

*How to live marriage in a way that brings maximal happiness to both husband and wife and in turn to the children.*

**A Catholic physician talks to engaged couples**  
*by William G. White*

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that in all we do, we seek happiness. The primary source of earthly happiness for human beings—more than work, hobbies, sports, politics or any other interest—is those who are most dear to us. For most people, these dear ones are our family members: husbands, wives, children, parents, etc. Therefore, the way we live our family lives is essential to our happiness. The prevalence of broken homes suggests that many families have not found a way to live happily together. Today we will discuss how to live marriage in a way that brings maximal happiness to both husband and wife and in turn to the children. We will address specifically those ways in which the husband and wife communicate with each other in their intimate relations.

But first, a preface. When we talk about marriage, we are talking about a union of one man and one woman. Whatever other kinds of relationships we see around us, whatever they are called, and whatever people do in those relationships, they are not marriage. Marriage arises out of human nature itself. It is recognized but not created by society. Marriage always has been and always will be between one man and one woman.

The human person is both material and spiritual. The body is “animated” (vivified, made alive) by the soul. The human person, a unity of body and soul, is created in the image and likeness of God. The body, then, is not a puppet to be manipulated or a possession to be used, but an essential aspect of the person. One expression that I have found helpful in understanding the wonderful mystery of the human body is that the body is “the material expression of the soul.” The immortal human soul, created by God in an act of personal love for each human being, actually makes the body what it is.

We see this nexus of body and soul in the creation of each child in his mother’s womb. The sperm and egg, the matter contributed by father and mother, are transformed and elevated at the moment of conception into a new human person. From that moment on the human soul “informs” the body. This new baby boy or girl is entirely distinct from father and mother, even though he or she is very small and hidden in the mother’s womb. It is that spark of life, the human soul, that makes the new child a unique human person. All growth and development from that point forward are guided and directed by that human soul, that principle of life; they could not occur in its absence. From the moment of conception, that person’s sex, race, physical features and temperament are determined. (DNA, often credited with “causing” these attributes, is merely an intermediate, instrumental cause. Without life—the functioning of the body in a unified and coordinated way through animation by the soul—DNA is nothing but a complex but inert molecule.)

The marvelous action of the soul is perhaps most clearly revealed at the opposite end of life—at the moment of death. Up to that moment, a person is present; afterward, only

“remains” remain. The soul, and with it the person, have “departed.” At conception, the opposite process occurs: at one moment there are present merely two parts of the mother’s and father’s bodies, of no great loss if not united; at the next moment these mere cells have fused to become a new living human person, created by God and informed by a new human soul.

### *Vive la différence*

Each human person is unique, but men and women express this individual humanity in different ways. As the French say of men and women, “*Vive la différence!*” The unique human soul of each individual reveals itself differently in men and women. The bodies, emotions, personalities and even thought processes of men and women have their own distinct characteristics. Neither man nor woman is superior or inferior; they are, in fact, complementary. Since these bodies, personalities, emotions and thought processes are expressions of the soul, they reveal the nature of the male or female person.

Pope John Paul II described the “nuptial meaning of the body.” Nuptial of course means “having to do with a wedding.” A man and a woman are made not for themselves but for each other. Now, it is hardly necessary to explain this truth to engaged couples who are deeply in love with each other. It is something they feel with all their hearts, with all their being. But this great truth has meaning that extends beyond falling in love, getting engaged and getting married. It means something about how this love is to be lived out in the long lives that, God willing, engaged couples will spend with each other.

The nuptial meaning of the body reveals the true nature of marriage: a relationship of complete mutual self-donation. Husband and wife give themselves to each other body and soul. They no longer live for themselves but for each other. This self-surrender is far from easy. You will be called upon to give more of yourself than you could have imagined you are capable of giving. You will find yourselves stretched, pulled and expanded in new and unexpected ways. If you respond with love to every demand, trial and crisis in your marriage, you will grow more mature, more generous, more patient, more kind and more selfless. You will be practicing a love that will change you into a new person who will be capable of living an eternity of love. That’s what the family is for— to prepare husbands, wives and children for heaven.

Now some people might say that the sacrifice is too great, that no one can just give and give and give. But as I am sure you have heard, “It is in giving that we receive.” In giving more than we ever thought we could, we receive more reward than we ever could have imagined. Marriage is, in fact, the only vocation that promises a measure of happiness, even a foretaste of heaven, on this earth.

