we supported each other unconditionally through individual tough times, in particular health situations, but also in job changes, family issues, parenting challenges. Fortunately, we were seldom down at the same times, so we could offer each other advice. In life, often we just need someone we trust to tell us things will be fine. Reassurance is a great stress reliever."

Dean and Susan emphasize a common theme heard from most of the married couples to whom I have spoken: the importance of shared experiences and companionship.

"Working at marriage doesn't have to mean having heart to heart discussions, but being conscious of keeping our friendship and our fun alive and well. It is doing things together, not merely being together.

"The most compelling aspect of our marriage is that we have had fun. We kept "date nights" going when our children were young. We have always loved traveling. In addition, we have attended sporting events and gone to the theater. For years we have been boaters. We have had enjoyable times regardless of the activity.

We call our life an adventure; In fact, Dean always says it is a "camping trip," meaning that we do things together and laugh as we figure out the world.

Engaged advice:

Our delightful daughter Katie became engaged to Karl on Christmas Eve after six years of dating. I shared about their joyful engagement last month as the Christmas Season came to an end. Katie is looking forward to their wedding in April of 2015. Reflecting back on their six-year relationship, Katie shared her advice to engaged and married couples:

"Be selfless, considerate, open and honest. Laugh all the time and enjoy your time

together. Be a good listener. Never take each other for granted. The grass is never greener...

“There is no more lovely, friendly or charming relationship, communion or company, than a good marriage.” -Martin Luther

For Your Marriage:

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has a wonderful website with lots of great ideas and information on marriage and the family for both engaged and married couples. For Your Marriage: Check it out [here](#).

Be sure to check out their great advice for married couples: Daily Marriage Tip

Prayer for Married Couples: Adapted from the US Catholic Bishops:

*Almighty and eternal God,
You blessed the union of husband and wife so that they might reflect the union of
Christ with his Church:
Look with kindness upon the special married couples in our lives.
Renew their marriage covenants.
Increase your love in them,
and strengthen their bond of peace
so that, with their families, they may always rejoice in the gift of your blessing.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

God is good : all the time!!

Have a happy Valentine's Day...

Better yet, make each day Valentine's Day with the one you love!!