



Beloved™

Finding Happiness in Marriage

LEADER'S GUIDE
MARRIAGE ENRICHMENT
Living Marriage

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General Editors



Nihil obstat: Derek Barr, Censor Deputatus

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SESSION 1

CHRIST AT THE CENTER



*Marriage
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SESSION 1

CHRIST AT THE CENTER

SESSION OVERVIEW

Putting Jesus at the center of our lives, and at the center of our marriages, is crucial to creating and maintaining strong marriages. Spouses cannot fulfill their partner's every need—only Jesus can do that. Only Jesus can fulfill the deepest longings of each human heart. The more we put Jesus at the center of our lives and our marriages, the more Jesus is able to work in and through us, to help us give ourselves fully and sacrificially to our spouses.

STEP 1 OPENING PRAYER

SAY: Welcome! We're glad you're here.
Let's ask the Holy Spirit to bless our time together.

Encourage couples to pray together the following Prayer of Spouses to the Holy Spirit (page 46).

**O Holy Spirit,
Spirit of unity, love, and goodwill of Father and Son,
you make us one in the sacred union of marriage.
Grant that, like the first Christians, we may be one heart and one mind.**

**Make us respect one another,
help one another in our striving for holiness,
and support one another.
Be our Guide,
our Counselor,
and our Consoler.
Make us bear one another's burdens during
our journey to heaven,
where we hope to live forever
as adopted children of the Triune God.**

Amen.



STEP 2 INTRODUCTION

Unless your couples have all done the first series of BELOVED together, throw out a few ice-breaker questions to help group members get acquainted—and get comfortable with answering questions in the group setting.

Use any or all of the following questions:

- How did you and your beloved meet? Was it love at first sight for you, or did it take more than one look?
- What attracted you most about your beloved?
- What are you most looking forward to in marriage?

SAY: This session marks the beginning of a journey—one that will strengthen your bond with your spouse and give you a fresh perspective on your marriage. Before we start that journey, though, I want to give you an idea of where we’re heading.

In this session, we’ll talk about putting Christ at the center of our marriages. In Session 2, we’ll discuss how to deepen the bond of marriage. Session 3 takes up resolving conflict in marriage. Session 4 reflects on healing, virtue, and love. In Session 5, we’ll look at how to protect the bond of marriage. And in Session 6, we’ll wrap things up by talking about God’s plan for sexuality.

Let’s get started. In this session, we’re going to talk about you, Jesus, and your spouse.

“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”
—Ephesians 5:25

STEP 3 VIDEO

SAY: In this video segment, we’re going to look at how putting Christ at the center of your life—and the center of your marriage—can change the way you approach your relationship with your spouse.

Play the video for Episode 1, which will last for approximately 19 minutes. Look for reactions during the video to get a sense of how people are connecting with the material. Here’s an outline of the video segment:

- I. Christ must occupy the center of your life.
 - A. Making Christ just a part of your life is not enough.
 1. Augustine tried to fill his life with achievements, but found only emptiness.
 2. The rich young man in the Gospels couldn’t give up his possessions to follow Christ.
 - B. Only Christ can fulfill our deepest desires and give peace to our restless hearts.

- II. Christ must occupy the center of your marriage.
- A. Your spouse cannot fulfill all of your needs.
 1. To believe otherwise is to set yourself up for disappointment.
 2. To believe otherwise is to ask too much of your spouse.
 - B. Only Jesus can help you find genuine fulfillment.
 1. He wants your marriage to thrive and grow.
 2. With his grace and love, he transforms our hearts to love like he loves.
 3. He is our model; giving yourself totally and sacrificially to God, your spouse, and others—as Jesus gave himself for us—is the key to finding fulfillment.
- III. We must answer Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?"
- A. If he is just a good man, good teacher, or wise philosopher, then it's okay to make him merely a part of your life.
 - B. If he is the Lord God, he must be at the very center of your life and marriage.

STEP 4 SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

SAY: Now let's take some time in small groups to discuss what we learned in the video and how we can apply this to our daily lives.

Ask your couples to arrange themselves in small groups of 4–6 people. Keep an eye on the clock here; make sure you leave plenty of time for couples to discuss the more intimate questions of Step 5.

Read the following questions aloud one at a time, giving the small groups time to answer each one. When you notice the discussion of one question starting to die down, move on to the next one.

If you feel comfortable interacting with the small groups while they work, you might inject one or more of the responses that follow each question into the discussion.

1. St. Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you." That is, our hearts are restless until Christ is the center of our lives—and marriages. Describe a time in which you experienced a restless heart in your life or in your marriage.

One person may talk about dropping out of school in order to figure out what she wanted to do. Another may talk about ending a relationship that just didn't feel right. Others may talk about how winning awards, getting a good job, having money and material things still leave them feeling restless. Things in this world can't fulfill us alone.

2. Look at the three diagrams in your Couple's Guide. How would you describe each diagram as it pertains to priorities and who is at the center of your life?

- *Figure A puts you, not Christ, at the center of your life, and Jesus is not at all a priority in your life.*
- *Figure B puts you as the center of your life, and Jesus is just one of many other priorities that might meet your needs at a certain point in time.*
- *Figure C puts Christ at the center of your life, and all the other things in your life are touched and influenced by your relationship with Christ.*

Point out that these figures contain just a sampling of priorities that might vie for the center spot in a person's life. Any number of other items could be substituted.

• **In all honesty, which diagram most accurately reflects the way you are living out your relationship with Christ right now?**

Encourage participants to create their own diagrams and invite volunteers to share theirs with the group.

• **What can you do to put Christ more at the center of your life?**

You might suggest starting a habit of praying before making a decision, big or small, or inviting Christ to be a part of the process. You might also suggest setting aside a certain portion of each day for prayer and Bible study.

3. What qualities might be exhibited by a couple who has Jesus at the center of their marriage? What clues would you look for?

Suggest a couple of the following ideas for inspiration if discussion is slow:

- *They go to Mass together.*
- *Prayer is a part of each person's daily life.*
- *When they face challenges or conflict, they pray.*
- *They are comfortable talking about anything with one another.*
- *They don't struggle with neediness.*
- *They don't make unreasonable demands on one another.*
- *They are quick to give God credit for their marital success.*
- *They make sacrifices for one another.*
- *They think about the other person's needs before their own.*

If time permits, quickly go through the questions one at a time and ask representatives from different small groups to share one or two of the responses they came up with. Give your group a chance to hear how other couples approached these topics.

“Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”

*—Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (1) 2006*

STEP 5 COUPLE'S DISCUSSION

SAY: Now let's take some time for you as individual couples to discuss how you can make Jesus more the center of your relationship and why this is so important for your marriage.

Give your couples a chance to spread out around your meeting area. Each couple should be far enough away from everyone else to be able to talk privately. They'll find the questions in their Couple's Guides.

Help couples budget their time effectively and offer guidance and examples as suggested below, in whatever manner you see fit.

1. On a scale of 1–10, how much do you bring God into your marital relationship and family life on a daily basis? (10 being “very often” and 1 being “We don’t ever talk about God.”)

Assuming that few couples will give themselves a “10,” encourage spouses to talk about why their number isn't higher. Is it due to busyness? A lack of motivation? Perhaps a reluctance to get “too religious”?

2. What are some things you can do together as a couple to put God more at the center of your marriage and your family life?

Use any or all of the following suggestions to supplement the couples' ideas:

- *Go to Mass together regularly.*
- *Pray daily together.*
- *Attend a Bible study together.*
- *Strike up friendships with couples who are pursuing the same God-centeredness.*

3. The video makes the point that having Jesus as the center of your marriage takes pressure off both spouses because it frees them from having to worry about meeting one another's every need. What difference has that freedom made in your marriage—or what difference *would* it make?

