

Let “Us”

# Pray

**the two of us and the Lord**

Fr. Chuck Gallagher, S.J.



a Living in Love  
companion book



A Living in Love Companion Booklet

**LET “US” PRAY**

**BY**

**FR. CHUCK GALLAGHER, S.J.**

The Two Of Us And The Lord

PASTORAL AND MATRIMONIAL RENEWAL CENTER



## DEDICATION

To Ann and Tom who open themselves to the Lord and one  
another with such joy and enthusiasm.

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## PRAY AS “US”

In all areas of a couple's life, it is absolutely essential to pray maritally. A husband/wife is not a single person, they are two in one flesh. Prayer should not be a private individual experience for a couple. They belong to one another. Their identity is as lover and beloved. That is the way they should appear before our Father. God is not individual and isolated. The Trinity is not a divine committee, made up of three separate entities. There are three persons but one God. God's very identity is the love relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit. Each is totally personally present and responsive to one another. He is persons in relationship. We have no possibility of understanding the true divine nature, when we approach God as separate individuals. That is one reason the name “Father” is so significant. We cannot think of Father without Son. In the very way we address God, we are reminded that love relationship is the very meaning and essence of the divine existence.

The Matrimonied couple is to present themselves to our Father in the same fashion. They are persons in a love relationship. They define themselves in, with, and through their love for one another. This is not a reduction of their personhood any more than the divine interaction diminishes God, but an expansion. Their love brings out the full dimensions of their personhood in a way all other expressions of their talents and personalities cannot. Being the focus of the other's love gives the person a sense of self beyond anything they could ever achieve on their own. We really cheat ourselves and deny the Father's plan, when we go to Him apart from our couple identity.

When we talk about praying as “us,” we are referring to the awareness of the wife/husband relationship. The subject of the conversation with our Father is not always directly marital. They have many things to talk over with our Father. They should always have a marital mind set, though, in whatever matters they discuss. This is true in all areas of their lives - as parents, sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, friends, or employees. They wear all those hats. They have all those responsibilities, but they are to deal with them as a couple, not as individuals. It is as husband and wife that they

are parents, members of a family, friends, and so forth. When they talk and listen to our Father about these other people in their lives, it must always be in the conscious context of their love and devotion to one another.

So when we go in prayer to our Father, we should reach out to Him with the full consciousness that He has joined us together and wants us to interact with Him as the chosen and the beloved of this glorious man, this wonderful woman. Being chosen is very important. It is, of course, of great value in our own married relationship. How affirming to realize she/he wants me, when they could have chosen so many others. That is most uplifting; isn't it?

But there is another facet, even more important. God has chosen us to be members of the Body of His Son. That touches us to the heart and then frightens us off. When we think it over, we are not all that sure we want to be chosen. We think we'd rather be normal, free. Furthermore, it doesn't seem very democratic. Why were we chosen and not others? When couples exalt in being chosen, it models to us how we are to react to the Father's choice of us. There is nothing to fear. We are not restricted in our freedom but expanded in our potential. Couples in love with one another don't think about what they can't do now that they are married, but how wonderful it is to be married. They certainly don't get upset that their choice of one another is not democratic. They know their love of each other makes them better for others. The same is true with the Father's special love for us.

Being chosen and being the married beloved of my spouse has to sink into us with total meaning in anticipation of our prayer. It is not enough to have an intellectual recognition of my married state. I have to let the awesomeness of our belonging to one another take me over. I am not just me any longer. I am one of us. That changes my whole self perception, my whole meaning, to me and to others.

When I pray, it is as lover and beloved, not as unattached person. This might seem to imply that people not married are in a lesser position with our Father. Not at all. All of us are in love relationships. There is no such thing as a single person. We are all sons, daughters, nieces, uncles, cousins, friends. When any of us

appear as a single before God, we are not expressing to Him who we are. Each of us is called to belong and find our identity in that very belonging. For the matrimonied, their prime identity is their love for one another.