I once heard a wise priest say that if married couples go into marriage with a plan to share everything fifty-fifty—all the responsibilities, all the privileges, all the give and take—that their marriage will be unhappy. Instead it is necessary to plan to give one hundred percent, even while receiving little or nothing. If each of the spouses has an attitude of total self-giving, then they will have a chance of true happiness in their marriage.

How does this play out in the practical order? Most couples work out a fair division of labor around the house, and usually this involves a fairly traditional pattern: the husband takes out the trash; the wife cooks; they do the dishes together. But these are relatively arbitrary; as long as both pitch in willingly, the jobs will get done one way or another. Ladies, since you will almost inevitably do more than your share, try to be pleased with your husband's sincere efforts, no matter how small. Gentlemen, only by striving constantly to do more than your share will you come even close to a fair share. (No, these stereotypes are not universal—they probably describe only about ninety-nine percent of marriages.)

## **Nature**

In other areas, the roles of husband and wife are more pre-determined by nature. Women are neither the slaves nor the property of men—nor vice versa. Husbands and wives are equal partners. God created Eve as “a partner fit for [Adam].” As soon as he met Eve, Adam said with delight: “Here then is flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones.” But equal partnership and equal worth do not mean sameness. Rather it is the complementarity of man and woman that makes each of them perfectly suited to be the answer to the other's deepest needs, to make each other complete.

In general, men tend to be protective, women to be nurturing; men are more methodical, women more intuitive; men look at the longer view, women are more sensitive to immediate needs; men's reasoning is more cognitive, women's is more tuned in to emotions. These tendencies, of course, vary among individuals and couples, but are generally true.

Another wise priest once said, “Men and women have different strengths and different weaknesses and the strengths of one are precisely suited to fill up the needs of the other.” Woman's greatest danger is loneliness; the role of her husband is to provide companionship. (A word to the guys: Forget the bowling night, or whatever other “night out with the guys” you may now enjoy, or at least make sure it's a much lower priority than spending time with your wife. Your new best buddy is sitting next to you now.)

On the other hand, a man's greatest danger is discouragement. The responsibility of earning a living, supporting a family, making one's way in a competitive and even hostile world can be daunting. Women's greatest gift to their husbands, then, is support and encouragement. Tell him how wonderful you think he is, what a great provider he is, how strong he is and how much you depend on him. Save the nitpicking and criticism for another time, preferably your prayer time. Bring your complaints to the Lord before you lay them on your husband.

## **The greatness of motherhood**

I speak of the husband as the provider. I know that it is fashionable these days for women to have jobs, and to do them very successfully. But I think we also know deep down inside that something is missing in this modern rat race. Maybe it's that sense of

complementarity: that men and women are different, yet each is wonderful and essential. I think that this is clearest when we think of men and women as fathers and mothers. As any small child would tell you if they could, mothers and fathers are not interchangeable. Children know that if you're looking for adventure, go with Dad; if you need comfort, no one will do but Mom.

Gentlemen, it is good—to use an old-fashioned word, it is manly—to take on the responsibility of providing for your family. Ladies, it is, to use another old-fashioned word, womanly to be a homemaker. What could be more loving than to make a home for those you love most? Especially when you are blessed with children, remember that, while the workplace holds many attractions, no job is more important—or more rewarding—than caring for your children.

The great English author G. K. Chesterton described the greatness of motherhood: “To be Queen Elizabeth within a definite area, deciding sales, banquets, labors and holidays; to be Whiteley within a certain area, providing toys, boots, sheets, cakes and books, to be Aristotle within a certain area, teaching morals, manners, theology and hygiene; I can understand how this might exhaust the mind, but I cannot imagine how it could narrow it. How can it be a large career to tell other people's children about the Rule of Three, and a small career to tell one's own children about the universe? How can it be broad to be the same thing to everyone, and narrow to be everything to someone? No; a woman's function is laborious, but because it is gigantic, not because it is minute.”

Many mothers work outside the home, of course, not because they want to leave their children, but because they feel they must. No doubt, raising a family on one income is difficult. The sacrifices are great. The second car, the larger house, the vacations: all of these must be put off, perhaps for a very long time. But if the sacrifices are great, the rewards are so much greater. To see your baby's first smile, his first steps, to hear his first “Mama”—these are great joys that can never mean as much to a day care worker or even to a grandmother as they do to a mother. Children really do need their very own mothers, and no one else can replace you in this role. Other people might be perfectly good at feeding or changing diapers, but motherhood is a personal relationship. If your husband went out of town on business, you would not invite another man to take his place in your home. Yet for a young child, replacing Mom with someone else is at least as strange and unpleasant.