Encourage spouses to share some of the pressures they've felt in trying to meet one another's needs. Point out that not everyone is a skilled counselor or a skilled conversationalist or a skilled lover. Rather than resigning themselves to a lifetime of disappointment and failure, though, couples who have Jesus at the center of their marriage can take their concerns to him, and there find both consolation and the means to persevere in charity.

“The Eucharist draws us into Jesus' act of self-oblation. More than just statically receiving the incarnate Logos, we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving.”

—Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* 13

STEP 6 WRAP-UP AND CLOSING PRAYER

SAY: Establishing Christ as the center of your marriage is not a one-time decision. Other priorities will constantly compete for that position. If you're not diligent about keeping Christ at the center, you run the risk of having him displaced. Turn to the Couple's Activity on page 49 in your Guides.

Direct couples to the "Couple's Activity" section of their Guides.

SAY: For your activity this week, think about the number you gave yourself (on a scale of 1 to 10) when it comes to bringing Christ into your marital relationship and family life on a daily basis. Then think about what specific steps you will take this week to increase that number by at least 1.

You may want to acknowledge that the scale is subjective. There are no official criteria that differentiate a 5 from a 6. However, a couple should evaluate the spiritual state of their marriage and recognize when significant progress is made. That's what you're looking for with this exercise.

SAY: As we wrap up, let's reflect on some beautiful words of Pope Francis from the homily of the Holy Mass for the conclusion of the Year of Faith, November 24, 2013, that remind us of the importance of putting Christ at the center of our lives:

"Christ is the center of the history of humanity and also the center of the history of every individual. To him we can bring the joys and the hopes, the sorrows and troubles which are part of our lives. When Jesus is the center, light shines even amid the darkest times of our lives; he gives us hope..."

SAY: Let us now close with the Prayer of St. Patrick:

Christ with me,
 Christ before me,
 Christ behind me,
 Christ in me,
 Christ beneath me,
 Christ above me,
 Christ on my right,
 Christ on my left,
 Christ when I lie down,
 Christ when I sit down,
 Christ when I arise,
 Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
 Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
 Christ in every eye that sees me,
 Christ in every ear that hears me.

SESSION 2

A DEEPER UNITY

*Marriage
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SESSION 2

A DEEPER UNITY



SESSION OVERVIEW

The rush of first love is like the taste of grape juice: exciting, bold, and slightly overpowering. Given the right amount of time and circumstances, though, that love can mature into something like a fine wine: complex, flavorful, and far superior to grape juice. The key to eventually enjoying such a relationship is to endure the “fermenting” process—the difficulties and challenges that God uses to mature and strengthen a marriage.

STEP 1 OPENING PRAYER

SAY: Welcome! We're glad you're here.
Let's ask our heavenly Father to bless our time together.

Direct couples to the Opening Prayer in their Guides. Pray together (page 52).

We thank you, O God, for the marital guidance found in your Word, for the timeless wisdom contained in these passages:

“Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

—Philippians 2:3-4

“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” —Matthew 20:28

“Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

—Ephesians 5:21

Move in our midst today, Lord. Guide our efforts to deepen our relationship with one another, as well as our relationship with you.

Amen.



STEP 2 INTRODUCTION

SAY: In Session 1, we talked about the importance of putting Christ at the center of our lives and at the center of our marriages. We discussed the fact that only God can satisfy our every need and that expecting too much of our spouse can cause harm to that relationship. We talked about the importance of selflessness and sacrifice in marriage.

Speaking of Session 1, this would be a good place to ask volunteers to share their experiences from the “Couple’s Activity” of the last session of working on putting Jesus more at the center of your relationship. To start the conversation, you might want to start with your own experience and then invite others to share.

SAY: In this session, we’re going to take those principles to the next level, using God’s relationship with the Israelites in Egypt as our model.

STEP 3 VIDEO

SAY: In this video segment, we’re going to look at the role challenges and difficulties play in stretching, maturing, and perfecting our marriage as God intends.

Play the video for Episode 2, which will last for approximately 18 minutes. Look for reactions during the video to get a sense of how people are connecting with the material.

Here’s an outline of the video segment:

- I. Israel’s relationship with God is a model for marriage.
 - A. At first, God “romanced” Israel in Egypt.
 - B. Israel had to cross the wilderness.
 1. Some people trusted God to guide them through the wilderness.
 2. Some people wanted to go back and start over.
 - C. Eventually God led Israel to the Promised Land.

- II. Love is like a fine wine.
 - A. The first rush of love is like grape juice, exciting and thrilling.
 - B. Mature love ferments into something like wine.
 1. The fermentation process involves trials and ordeals.
 2. The fermentation process requires endurance.
 3. The result is like a fine wine – complex, subtle, superior to grape juice.

- III. Married couples have an adventure that they are called to share in Christ.
 - A. That adventure flows into our love for our children, our friends, our church, and our world.
 - B. When you have a big-picture vision of your adventure, you can see where the little things fit in.

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

Song of Solomon 8:6-7

STEP 4 SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

SAY: Now let's take some time in small groups to discuss what we learned in the video and how we can apply this to our daily lives.

Ask your couples to arrange themselves in small groups of 4–6 people. Encourage them to join up with couples they haven't partnered with before. Keep an eye on the clock here; make sure you leave plenty of time for couples to discuss the more intimate questions of Step 5.

Read the following questions aloud one at a time, giving the small groups time to answer each one. When you notice the discussion of one question starting to die down, move on to the next one.

If you feel comfortable interacting with the small groups while they work, you might inject one or more of the responses that follow each question into the discussion.

1. What connection do you see between God's relationship with the Israelites and your relationship with your spouse?

If necessary, remind couples of some of the key points made in the video:

- *The relationship between God and Israel began with excitement and thrills. God parted the Red Sea to help the Israelites escape. He sent manna, bread from heaven, to feed them. Likewise, most relationships begin with the excitement and thrills of first love. New couples will do things like staying up all night talking or driving hundreds of miles just to see each other for a few hours.*
- *The Israelites were bound to God by the covenant at Mount Sinai. Spouses are bound to one another by their marriage covenant.*
- *Neither involves an easy journey. The Israelites had to cross a wilderness. Couples must endure trials and tribulations.*
- *The Israelites expressed doubt and regret about their relationship with God. Many frustrated couples express their doubts and regret about their marriage.*
- *The Israelites had to choose whether to continue trusting God or to abandon him and start over again. Desperate couples face the choice of whether to continue trusting in their relationship or to abandon their marriage.*
- *The end result—life in the Promised Land—was worth the sacrifices and challenges for the Israelites. Likewise, the end result of a healthy, battle-tested marriage is worth the effort for couples who persevere.*

Encourage volunteers to offer their own correlations.

2. Describe the difference between a “grape juice” love and a “fine wine” love.

To get your group members' “creative juices” flowing, throw out any or all of the following suggestions:

- *Grape juice is simple and obvious. It might even be considered immature.*
- *Grape juice is about immediate gratification.*
- *Wine is nuanced and complex.*
- *Wine involves a transformation.*
- *Wine is created organically, through a natural process.*
- *Wine cannot be rushed or given up on.*

3. If marriage is an adventure that couples are called to share in Christ, what's the best way to approach that adventure?

This question lends itself to some creative answers, so encourage couples to play around with the idea of an adventure. If no one else mentions them, you might suggest one or more of the following ideas:

- *Marriage should be approached with a sense of boldness and daring—the way adventurers in the movies face their exploits.*
- *Marriage should be approached with a never-say-die attitude.*
- *Marriage should be approached with a commitment to “follow the map” when necessary, but also a willingness to take a route less traveled when circumstances call for it.*
- *Marriage must be approached with a deference to Christ as the “adventure guide.”*

4. Agree or disagree: If you don't regularly experience conflict or challenge in your marriage, your relationship is not maturing at a healthy rate.

The question is intended to be a little provocative. If it raises a debate among small group members, let it play out (although you'll want to make sure the debate doesn't get too heated).