Before we begin our approach to our Father, we should very deliberately and consciously bring our relationship with our spouse to the forefront of our consciousness. We should continue that throughout our time of prayer. In other words, I should very explicitly remind myself I am a wife/husband and be interacting with God specifically in those terms. The subject matter of my communication with God may not be about our marriage but I must be overtly marital, always, especially with our Father. Otherwise, I am not my real self.

That can sometimes cause an objection. We want a core identity that is myself, separate, just me. Yes, our marriage is important; we couldn't conceive of ourselves as not married. Our marriage is so intimate, we realize we have been strongly, personally influenced, even in ways beyond our understanding. We still, however, see a part of ourselves as our own. There is the belief that ultimately, "I am me." That is an American dogma absolutely imposed for our unquestioning acceptance. There is complete certitude that without this ultimate "me-ness" I would be a dependent personality or, at the very least, be missing so much, be taken advantage of, or used.

Another look at that certitude is needed. We are becoming more and more aware that genetics play such a large role in our lives. First, our health, stamina, strength, stature, weight, intelligence, etc. are a rich endowment given us by our parents and their parents, etc., etc. So it is false to say, "I'm my own man, I'm my own woman." I have to learn to recognize the genetic endowment I have received. I am an expression of my parents and my ancestors. We can shrug that off by saying it is merely physiological, the real me is my soul, but there is no dichotomy between body and soul. Just my soul is not me nor is just my body. The beautiful bonding of body and soul is who I am. So, anything about my body is about me. Secondly, this dowry I have been handed genetically has had a vital impact on my life. My looks, for example, have had an influence on my job and how far I have gotten.

Studies show good looks do make a difference. In the case of my brains, obviously it strongly conditions what interests me, my education, standard of living. Stamina, also, has a say in the type of life I live and what I accomplish. How long I live and how well I live is jump started by my parents and their parents.

This is also true personally and not merely physically. I have received from my family a love endowment enabling me to love. My capability to express and receive love is definitely not my own personal accomplishment. It is an outgrowth of the affection I received in my home. My attitudes toward men, women, and marriage, toward children and their desirability, come most of all from what I witnessed in my mother and father. Attitudes about sex and sexuality, above all, were poured into me. My value system, religious beliefs, ambitions, were strongly formed.

Without those influences from my parents, I wouldn't be me at all. I would be a completely different person. I may not make the same decisions, all the time, as my parents; my standard of living might be quite a bit different; my style might not be theirs, but I am theirs. We forget that at our peril. While all this is so true, and intellectually we accept it, there is a grinding in us at the thought. We would much prefer to be able to release ourselves from our genetic and attitudinal endowment.

Our marriage is incredibly formative and empowering when it comes to our very being. In any good marriage, we become more and more part of one another as the years of our love accumulate. We take on each other's thoughts, hopes, and dreams. We even take on each other's gestures and facial characteristics. Haven't you noticed elderly couples, who have grown to look like one another. Part of this is the natural shrinkage of old age but it is more than that. They have taken on each other's frown and smile lines. The same blending takes place internally. After the intimate conversations and observations of so many years together, they have lost sight of whose idea or plan it really was; now, it is theirs.

That is wonderful, the way it ought to be. That does not make either the wife or husband less themselves but so much more than they could ever hope to be individually. We are not isolated individuals. We are the living, breathing expression of the loves which

have formed us. We are not solely persons; we are persons in relationship.

So we should always approach our Father as an expression of the relationship to which He has called us. This does not demand that we never pray physically alone, but it does insist we always come to Him as spouse. That is who we truly are . Such is our identity. It doesn't depend on the topic of our prayer. We can be talking about anything: a problem with the boss, our headache, what's going on in the parish, something about my mother which is upsetting me, money worries. These things might not necessarily be directly connected with my marriage but I am and our Father wants to deal with me rather than my problem or issue. He cannot deal with the real and whole me when I come alone. I need to pray, wrapped in the mantle of the love He has given me, my spouse.