Most families struggle financially in the first few years of marriage but eventually achieve a reasonable level of financial security. A survey of middle-aged married couples, when asked what they would do differently, most frequently gave the response, “We should have had more children.” The next response in frequency—for both men and women—was, “I wish I had spent more time with my children.” Children grow up fast. Soon they will be gone from the house and on their own. Enjoy every minute with them that you possibly can—and let them thrive in the sunshine of your loving presence.

As Pope John Paul II said, and Pope Benedict repeated, “Do not be afraid!” Do not be afraid to support your family on the husband's earnings alone. Work hard and God will

provide. Do not be afraid to reject the standards of the world that claim a woman can find fulfillment only outside of the home.

### **The nuptial meaning of the body**

One area of complementarity, of mutual “fit” between husband and wife, is the body itself. What does the nuptial meaning of the body tell us about the specific act that pertains to marriage? What are some of the common misunderstandings of sexuality in marriage that can lead to unhappiness, alienation and even divorce, and how can they be avoided? I’m sure you’ve heard the statistic that more than fifty percent of marriages fail. And yet among certain couples who order their marriages in a certain way—that is, without contraception—the divorce rate is closer to two percent. Why such a dramatic difference?

I know a college professor who has been telling her students for years that if they do four simple things, yet still get divorced, she will pay them one thousand dollars—and no one has yet tried to collect on the wager. The four conditions are: 1) chastity before marriage, 2) daily family prayer, 3) weekly family attendance at church and 4) no contraception.

Regarding the first condition, as people in love know, chastity before marriage—that is, abstinence from sexual intercourse and from other intimate sexual contact—is not easy. Fallen human nature has its own biological imperative, and it doesn’t like to wait around for the marriage ceremony. Physical intimacy is a great and wonderful gift from God, meant to glue husband and wife together, to bind them to each other so that they are much less likely to drift apart. I strongly encourage you, after you are married, to express your love for each other as often as you possibly can in the marital embrace, subject to mutual respect and the demands of daily living. This wonderful act of self-giving is both a sign and a reconfirmation again and again of the commitment that you will have made to each other in your marriage vows. Some have argued that, because of the physical pleasure involved, sexual intercourse is a selfish act and should be strictly limited or used only for the purpose of having children. This is not a Catholic understanding of marriage. St. Thomas Aquinas once replied to the question “whether there would have been sexual pleasure in Paradise if Adam and Eve had not sinned,” that sexual pleasure in Eden would have been greater because of freedom from concupiscence. The union of man and woman in marriage is a great good, and the marital act is an expression of that union. In its essence it is specifically an unselfish act, an act of self-giving. Although, as sinners, husband and wife may at some times treat each other with less than perfect love, or even with unkindness, cruelty or exploitation, the essential nature of the marital act is not exploitative but nurturing. Its fruitfulness extends not merely to the begetting of children, but to a mutual “begetting”—a mutual giving of life and its increase by the spouses to each other. Traditionally the Church has viewed sexual union between husband and wife not as a mere pleasure to be indulged in only rarely and reluctantly, but as a “debt” that each owes to the other, a debt the payment of which should not be withheld without serious cause.

On the other hand, sexual intercourse outside of marriage is a completely different matter. Yes it's fun, it's pleasurable, it even seems to bring you closer. But it's really a sham. And I think, deep down in our hearts, we really know that. It's the pleasure without the commitment, the attempt to feel oneness without the vow that makes you one. Studies show that couples who co-habitate before marriage have less stable marriages and a higher divorce rate.

What if you've already gone down that road? Well, whether you call them mistakes or sins, we all make wrong decisions. To be a Christian is not to be perfect all the time. It is falling and, with the help of God's grace, getting up—over and over again, if necessary. If you have already engaged in intimate contact, it's not too late. Many people now are discovering the beauty of what is called “secondary chastity,” that is, striving anew to live lives of abstinence from sexual intimacy. Of course, it isn't easy. Those bodily urges are still very much in the picture. It will be necessary to avoid temptations, like being alone together in certain situations. It will require changing some of the patterns of relating to each other in physical ways; giving up those things that stir up passion like certain kinds of dancing, kissing, staying out too late, etc. It will require real self-sacrifice, but it will be a great preparation for the self-sacrifices that will be needed in marriage. It's also a great preparation for withstanding temptations to infidelity that may come along later. What a wonderful wedding gift for an engaged couple to give each other: to recommit themselves to sexual purity for the sake of their love for each other!