If you get a sense that most people in a group line up on one side of the issue, be prepared to play devil's advocate. On the one hand, you might point out that there are seasons of life. Some seasons bring more conflict, stress, and challenges than others. Therefore, a lack of challenging circumstances may not necessarily reflect poorly on the health of a relationship. On the other hand, a long-term pattern of avoiding conflict or denying emotions may signal that a relationship isn't stretching and maturing as God intends.

If time permits, quickly go through the questions one at a time and ask representatives from different small groups to share one or two of the responses they came up with. Give your group a chance to hear how other couples tackled the questions.

“The institution of marriage is not an undue interference by society or authority, nor the extrinsic imposition of a form. Rather it is an interior requirement of the covenant of conjugal love which is publicly affirmed as unique and exclusive, in order to live in complete fidelity to the plan of God, the Creator. A person's freedom, far from being restricted by this fidelity, is secured against every form of subjectivism or relativism and is made a sharer in creative Wisdom.”

— St. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* 11

STEP 5 COUPLE'S DISCUSSION

SAY: Now you'll have some time as individual couples to discuss how you two can deepen the bond of your own relationship and why this is important for your marriage.

Give your couples a chance to spread out around your meeting area. Each couple should be far enough away from everyone else to be able to talk privately. They'll find these questions in their Couple's Guides:

1. How do you and your spouse complement one another or balance each other out?

If you have time and the inclination, as the leader you might launch this question with an anecdote of your own, sharing briefly about how you and your spouse complement one another or balance each other out in your marriage. When you share about your own differences with a sense of humor, love, and grace, you provide couples with a positive example of how to embrace differences over time rather than find them reason to become disenchanted.

2. How does it change your outlook on your marriage to know that struggles and "wilderness experiences" are part of God's plan?

You might want to remind your group members of the point made in the video. That is, when some people experience difficulties in their relationship, they may be tempted to believe that they married the wrong person. In reality, if your spouse stretches you to grow in virtue and patience, you can rest assured that you married exactly the right person.

Knowing that God allows us to experience challenges in our marriage for a reason means we don't have to panic when they occur. We can look for God's hand in the situation and pray for his assistance.

3. What are two challenges or situations that God has used to deepen your marriage?

Recently married couples may not have experienced any serious trauma in their relationship. As a result, they may feel unqualified to answer this question. Emphasize that not all challenges are dramatic or tragic. Problems such as boredom and meddling in-laws can cause struggles in a marriage, as can...

- the loss of a loved one
- a job layoff
- fertility problems
- parenting issues
- infidelity
- an out-of-state move

You may find it worthwhile to ask the husband to identify one challenge and the wife to identify the second one. It might be instructive for them to discover what the other views as a challenge.

• How has your marriage stretched, grown, or matured as a result?

Some couples may have difficulty answering this question, especially if the experiences are still sore spots in their relationship. They may still be in the process of stretching and growing, and may not have the distance and perspective to assess the results accurately. If that's the case, have them consider how they would like their marriage to stretch, grow, or mature as a result of their wilderness experiences.

• How did your past challenges or situations prepare you for future challenges?

If you sense that couples are having difficulty answering this question, you might try a different approach and ask these questions instead:

- Do you believe the old saying that whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger?
- Do you believe that applies to relationships as well?
- If so, how did your wilderness experiences make your marriage stronger?

“Two such as you with such a master speed
 Cannot be parted nor be swept away
 From one another once you are agreed
 That life is only life forevermore
 Together wing to wing and oar to oar.”

—from “The Master Speed” by Robert Frost

STEP 6 WRAP-UP AND CLOSING PRAYER

SAY: The more knowledge we have of our spouse, the more powerfully we can express our love. The take-away from this session, then, is that we have the opportunity to spin our intimate knowledge into relationship gold. Turn to the Couple’s Guide on page 54 in your Guides.

Direct couples to the “Couple’s Activity” section of their Guides.

SAY: For your activity this week, spend some time creating a “bio sheet” for your spouse. Make a list of the things you’ve learned from your courtship and your years together as a married couple. Include your spouse’s likes, dislikes, noteworthy accomplishments, important events, talents and abilities, favorite songs, movies, tasty treats, relaxation spots. Then use this information to express love for your spouse in highly personal and meaningful ways. See how many times you can surprise and delight your spouse with a loving gesture this week.

SAY: Let’s close together in prayer.

Almighty God,

We praise you for the model of selfless, sacrificial love you demonstrated in your relationship with the Israelites. We thank you for the wilderness experiences that you use to deepen our relationships— for the challenges and dark times that ultimately produce maturity, appreciation, and fulfillment. Bless our efforts to understand those experiences, to survive and thrive in the midst of them.

Your Word tells us that we are fearfully and wonderfully made.

We give thanks to you for the opportunity...

- to examine the crowning work of your creation in our beloved every day,
- to study the intricacies of your design, and
- to use our knowledge of that design to express love to our beloved in a meaningful way.

Guide us as we work to plan a marriage that will honor you and reflect your grace for the rest of our lives.

We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.



SESSION 3

CONFLICT AND COMMUNICATION



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SESSION 3

CONFLICT AND COMMUNICATION



SESSION OVERVIEW

Conflict is inevitable in any relationship, but it doesn't have to be damaging or hurtful. In fact, if approached in the right way and handled well, conflict can actually be a healthy thing in a relationship. However, sometimes in a conflict, our perspective gets shifted from our spouse to the conflict itself. Instead of working together to address the situation, we work in opposition. The key to resolving conflict in a healthy manner is to address not only the conflict itself, but also the underlying factors that are causing it.

STEP 1 OPENING PRAYER

SAY: Welcome! We're glad you're here.
Before we get started, let's ask our heavenly Father to bless our time together.

Direct couples to the Opening Prayer in their Guides (page 58).

In Proverbs 27:17, we read, "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another."

Almighty Father, the conflicts that we resolve in our marriage sharpen us and make us keener instruments of your grace and glory. Bless our efforts to understand conflict better, to work through our conflicts together with our spouse in order to strengthen and deepen our understanding of one another. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.



STEP 2 INTRODUCTION

SAY: In Session 1, we talked about the importance of putting Christ at the center of our lives and at the center of our marriages. In Session 2, we discussed how to deepen our bond with our spouse through challenging situations and circumstances.

This would be a good place to ask volunteers to share their experiences from the take-home activity from the last session: creating a bio sheet for your spouse and then showing love in personal, thoughtful ways.

SAY: Does anyone have an experience to share about any surprises you planned for your spouse based on the bio sheet you created? Tell us briefly about how your surprises went over.

Lead by example if you'd like. Then encourage a few group members to briefly do the same. You don't want to spend a lot of time on the review.

SAY: In this session, we're going to talk about conflict: what it is, what causes it, and what we can do about it.

“And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”

—Mark 11:25

STEP 3 VIDEO

SAY: In this video segment, we're going to look at the common areas of conflict that most couples face. Then we'll pull back the curtains on those areas to see what's really behind them.

Play the video for Episode 3, which is approximately 24 minutes. Look for reactions during the video to get a sense of how people are connecting with the material.

Here is an outline of the video segment:

- I. Conflict causes us to shift our focus from our spouse to the conflict itself.
 - A. Instead of facing and fighting the conflict together, we fight our spouse.
 - B. Certain areas of conflict are more common than others in marital relationships.
 1. Money
 2. Sexuality
 3. Children
 4. Time spent apart as a result of work
 5. Chores and household responsibilities
 6. Our relationships with family and friends

- II. The cause of conflict is not always what it seems.
- A. We tend to see things the way we want to see them, causing us to overlook or misidentify certain conflicts.
 - B. In order to discover what's driving a conflict, we have to "lift the hood" of our marriage and look inside. Conflicts can be driven by...
 - 1. Fear
 - 2. Brokenness and woundedness
 - 3. Insecurity
 - 4. Shame
 - 5. Absence of forgiveness
 - C. Self-awareness is essential in identifying the driver of a conflict.
 - D. Once we discover what's driving our conflict, we can approach it together rather than letting it get between us.