It doesn't make any difference whether we are in good humor with our spouse at this particular time. That does not excuse leaving my marriage aside. In fact, that is precisely what most needs to be addressed in our prayer. While it may be human and understandable to have times of not feeling very close to my wife/husband, it is not the way the Lord wants us to be. When in a snit, we are lonely and unhappy. Our Father yearns for our peace. So we have to restore our beloved to our hearts, as we pray. No other subject is worth praying about until we belong again.

A more likely scenario in prayer is taking our marriage for granted. We don't even think about it, unless the topic is directly marital. So, in ordinary day-to-day prayer, we go as ourselves, that is, the self alone. There is generally no overt rejection of the spouse; we just don't refer at all to him/her. I'm praying. It's a separate thing. But, the Lord doesn't want a separate relationship with us. He wants to be an intimate part of our intimacy. So, we always go to Him highly conscious of who we truly are - the beloved of this dear one.

Whenever we pray, the most important dimension of our prayer is to be totally immersed in our marriage. I do not go to the Lord as a man, I am a cherished husband of this wonderful, giving woman. I am not only a woman, I am a beloved wife of this gorgeous, generous man. It might take a little time, at the beginning of my

prayer, to get myself in this condition. It is, though, a necessary effort and a very worthwhile one. Ask the Father's help. This is His will for us, so He will be most eager to prompt, remind and empower us to this awareness. Then, any prayer we offer will be marital.

It is an essential aspect of our vocation, however, to pray daily, as a couple, not just in our consciousness but also physically together. Many, even most couples of faith, simply do not pray together or do so quite infrequently. They look on prayer as private, other than occasions such as Mass. Even there, while physically together, praying fervently, they are often absorbed in their own spiritual world. What a pity! We shut each other out of the beautiful intimacy we have developed over the years with the Father. It is like a wife or husband having a beautiful work of art and keeping it to themselves, never letting the spouse see it. Possibly they might let the other person look but never together. We would all say that was dumb.

Of course, they pray a lot FOR one another but do not pray WITH one another, other than as an exception. This is as improper as a spouse keeping a relationship with a family member or friend separate from their marital relationship. Our relationship with our heavenly Father should not be apart from our relationship as husband/wife. What would you think of a couple who never talked with their children as a couple? Each had their own personal relationship with the children. Even, if both were excellent parents, very loving, with great communication with the little ones, wouldn't it be awful, if they were never together with those children?

The same applies to our prayer life. We could be the most faith-filled persons in the world, with a highly developed relationship with our Father. We could have a full awareness that our husband/wife were equally prayerful and blessed with the same kind of faith. If our prayer was basically separate, it's less than I can be and a lot less than our Father wants us to be. When a couple prays together, the blessings are especially immediate and effective in their relationship.

One of our older wedding vows states, "With all my worldly goods I thee endow." It is not one of the most moving parts of the cere-

mony because we don't like mixing up possessions and romance. However, if a husband were to create a higher standard of living for himself than for his wife, we would reject that as completely out of line. We believe that anything he has should be theirs. The same for the wife. Why does that apply merely to the material? Surely, our relationship with our heavenly Father is of more value than any possession. Our prayerfulness should be a gift we offer one another. It should be shared.

Some of the problem lies in the fact that spouses are likely to have different expressions of spirituality. We are comfortable praying a certain way and don't want to change. That is understandable but incorrect. The method of our approach to our Father is not nearly as important as our praying together. We would certainly agree that what they eat is a matter of taste but to eat separately would not be desirable for a couple. In all areas of our married life, we have to work out together what is most appropriate for the two of us. So too spiritually, we have to develop a oneness. We don't start on the same page in most things when we first marry. She might be a night person, while he is a day person; she could be lively, while he is reserved and that will effect what they like to do; she might like small parties with a few friends, while his preference is for a larger gathering. They talk over these differences and develop a common approach. Sometimes, it's his way and sometimes hers. The one consistency is that they are together. This is a good habit they have developed together. One they should institute in their spiritual life.