It's also important to avoid excessively long engagements. As the father of adult children, I know that education is important. But too often, I think, parents are so insistent on education and material security that they urge their children to postpone marriage too long. It's not a good idea to rush into marriage, but it can be an equally bad idea to be too afraid of marriage. If you are unsure of whom you want to marry, don't make a hasty decision. But it is not necessary to have a house in the suburbs and two new cars before you marry. Prolonged engagements almost inevitably lead to sexual temptations; or, to put it in a more positive light, your commitment to chastity can be a great motivator to clear away the fear and the anxieties that are keeping you from an early wedding. When you are yearning to be one with the person you love, material security seems just a bit less important. I suggest that you strive for a good balance of natural and supernatural prudence.

So that's the first of the professor's four conditions: chastity before marriage. The second and third, daily family prayer—together—and weekly family Mass—together—are simply ways of living the truth that we are not alone. Marriage, to be happy, must be holy. We cannot carry by ourselves all the burdens, the stresses and the temptations that will test us. We need Christ not only in our individual spiritual struggles, but also in this most intimate, most holy, most joyful—and most difficult—relationship.

What about the fourth condition, no contraception? Why not? Now we get back to the nuptial meaning of the body. If the body has meaning, if the acts of the body “say” something, what do they say? What, specifically, does the marriage embrace say about total self-giving, which a couple promises each other in their wedding vows? The marital

act says three essential things that flow inexorably from the very definition of marriage and from the nuptial meaning of the body: fidelity, permanence and openness to life.

1. *Fidelity*. I see couples here, not triangles or quadrilaterals. Polygamy is not marriage. It is not total mutual self-giving. You cannot give yourself totally to one person if you are trying to give yourself to someone else at the same time. That's pretty clear to most moderns, although many people are confused about what has been called serial monogamy, or the practice of having several spouses in succession. But that brings us to the second of the three intrinsic conditions of marriage.

2. *Permanence*. Marriage lasts "until death do us part." There is no hidden clause in the wedding vow about "until death do us part (unless we get divorced)." It's really simple: until death do us part, period. Now "simple" does not necessarily mean "easy." Simple things are often the most difficult, because we cannot weasel our way out of them. Why does marriage have to be life-long? Why is divorce impossible? You notice I say that divorce is impossible, not that it's wrong. It's simply impossible. Why? Once again, as always, total self-giving! "Total" does not mean "for now," or "until things get tough," or "until I find someone else." Total means always. If it's not for always, it's not marriage.

Now we get to the hard one, or at least the hardest one for us moderns to understand. I really think it is the easiest one to practice, much easier than "fidelity" and "permanence." The third essential, intrinsic, without-which-no-marriage is:

3. *Openness to life*. This element is so important that, like the first two, without it there simply is no marriage. A couple who try to marry with the positive intention of avoiding ever having children have an invalid marriage, that is, they really are not married at all. If they are open to having children, they don't necessarily have to be able to have children. The elderly or the infertile, for example, can contract a valid marriage, as long as they are willing to accept the children God sends them, even if that may be only remotely possible. And even those who plan to have children someday may not use contraception. If they must postpone children, they may do so only through natural means.

But why? Why is openness to life considered so important? Again, it's a matter of total mutual self-giving. When a man and a woman promise themselves to each other in marriage, they promise every dimension of themselves—not just their bodies, but their minds, their affections, their decision-making, etc. But fertility, or fruitfulness—the ability to conceive and bear children—is not just a physical attribute; it is part of our very personalities. It is one of those essential aspects of ourselves that we give away when we marry. This capacity to procreate, to participate in God's act of love in creating a new human person, does not belong to us as individuals; it belongs to our husband or wife. A wife gives to her husband her capacity to be a mother to his children; a husband gives to his wife his capacity to be a father to her children. This most intimate and essential part of our very selves is a gift we have given away to our spouses. This fruitfulness is a sharing in the image and likeness of God, in a way that no other creature can do. Lower animals can reproduce, but they cannot procreate, i.e. bring into being a new person.

Only human beings, in a voluntary act of love, can participate in God's act of creating a new immortal soul. Not even the angels are made so perfectly in God's image.

The total gift of self, which husbands and wives promise each other in their wedding vows, is made real in each expression of love in the marital embrace. If that sacramental sign—that making real—of the covenant of marriage is distorted by contraception, it is falsified; it loses its meaning. It becomes a lie.