STEP 4 SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

SAY: Now let's take some time in small groups to discuss what we learned in the video and how we can apply this to our daily lives.

Ask your couples to arrange themselves in small groups of 4–6 people. Encourage them to join up with couples they haven't partnered with before. Keep an eye on the clock here; make sure you leave plenty of time for couples to discuss the more intimate questions of Step 5.

Read the following questions aloud one at a time, giving the small groups time to answer each one. When you notice the discussion of one question starting to die down, move on to the next one.

If you feel comfortable interacting with the small groups while they work, you might inject one or more of the responses that follow each question into the discussion.

1. Of the top six areas of conflict—money, sexuality, children, work, household responsibilities, and family and friends—which one has caused you the least amount of trouble in your marriage? Explain.

You might want to break the ice here by answering this question (as well as the follow-up) first yourself. For example, you and your spouse may not have much conflict in the area of household responsibilities because you're both clean freaks who place a high priority on neatness.

• Which area of conflict has caused the most trouble?

If your most troublesome area is sexuality, addressing the topic in a sensitive yet straightforward manner will set the tone for couples in the group who also identify it as their most troublesome area.

2. What does it mean to "lift up the hood" on your relationship?

If no one else mentions it, suggest that it involves looking at the inner workings of your marriage—the way your personality interacts with your spouse's—to discover the root causes of your conflict. It means not settling for surface appearances where your marriage is concerned.

• **Why might some people be reluctant to “lift up the hood” of their relationship?**

Use any or all of the following suggestions to supplement your group members’ responses. These things might be difficult for them to admit out loud.

- They’re not sure what to look for.
- They’re afraid of finding a serious problem.
- They don’t have the motivation or energy to fix the potentially serious problem that may be under there.
- They prefer to maintain the illusion that everything is running smoothly.

3. What do you wish someone had told you about conflict before you got married?

Use any or all of the following suggestions to supplement your group members’ responses.

- Conflict is a normal part of any relationship.
- No one really “wins” a conflict.
- Being right is much less important than being kind.
- Some things can never be un-said.
- Never let a conflict extend past bedtime.

If time permits, quickly go through the questions one at a time and ask representatives from different small groups to share one or two of the responses they came up with. Give your group a chance to hear how other couples tackled the questions.

“The love of Christ can restore to spouses the joy of journeying together. This is what marriage is all about: man and woman walking together, wherein the husband helps his wife to become ever more a woman, and wherein the woman has the task of helping her husband to become ever more a man.”

—Pope Francis, Homily on June 14, 2014



Couple working out their bills at home in the kitchen
© wavebreakmedia / Shutterstock.com

STEP 5 COUPLE'S DISCUSSION

SAY: Now let's take some time for you as individual couples to discuss conflict and how you handle conflict in your relationship and why this is so important for your marriage.

Give your couples a chance to spread out around your meeting area. Each couple should be far enough away from everyone else to be able to talk privately. They'll find these questions in their Couple's Guides.

Help couples budget their time effectively and offer guidance and examples as suggested below, in whatever manner you see fit.

1. How have your conflict-resolution skills developed over the course of your marriage?

Talk briefly about how you and your spouse resolved conflict when you first started dating. Did one or both of you keep your annoyances and hurt feelings to yourself, for fear of hurting the relationship? Was there a lot of drama involved? Did it include a lot of crying, screaming, or hurling angry accusations at each other? How did that work out for you? How do you deal with conflict now?

Encourage spouses to talk about their own early experiences with conflict: the mistakes they made, as well as the things they learned about one another in the process. Ask them to consider why their conflict-resolution strategies have changed (if indeed they have changed).

2. How much more work do you have to do in refining your conflict-resolution skills?

Encourage openness and honesty on the part of both spouses here. If one feels satisfied that they have no more to learn about conflict resolution and the other believes they still have a lot to learn, both should feel free to express their opinions.

*“In an epoch marked by hatred, selfishness, the desire for false happiness, by the decadence of customs, the absence of father and mother figures, instability in numerous young families, and by widespread frailty and hardship to which many young people fall prey, we look to you, Jesus in the Eucharist, with renewed hope.”
—St. John Paul II, Message to the young people of Rome and Lazio, March 15, 2005*

STEP 6 WRAP-UP AND CLOSING PRAYER

SAY: The best time to talk about conflict is when we're not in the midst of it. Emotions run high when a conflict is in full bloom, clouding our judgment and reasoning abilities. This week, then, find a time when things are peaceful between the two of you to talk about the ways you work through conflict. From there, come to some agreement about the things that are and aren't okay in the midst of conflict. Turn to the Couple's Activity on page 60 in your Guides.

Direct couples to the "Couple's Activity" section of their Guides.

SAY: For your activity this week, your goal is to come up with a "Geneva Convention" for your relationship, a pact that's very loosely modeled on the well-known international protocols for armed conflict. The purpose of those Conventions is to prevent cruelty, and that's what our purpose is, too.

Spend some time this week talking about conflicts you've had in the past, how you handled them, and how they turned out. Talk about the things that bother you when you argue with your spouse. Talk about the things that hurt your feelings or push your buttons. Talk about the sensitive topics and issues that should never be used as ammunition during a conflict.

Draw up a list of resolutions based on your discussion—promises of things you will and will not do in the heat of conflict.

SAY: Let's close the session with the following words from Pope Francis and the Our Father:

"We all know there is no such thing as the perfect family or a perfect husband or wife. I won't even mention a perfect mother-in-law... It's us who do exist, sinners. Jesus knows us well and he tells us a secret: Never let the day end without apologizing."

—Pope Francis, to engaged couples on February 14, 2014

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen.

SESSION 4

BUILDING A THRIVING MARRIAGE

*Marriage
Enrichment*

Living Marriage

Beloved™



Nihil obstat: Derek Barr, Censor Deputatus

Imprimatur: Most Reverend Samuel J. Aquila, S.T.L., Archbishop of Denver

January 2015

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SESSION 4

BUILDING A THRIVING MARRIAGE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Marriage is a high calling, but we must not allow the ideal to become the enemy of the good. Instead, we must do the little things we can to keep moving closer to the ideal. We must be aware of ourselves, do the work that is necessary, find ways to be together, pursue virtue, and be patient with each other.

Woundedness presents a challenge to the ideal of marriage. A wound is an experience of unlove—one that can have far-reaching effects. The wound causes pain, which causes fear, which causes managing behaviors to avoid the pain. Woundedness must be countered with an authentic experience of love—a blessing from God or another person. The blessing triggers feelings of being loved, which trigger gratitude and security, which trigger expressions of love.

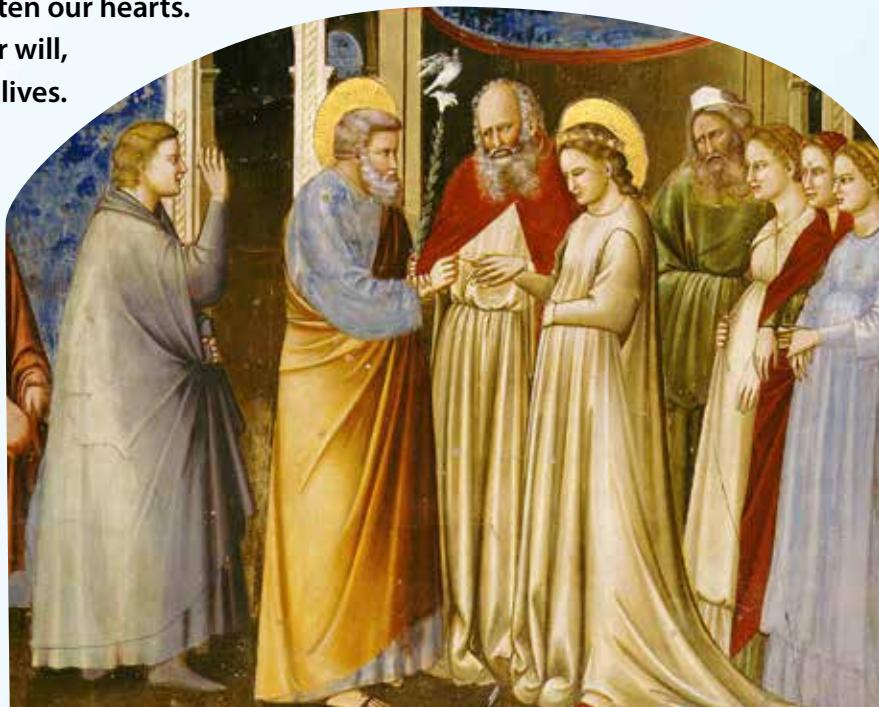
STEP 1 OPENING PRAYER

SAY: Welcome! We're glad you're here.
Let's begin with a word of prayer.