This will take time to develop plus much patience and love, but the rewards are immense. Many recognize the attractiveness of this but have a number of excuses: "My spouse is not that prayerful; we don't want to pray at the same time or for the same length of time; we have different needs; I'm more comfortable praying by myself." All these attitudes would be recognized in other areas of our marriage as things to change. Suppose we were to say, "We don't eat together because we like different foods or because we are hungry at different times or I'm a fast eater and he/she is slow or each of us has a different value system when it comes to meals." It would be one thing to accept not always being able to eat together because of other responsibilities, but another to set that up as the usual practice much less an ideal. Or, "My mother

is coming over this evening. Why don't you take in a movie or something else to get you out of the house? I like to have her to myself and, when you're around, I can't talk to her the way I enjoy. You get her talking about different things and you talk to her in ways that make me uncomfortable. You're too free and easy with her. I'd rather be more serious." That would be ridiculous, wouldn't it? But we find nothing strange when we make statements fairly close to that, excusing ourselves from praying with one another.

Not only that, but we ignore an opportunity to use our differences to our benefit. You might, for example, rather be serious with your mother, but, if your spouse is there, you might see a new side of her you would not have discovered alone. You might see a generosity, a fun loving dimension in her you don't perceive when the two of you are by yourselves. It is the same in couple prayer. It would be an omission if we didn't draw upon our differences to enhance our prayer.

A deep reality is that praying together brings about a bonding that nothing else can. A special intimacy is involved. Our relationship with the Father is precious to us. Many have been close to Him all their lives. They have had a highly developed one on one relationship with Him since childhood. It is so much ours, it is hard to bring it out to the light of day by sharing. That connection with the Father is very much like the connection we have with our own body. It, too, has been with us since childhood and we've grown used to it. It's no one's but our own, but we are willing to offer our bodies to our spouse in love. So we should be willing to share our love for our Father and our interchanges with Him. We are our Father's son and daughter. We will never understand one another in full measure apart from our relationship with Him.

But we have to be careful not to demand that our marital prayer be my form of prayer. That seems so obvious, once said, but it is not so easy to carry out in practice. When we are used to something, especially when we are good at it and find it satisfying, it is very hard to conceive of doing it any other way. The approach to our Father has to be developed mutually, just as is everything in our marriage. The vital element here is not how we pray but that we pray as a couple. Actually, it will be very difficult to pray



as a spouse, when physically alone, if we are not actually praying together on a regular basis. Of course, this does not suggest that we restrict our prayer solely to the times we are together.

Over the years, we might have developed a prayer style in which we quite naturally turn to our Father. There are many times during the day when we call for God's help and guidance or simply breathe a quiet, "Thank you," or just make ourselves aware of His presence. Doing so is a wonderful mark of a true believer, of one who is really prayerful. Yet, as a husband/wife, such occasions of meeting and recognizing the Lord are to be expressions of the two of us and our devotion to each other. It will be so much harder to accomplish this if we are not consistently praying while physically together.

## **DISCIPLINE**

To be effective in introducing this mentality and practice into our daily lives we must be disciplined. That means a regular time to pray with one another. Please don't choose just before going to sleep. It is certainly okay, a commendable practice, to lift our minds and hearts to God together immediately before sleeping but that should not be our prime prayer experience. It's as though we were to restrict our serious conversations with one another to bed time. We are often too worn out to be attentive; we will be concerned about the length of time it would take because we know we have to get up early. Also, we have probably wound down as the evening passes and are not fully alert. So while a 'good night' to the Lord is admirable, it is much better to choose a time when more alert.