Even if husband and wife mutually agree to this truncation of the full meaning of the marriage act, they are simply agreeing to lie to each other. Their bodies speak an irrevocable truth, the truth of total self-giving, yet with contraception the couple denies the true meaning of what their bodies are saying. With their bodies they say, "I give you everything I am and will ever be," but contraception adds, "but not my fruitfulness. I do not give you my power to be a father or mother. I do not give you myself as a procreator with you and with God of a new human soul. I refuse you this most sacred and central dimension of my being. I refuse to be the father or mother of your child. And I reject your gift of self; I reject your power to be the mother or father of my child." Their act becomes an act not of mutual self-giving, but of mutual exploitation, of merely using each other for pleasure. It is really no wonder that such marriages become strained and weakened, often fatally so.

### **Fear of the child**

It is unnecessary, I think, to go through the whole catalog of pills, diaphragms, devices, chemicals, condoms, soups and sauces that people use to avoid children. Many of them are promoted with lies. Pills, IUDs, hormonal patches and injections, for example, can not only prevent conception, they can also cause early abortion, the death of a living child, before the mother even knows she is pregnant. They have significant risks for the women who use them, flowing through the blood stream and adversely affecting many organ systems. They cause strokes, heart attacks, blood clots, gallstones and even cancer.

As a physician, I don't call them sins; I call them unhealthful practices. I might even justifiably call them poisons. Whether or not they lead to hell in eternity, they can certainly lead to hell on earth. By driving a wedge between husband and wife, they lead to misery, pain, alienation, confusion and loneliness. As a physician, I have no problem recommending against these unhealthful practices. Medicine and theology, science and Catholic moral teaching, do not contradict each other. They are both based on the natural law, the law that is written in our hearts, the law that is revealed in the meaning and beauty of men's and women's bodies. As the late Dr. Herbert Ratner used to say, "The Author of the Book of Nature and the Author of the Book of Scripture are the same, and he does not contradict himself." When he says, "Thou shalt not," he is not trying to take all the fun out of life. He is trying to save us from actions that will harm us, that will distort our natures, that will inevitably make us profoundly unhappy.

For those who must temporarily avoid children for serious reasons (such as illness, poverty, etc.), timing sexual intercourse to avoid the fertile period of the woman's cycle

is allowed by the Church. This is not contraception, because it does not contradict the true meaning of the marital act. It simply makes use of a time when conception is unlikely. Nevertheless, even those who practice this “natural family planning,” must take care never to lose sight of the wonder and beauty of the gift of children, nor to forget God’s loving providence. Experience eventually teaches us that his “supernatural planning” always turns out better than any planning we might do in contradiction to his.

One dimension of God’s plan for families is surprisingly little known: the effect of breastfeeding on the spacing of pregnancies. The self-giving of marriage extends, once a baby comes, to meeting the needs of that baby as well as possible. The best way to nourish and care for a baby is breastfeeding. The nutritional, immunological and other physical benefits of breastfeeding are now thoroughly documented. At least as important are the emotional benefits to both mother and baby. Because of improved cognitive, neural and social development, breastfed babies even do better later on in school.

One of the beneficial side effects of nursing is that the menstrual cycle usually doesn’t return for several months, often for more than a year. This natural, temporary period of infertility usually leads to a spacing between babies of 1½ to 2½ years or even longer. If a longer spacing is necessary for a serious reason, natural family planning can be used.

Mother Teresa spoke of the “fear of the child.” Our modern age is afraid of the child, of God’s most generous gift to mankind. It is afraid of the commitment, the difficulty, the challenge and the self-sacrifice. But we do not need to be afraid. We can trust in God. Many of the happiest marriages I know are those that are unconditionally open to children, those in which husbands and wives love each other without fear or reserve, with joyful trust in the Lord and with acceptance of all the precious children he wishes to shower upon them. Is it hard? Of course it is. Everything worthwhile requires effort. And the most worthwhile things require the greatest effort; sometimes they even require suffering. But they also bring the greatest rewards.

So marriage means self-giving, self-surrender, even self-abnegation. It is a cross as well as a comfort. But from such a marriage, lived in accordance with our natures, lived for VBNBeach other, lived in God’s loving care and in obedience to his loving laws, comes life, an abundance of life. And with life, joy. So enjoy your marriage. Enjoy each other. Enjoy your children. May God bless you with many.

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