Direct couples to the Opening Prayer (adapted from the prayer that was offered before every session of the Second Vatican Council) in their Couple's Guides (page 64).

**We stand before you, Holy Spirit, gathered in your name.
Come to us, remain with us, and enlighten our hearts.
Give us light and strength to know your will,
to make it our own, and to live it in our lives.**

**Guide us by your wisdom, support us
by your power, for you are God,
sharing the glory of Father and Son.
Unite us to yourself in the bond of love,
and keep us faithful to all that is true.
You live and reign with
the Father and the Son, one God,
for ever and ever. Amen.**



STEP 2 INTRODUCTION

SAY: In Session 3, we talked about the causes of conflict as well as strategies for dealing with them. Your assignment was to draw up a “Geneva Convention” type of agreement for conflict. Would any couples like to briefly share about their experience?

Share about your experience and encourage a few group members to do the same. You don’t want to spend a lot of time on the review.

SAY: In this session, we’re going to talk about healing wounds, pursuing virtue, and experiencing love as God intends.

STEP 3 VIDEO

SAY: This video segment discusses pursuing God’s ideal for your marriage.

Play the video for Episode 4, which will last for approximately 25 minutes. Look for reactions during the video to get a sense of how people are connecting with the material.

Here is an outline of the video segment:

- I. Marriage is about mirroring God’s love.
 - A. We must not let the ideal become the enemy of the good.
 - B. There are five things couples can do to pursue the ideal.
 1. Be aware of yourself.
 - a. Invite feedback from your spouse.
 - b. Pursue awareness through prayer and your relationship with God.
 2. Do the work.
 - a. Use the tools and resources available to you.
 - b. Make a plan with a strategy and follow through.
 3. Be together.
 - a. Set aside time to share your hearts with one another.
 - b. Plan a weekly date night.
 4. Pursue virtue.
 - a. Marriage is a virtuous friendship—two people coming together for a common goal.
 - b. Pursuing virtue involves a learning process; occasional failures are to be expected.
 5. Be patient with each other.
 - a. It takes time to grow in an area of virtue.
 - b. If you get discouraged with the process, you may become disillusioned with your relationship.
- II. Woundedness can prevent us from expressing and experiencing love as God intends.
 - A. A wound is an experience of unlove.
 1. The wound gets surrounded by pain.
 2. The pain gets surrounded by fear.
 3. The fear gets surrounded by managing behaviors.
 - B. The remedy for woundedness is an experience of love—an authentic blessing from God or another person.
 1. The blessing gets surrounded by the feeling of being loved.
 2. The feeling of being loved gets surrounded by gratitude and security.
 3. Gratitude and security get transformed into expressions of love.

“Love is the prime gift. Whatever else is freely given to us becomes a gift only through love.”

—anonymous by Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*

STEP 4 SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

SAY: Now let’s take some time in small groups to discuss what we learned in the video and how we can apply this to our daily lives.

Ask your couples to arrange themselves in small groups of 4–6 people. Encourage them to join up with couples they haven’t partnered with before. Keep an eye on the clock here; make sure you leave plenty of time for couples to discuss the more intimate questions of Step 5.

Read the following questions aloud one at a time, giving the small groups time to answer each one. When you notice the discussion of one question starting to die down, move on to the next one.

If you feel comfortable interacting with the small groups while they work, you might inject one or more of the responses that follow each question into the discussion.

1. What’s the most impressive thing you’ve ever accomplished? Explain.

Give your group members a chance to humble-brag on themselves. Among the accomplishments people might mention:

- *building a start-up company into a successful venture*
- *taking care of a sick or injured loved one*
- *winning a talent competition*
- *graduating with honors from a prestigious school*
- *winning a state championship*
- *overcoming a learning disability*

Perceptive group members will likely mention their marriage as one of their most impressive accomplishments. If not, broach the topic yourself with a follow-up question.

• Where does your marriage rank among your most impressive achievements? Explain.

Emphasize that this isn’t intended to be a “Gotcha!” follow-up question. You’re not trying to embarrass spouses who failed to mention their marriage as an accomplishment. Instead you’re trying to determine whether your group members see marriage as something to be worked at—or whether they categorize it as something that comes naturally.

2. Of the five things spouses can do to pursue God’s ideal for their relationship—be aware of yourself, do the work, be together, pursue virtue, and be patient—which one would you say is most difficult? Explain.

You may want to point out that each task presents its own challenges.

- *Becoming aware of yourself opens the possibility of discovering things about yourself that you didn’t really want to know.*
- *Doing the work of marriage requires time and energy, things that are in short supply in an average week.*
- *Being together requires vulnerability, which is risky.*
- *Pursuing virtue involves sacrificing some of your own priorities in order to work toward a common goal with your spouse.*
- *Being patient with each other requires a positive, forward-thinking attitude, even in the midst of disappointment and setbacks.*

3. Describe a relationship you’ve seen struggle because of woundedness.

By posing the question in a third-person context—that is, with your couples as observers of another relationship—you give group members the freedom to talk about the effects of woundedness without making them feel as though they’re revealing things about themselves.

Encourage group members to protect the anonymity of the couples they talk about, to shy away from personal (or lurid) details that might make their stories recognizable.

If time permits, quickly go through the questions one at a time and ask representatives from different small groups to share one or two of the responses they came up with. Give your group a chance to hear how other couples tackled the questions.

“May you be torches that burn in the middle of the world: where there is a night of unbelief, may the light of your faith cast a strong light; where there is the soot of hatred and despair, may the glow of your optimism and hope shine in; where there is the darkness of selfishness and violence, let the fire of your love burn bright.”

—St. John Paul II, Speech to Youth, Imola, Italy, May 9, 1986

STEP 5 COUPLE'S DISCUSSION

SAY: Now let's take some time for you as individual couples to discuss the ideas in the video.

Give your couples a chance to spread out around your meeting area. Each couple should be far enough away from everyone else to be able to talk privately. They'll find the questions in their Couple's Guides.

Help couples budget their time effectively and offer guidance and examples as suggested below, in whatever manner you see fit.

1. What would happen to your marriage if you became more aware of yourselves, did the work of marriage, made a point of being together more, pursued virtue more passionately, and learned to be more patient with each other? How good could you be together? What might be some of the results?

Encourage couples to set their aim high here. Consider giving your own example about what might change in your marriage if you devoted more time and energy to working on it, such as...

- learning to accept and embrace quirks that used to be annoyances,
- communicating on a deeper level than you ever imagined possible,
- finding healing for hurts that you've experienced for years, and
- becoming mentors to other couples.

2. What impact has woundedness—that is, past experiences of “unlove”—had on your marriage?

This question, if properly tackled by couples, will take them out of their comfort zones. Some spouses may talk about their own woundedness and how it affects the way they give and receive love. Others may talk about the woundedness they see in their spouse and talk about the challenges it presents when it comes to expressing love.

Encourage spouses to express their feelings openly, but in a non-accusing way. The goal here is not to lay blame at someone's feet; rather, it is to identify the obstacles and challenges that both spouses must work through—together—in order to draw closer to God's ideal for their marriage.



STEP 6 WRAP-UP AND CLOSING PRAYER

SAY: Marriage is the most important job we'll ever have. It deserves at least the same amount of time, planning, strategizing, and attention to detail that we give to our career or our education. Yet the work of marriage tends to get pushed aside in favor of more "pressing" things. Turn to the Couple's Activity on page 66 in your Guides.

Direct couples to the "Couple's Activity" section of their Guides.

This week we're going to put marriage front and center. Set aside some time this week to make a "to-do list" for your marriage—specific things you want to do in order to draw closer to your spouse. After you've made your list, put each item on your calendar so that it doesn't get lost in the busyness of daily life. Give the work of marriage the priority it deserves.

SAY: Let's wrap up the session by recalling the beautiful words of St. John Paul II that were quoted in the video segment and with our closing prayer:

"The family finds in the plan of God the Creator and Redeemer not only its identity, what it is, but also its mission, what it can and should do....Each family finds within itself a summons that cannot be ignored and that specifies both its dignity and its responsibility. Family, become what you are."

—St. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* 17

SAY: Let's close in prayer.

Go with us, Father, as we depart from here. Bless our efforts to build relationships that approach your ideal. Work in our hearts and in our minds to refine us and make us better instruments of your grace.

Amen.

"It is risky to get married: it is risky! It is this egoism which threatens it, because we each have within us this possibility of a dual personality: the one that says, 'I am free, I want this ...' and the other which says, 'I, me, to me, with me, for me ...'"

—Pope Francis, meeting with the young people of Umbria,
October 4, 2013

SESSION 5

PROTECTING THE BOND



*Marriage
Enrichment*

Living Marriage

Beloved™



Nihil obstat: Derek Barr, Censor Deputatus

Imprimatur: Most Reverend Samuel J. Aquila, S.T.L., Archbishop of Denver

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SESSION 5

PROTECTING THE BOND



SESSION OVERVIEW

God desires for us a marital relationship that grows in love, grows in trust, grows in unity, and grows in closeness. Circumstances, however, can conspire to prevent such growth from occurring. The pursuit of things outside the home—or things outside the interests of the family—such as social media, career advancement, or just having a good time, can rob a marital relationship of its potential. In this session, we'll discover how to protect the bond with help from the Holy Spirit.

STEP 1 OPENING PRAYER

SAY: Welcome! We're glad you're here.
Before we get started, let's pray.

Direct couples to the Opening Prayer in their Couple's Guides (page 70).

Our Father in heaven, we ask for your blessing and help as we are gathered together. We pray for guidance in the matters of marriage and ask that you would clearly show us how to seek your ideal with a spirit of joy and enthusiasm. Give us the desire to find ways to excel in our relationships. Help us to work together and encourage each other to excellence. We ask that we would challenge each other to reach higher and further to be the best spouses—and vessels of your grace—that we can be.

Amen.



STEP 2 INTRODUCTION

SAY: In Session 4, we talked about pursuing virtue in our marriages, which includes doing all the little things that make marriage work. Your take-home assignment was to create a to-do list for your marriage, so you could specifically put your marriage front and center. Would any couples like to briefly share about their experience?

If you and your spouse made a to-do list for your marriage, you may want to talk briefly about some of the things you listed and why. Then encourage a few group members to do the same. Guide the conversation so it doesn't last more than a few minutes.

SAY: In this session, we're going to talk about protecting the bond of marriage from potentially harmful outside influences—things that we often unwittingly allow to drive a wedge between us.

STEP 3 VIDEO

SAY: In this episode, we're going to look at how to prevent damaging influences from creeping into our marriages.

Play the video for Episode 5, which will last for approximately 22 minutes. Look for reactions during the video to get a sense of how people are connecting with the material.

Here is an outline of the video segment:

- I. Many different challenges can keep us from growing in our relationship.
 - A. If those challenges aren't addressed, they can cause spouses to live parallel lives, never really connecting with one another.
 - B. The idea of living parallel lives runs counter to God's intention.
 1. He wants us to grow in love.
 2. He wants us to grow in trust.
 3. He wants us to grow in unity.
 4. He wants us to grow in closeness.
- II. We must not allow pursuits outside of the home to cause divisions within the home.
 - A. Many good Christians pour their hearts into advancing their careers and striving for personal success.
 1. They fail to ask, "How can I strive for my spouse's needs?"
 2. They fail to ask, "What do my kids need from me right now?"
 - B. That imbalance must be corrected if the marriage is to thrive as God intends.
 - C. We need to keep boundaries to protect the covenant of marriage and the love God wants us to have in our marriages. These things can divide us:
 1. Letting technology overtake our lives
 2. Developing close friendships and emotional attachments with the opposite sex
 3. Idealizing others
 4. Not guarding our eyes and thoughts from things that aren't good for our souls
- III. Our marriages are worth fighting for. Say yes to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

“A good wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.”
—Proverbs 31:10-12

STEP 4 SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

SAY: Now let’s take some time in small groups to discuss what we learned in the video and how we can apply this to our daily lives.

Ask your couples to arrange themselves in small groups of 4–6 people. Encourage them to join up with couples they haven’t partnered with before. Keep an eye on the clock here; make sure you leave plenty of time for couples to discuss the more intimate questions of Step 5.

Read the following questions aloud one at a time, giving the small groups time to answer each one. When you notice the discussion of one question starting to die down, move on to the next one.

If you feel comfortable interacting with the small groups while they work, you might inject one or more of the responses that follow each question into the discussion.

1. Explain how a married couple could go from the intimacy of their early days to living parallel lives, as described in the video. Have you seen this happen to any couple that you know?

If no one else suggests it, point out that the process generally occurs gradually. A selfish choice here and a thoughtless move there can have a cumulative effect. The busyness of daily life and raising children conspires against couples trying to grow in closeness and unity.

2. Think about the description in the video of the family in the airport focusing on their individual phones and personal devices and not talking to one another. How close to home did this description hit? What are some of the challenges that you face in this area?

You can break the ice here by admitting how close to home it hit for you. If applicable, share an experience when you noticed that you and your spouse (or you and your family) were in the same physical location but in different worlds, thanks to your personal devices.

3. Gale Sayers called his book *I Am Third*. What are some of the challenges and drawbacks to making that title a reality in your own life?

If no one else mentions it, point out that putting God first, your marriage and family second, and yourself third can...

- *have a negative impact on your career,*
- *put a strain on some of your friendships,*
- *cut into your workout time,*
- *greatly reduce your social media presence, and*
- *mean not getting to do some of the things that you would like.*

If time permits, quickly go through the questions one at a time and ask representatives from different small groups to share one or two of the responses they came up with. Give your group a chance to hear how other couples tackled the questions.

“The human person is a special gift of the Creator and the Redeemer together. Indeed to be a bridegroom is to be aware of the gift. This awareness creates a new mentality, a new attitude, a new behavior when we see the gift in the works of creation and above all in people.”

*—St. John Paul II, Speech to Youth of Civitavecchia, Italy,
March 19, 1987*



STEP 5 COUPLE'S DISCUSSION

SAY: Now let's take some time for you as individual couples to discuss how you can make protect the bond of your relationship and why this is so important for your marriage.

Give your couples a chance to spread out around your meeting area. Each couple should be far enough away from everyone else to be able to talk privately. They'll find the questions in their Couple's Guides.

Help couples budget their time effectively and offer guidance and examples as suggested below, in whatever manner you see fit.

1. Create some visuals. In the first circle, make a pie chart that represents the way you spend your time during your waking hours. In the second circle, make a pie chart that represents the way your spouse spends his or her waking hours. Use any or all of the following categories for your charts:

- **Marriage/Family**
- **Career**
- **Church**
- **Personal-Devices (Internet, social media, online games, messaging)**
- **Hanging Out with Friends**
- **Sports/Workouts**
- **Hobbies**
- **Watching TV**
- **Any other categories that apply**

Emphasize that the concept of "multitasking" should have no place on these pie charts. For example, Personal Device Time cannot be called Marriage/Family Time simply because it takes place at home. The rule is, if you're looking at or even just holding a personal device, it counts as Personal Device Time because the device is holding your attention.

Encourage couples to heed St. Paul's exhortation to "speak the truth in love" with their answers. They are not trying to hurt their spouse, but they are trying to shine a spotlight on things that they see creeping into their marriage.

A little transparency from you would go a long way toward putting your group members at ease. You don't necessarily have to share a completed pie chart with the group, but you can reveal an area that occupies too large of a slice on your chart and share your feelings about it.

2. Working together and with input from your spouse, draw a pie chart that represents a reasonable, more marriage-friendly way of spending your waking hours.

Encourage spouses to be reasonable in their strategies. Their goal is to come up with workable adjustments to their schedules. Eliminating Personal Device Time completely, for example, is probably not a workable solution. Making sure that it occupies no more than, say, a half hour each night maybe.

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

—1 Corinthians 13:1-3

STEP 6 WRAP-UP AND CLOSING PRAYER

SAY: Now that you’ve identified the primary distractions that are creeping into your marriage, it’s time to do something about them. Turn to the Couple’s Guide on page 73 in your Guides.

Direct couples to the “Couple’s Activity” section of their Guides.

This week, choose the number-one area of concern, based on your pie charts, and work on a strategy for combating it. For example, many of us will likely admit that Personal Device Time is an issue that must be dealt with. If that’s the distraction, you’re going to ask yourselves two questions this week: “How much has Personal Device Time [or your other primary distraction] infiltrated our relationship?” and “What are we going to do about it?”

SAY: Let’s close the session with the following prayer, asking for God’s help:

Our Father, may everything we do begin with your inspiration,
continue with your help,
and reach perfection under your guidance.
With your loving care, guide us in our daily actions.
Help us to persevere with love and sincerity.
Teach us to judge wisely the things of earth
and to love the things of heaven.

Amen.

SESSION 6

SEXUALITY AND AUTHENTIC LOVE



*Marriage
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Nihil obstat: Derek Barr, Censor Deputatus

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January 2015

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SESSION 6

SEXUALITY AND AUTHENTIC LOVE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Sexual intimacy, as intended by God, is unitive—a total gift of self, holding nothing back. It is more than just a biological union; it is a union of body, soul, and emotions. Sexual intimacy is also procreative. In the act of sex, spouses must always be open to the possibility of creating new human life. If the unitive or procreative dimension of sex is thwarted, genuine intimacy cannot occur. As we will see, the Church’s teachings on sex are not a “no” to this or a “no” that, but actually a “yes” to authentic love—the love that we are all ultimately looking for.

STEP 1 OPENING PRAYER

SAY: Welcome! We’re glad you’re here.
Before we get started, let’s pray.

Direct couples to the Opening Prayer in their Couple’s Guides (page 76).

Almighty God,

**We gather today to answer the call of St. Paul
to present our bodies as living sacrifices,
holy and acceptable to you.**

**Open our hearts to the wisdom of
your plan for marital intimacy.**

**Transform us by the renewal of our minds
so that we may prove what is good
and acceptable and perfect to you.**

Amen.



STEP 2 INTRODUCTION

SAY: In Session 5, we talked about protecting the bond of marriage from outside influences. Your take-home assignment was to make plans to take down the biggest current threat to your marriage. Let's talk about that for just a couple minutes.

If you and your spouse did the exercise from Session 5, talk briefly about a couple of the strategies you brainstormed. Then encourage a few group members to briefly share their experience with the activity. You don't want to spend a lot of time on the review.

SAY: In this session, we're going to talk about sex—specifically, God's plan for marital intimacy. And we're going to start by watching a thought-provoking video on the subject.

STEP 3 VIDEO

Play the video for Episode 6, which will last for approximately 25 minutes. Look for reactions during the video to get a sense of how people are connecting with the material.

Here is an outline of the video segment:

- I. Sex has everything to do with marriage.
 - A. The two cannot be separated.
 - B. Sex is the fullest expression of marital love.

- II. Marriage is the intimate union of man and woman—a total gift of self from one to the other, holding nothing back.
 - A. Genuine sexual intimacy is unitive.
 1. It is more than a biological union.
 2. It is a union in totality, involving body, soul, and emotions.
 - B. Genuine sexual intimacy is procreative.
 1. It must always be open to the possibility of creating new human life.
 2. It makes us co-creators with God.

- III. To thwart the unitive or procreative aspects of sex is to pervert the act.
 - A. Premarital sex thwarts the unitive aspect of intimacy—and often the procreative aspect as well.
 - B. Masturbation and pornography thwart the unitive and procreative aspects.
 - C. Homosexual acts thwart the procreative aspect.
 - D. Contraception thwarts the procreative aspect—and often the unitive aspect as well.
 1. It says to your spouse, "I love everything about you except for your fertility."
 2. Natural family planning—using the woman's natural infertility cycle to regulate procreation—is a better option.

“I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”
—Romans 12:1-2

STEP 4 SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

SAY: Now let’s take some time in small groups to discuss what we learned in the video and how we can apply this to our daily lives.

Ask your couples to arrange themselves in small groups of 4–6 people. Encourage them to join up with couples they haven’t partnered with before. Keep an eye on the clock here; make sure you leave plenty of time for couples to discuss the more intimate questions of Step 5.

Read the following questions aloud one at a time, giving the small groups time to answer each one. When you notice the discussion of one question starting to die down, move on to the next one.

If you feel comfortable interacting with the small groups while they work, you might inject one or more of the responses that follow each question into the discussion.

1. Catholic author Frank Sheed said, “Modern man practically never *thinks* about sex.” Why is it important for us, as married couples, to *think about* the true meaning of sex?

- *To think about sex is to consider God’s plan for intimacy before we engage in it.*
- *To think about sex is to examine our own motives and feelings in order to make sure that they are purely loving.*
- *To think about sex is to ask, “How can I give myself more fully to my spouse?”*

2. God reveals to us the true meaning of sex. How is God’s plan for sexuality good news—a “yes” to the fullest expression of intimacy and love?

- *God’s plan for sex reveals that sex is meant for a total self-gift between spouses.*
- *God and the Church are not down on sex, but show us how God’s plan for sex fulfills our deepest longings.*
- *When spouses engage in sex as God intends, they fully embrace and accept the other and there is no use of the other person just for sexual pleasure.*

3. What are some of the benefits a marital relationship might experience when the couple fully embraces God's plan for sex?

- *Better communication*
- *Increased generosity toward the other*
- *Deeper vulnerability*
- *More intense emotional bonding*
- *A more profound understanding of the Sacrament of Marriage*
- *An openness to the possibility of creating new human life*
- *A greater understanding of the other*
- *The ability to recognize the distorted nature of our culture's ideas about sex*

If time permits, quickly go through the questions one at a time and ask representatives from different small groups to share one or two of the responses they came up with. Give your group a chance to hear how other couples tackled the questions.

“Seeing God’s covenant with Israel in the image of exclusive and faithful married love, the prophets prepared the Chosen People’s conscience for a deepened understanding of the unity and indissolubility of marriage... Tradition has always seen in the Song of Solomon a unique expression of human love, insofar as it is a reflection of God’s love—a love ‘strong as death’ that ‘many waters cannot quench.’”

—CCC 1611



STEP 5 COUPLE'S DISCUSSION

SAY: Now let's take some time for you as individual couples to discuss sexual intimacy and why it is so important in your marriage.

Give your couples a chance to spread out around your meeting area. Each couple should be far enough away from everyone else to be able to talk privately.

Help couples budget their time effectively and offer guidance and examples as suggested below, in whatever manner you see fit.

1. How has your sexual intimacy changed from your honeymoon until now?

Ask your couples not to say, "It's gotten worse" or "It's gotten better." Instead, encourage them to identify specific attitudes or approaches to sex that have evolved over time. You might offer one or more of the following examples:

- *"We used to have sex whenever the urge struck us; now we put more thought and planning into our intimacy."*
- *"As our family has grown, we've relied more heavily on scheduling our intimate encounters during periods of infertility."*
- *"Little habits have started to creep into our relationship that rob us of some of our intimacy."*

2. Take an honest look at your sexual relationship and all that you have learned today about God's plan for sex. Then, have each of you identify one or two things that would help improve your sexual intimacy. (For example, better communication, increased vulnerability, deeper emotional bond, etc.)

Emphasize that there are no "right" answers to this question, only honest assessments. If you want to offer options to spur your couples' thinking, read the following bulleted points:

- *One might have the desire for more communication about sexual intimacy.*
- *Another might desire a deeper emotional bond during sex.*
- *A couple might say they need to make sure their sexual desires don't become self-centered or overwhelm their love for one another.*
- *Others might decide to refrain from using contraception so that their sexual intimacy is truly a self-gift.*

*"In destroying the power of giving life through contraception, a husband and wife are doing something to self. This turns attention to self, and so it destroys the gift of love in him or her."
—Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, Speech at the U.S. National Prayer Breakfast on February 3, 1984*

STEP 6 WRAP-UP AND CLOSING PRAYER

SAY: We face a dilemma when it comes to sex. On the one hand, God invites us to enjoy the fullness of his gift of intimacy. He wants us to offer ourselves totally to our spouses, holding nothing back. He wants us to embrace the unitive and procreative aspects of sex. On the other hand, the culture that surrounds us does everything it can to devalue and distort God's gift, to promote it as something that it's not intended to be. If we allow ourselves to get caught in the middle of these two perspectives, it can create obstacles to our intimacy. Turn to the Couple's Activity on page 78 in your Guides.

Direct couples to the "Couple's Activity" section of their Guides.

Your job as a couple this week is to each identify one obstacle—or one potential obstacle—to living out God's plan for sexual intimacy in your marriage. It may be an issue with pornography or having recourse to contraception or sterilization, a reluctance to embrace natural family planning, or something else entirely. Whatever it is, don't tell your spouse the obstacle you identified until you come together to talk about it.

After you reveal your choices to one another, spend some time working through the obstacles. Talk about the specific problems they cause and then brainstorm some workable solutions for removing them.

SAY: Let's close the session by praying the Collect for Purity.

O God, the King eternal, whose light divides the day from the night and turns the shadow of death into the morning: Drive far from us all wrong desires, incline our hearts to keep your law, and guide our feet into the way of peace; that, having done your will with cheerfulness during the day, we may, when night comes, rejoice to give you thanks; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

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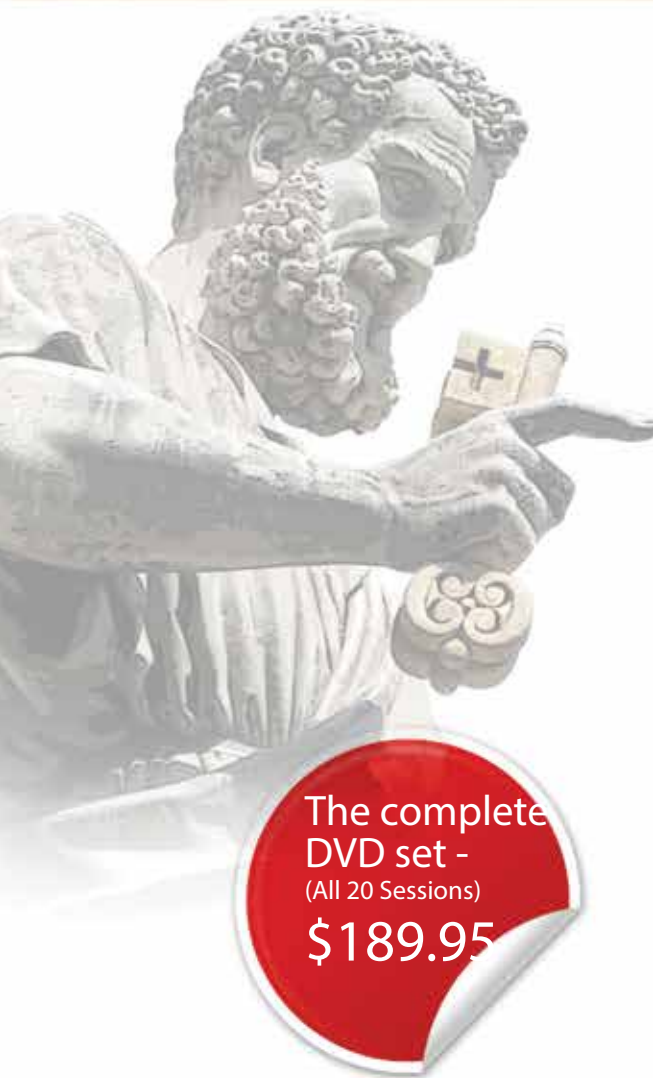
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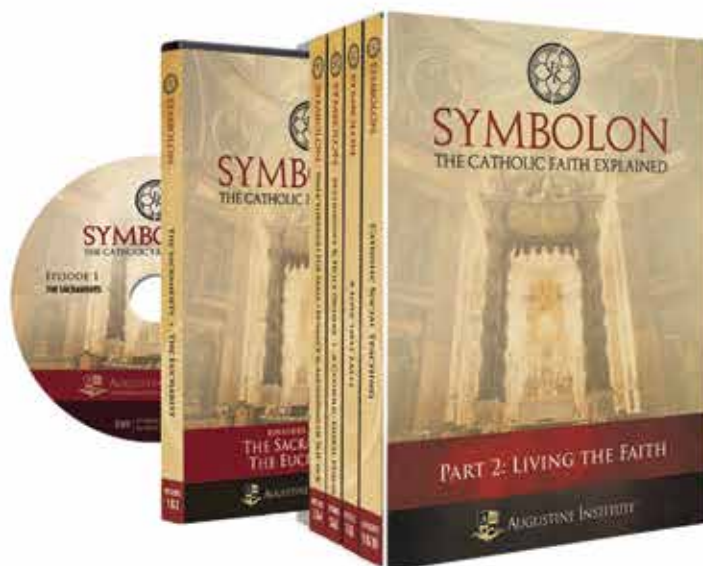
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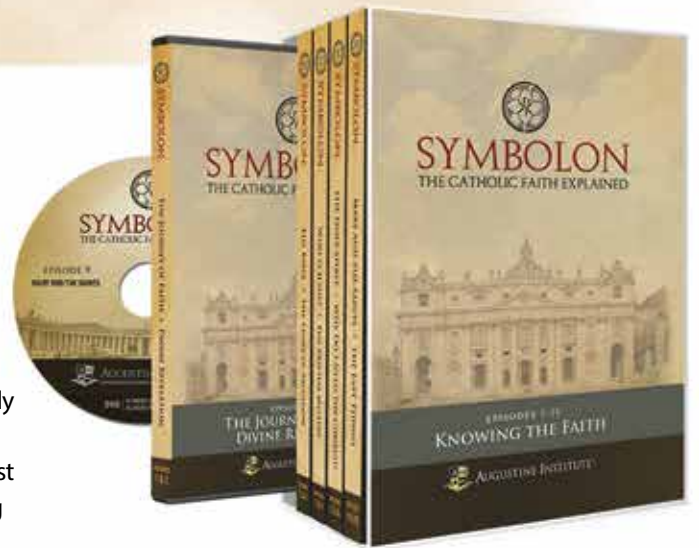
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