The best time varies from couple to couple depending upon the schedule in their home. For some, it will be right after supper or just before. For others, it will be after putting the kids to bed or once their homework has begun. But choose a time when still very much alert and with it. You know when that best time is. However, you are probably doing something now, during that time, which you find particularly enjoyable and relaxing. You will be reluctant to give it up. There will be a sense of loss for a while

but keep at it. Sooner or later, you will find the Lord provides even more enjoyment and relaxation. It's like going on vacation. When thinking about packing, we'd often just as soon skip the whole thing, but once we've arrived, we can't imagine why we were so reluctant to pack. It's not so much that we don't like the vacation; it's the chore of getting there. The same is true with prayer.

Another factor is length of time. Our daily prayer together should be a minimum of ten minutes. It would be hard not to be rushed in less than that. Also, we will not establish much of a relationship with Him, if it's just quickies all the time. Of course, we are not calling for rigidity in this. There may be days when we can't find the ten minutes, as well as days when we can spend longer, but we should have ten minutes as a standard. We could hardly consider such an investment an overly generous one. Granted, time is at a premium for all of us. Nonetheless, we can find the minutes to do what we want. It can truthfully be said, "If you are too busy to pray, you are too busy." We simply must make the time for our own sake.

A second discipline is to establish the primacy of our relationship before we begin to pray. After all, both of us have had a full day filled with all sorts of activities, decisions, interests, and concerns. We need to rid ourselves of the distractions and bring each other and our love to the forefront of our consciousness. This is best done silently and non verbally. Just hold one another for a while not saying anything. If we speak, we are most liable to bring up issues, events, or decisions to be made. We have to distract ourselves from our distractions and become absorbed in one another. Our mindset at this preparatory time should be, "I take you in riches and poverty, in sickness and health, for better or for worse." In other words, whether I'm feeling loved right now or not, whether our closeness is something I'm experiencing powerfully at this time or not, whether I'm feeling well treated or not. I just want to embrace you at this time completely and absolutely, as my beloved, beyond reason, without any reservations. Put aside everything else that has happened to us this day, forget about all other things and become personally present to one another in the fullest possible way.

This can be very self sacrificing if I am upset, hurt or feeling bur-

dened, but it is absolutely essential. It takes much humility and generosity of heart, but we should do this in our approach to our Father, if we are to deal with Him as a couple and not as two singles who will return to relationship later. In other words, we are to live out the petition of the Lord's prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." We push aside what is between us and draw close to one another. Remember the beautiful saying in Scripture, "If you are going to the altar and find your brother has anything against you, leave your gift at the altar and go make it up with your brother before you return to the altar." Certainly, that applies even more strongly to a spouse. We won't always want to do this even when we admit it is right. We'll sometimes want to keep the distance until we have settled down or have had a chance to hammer it out in a good discussion. The discussion may well be needed. This preparation for prayer is not to be an excuse to avoid talking with each other about things between you, but right now, let it go and reinforce your devotion to one another. We are approaching the Lord. We want to be at our best with Him. We can't put on a front about this, the way we would if we were going to our in-laws. We can't be just nicey-nice on the outside. This embrace of one another should reach our hearts.

This exercise of creating total personal presence to one another should not be limited to the times when we are chilly with one another. We realize that we need it then, but we might think, in our normal good times, it is not as necessary. We believe we can get right to the prayer. That would be a mistake. We still need to recreate us. The fact that we are not upset or cool to one another is, after all, our usual situation, but we can be on the periphery of each other's consciousness. If there is nothing wrong, then we can go on about other things. Take the time and the attention to become one with one another.

This whole exercise of getting in touch with each other and bringing our whole couple-selves to our Father can be like dancing. There are times we get on the dance floor and it feels like our shoes are nailed to the boards. Our joints just won't move, our first few steps are terribly awkward and after a while our legs ache. We might even dread the idea of starting to dance, but if we continue to dance our joints start to limber up. We begin to focus

on one another and not on our awkwardness. After a while, we are really in tune with one another and nothing else matters. It makes no difference if the room is too crowded or it's too hot. We have room for us. That is all that matters.

The third area of discipline in our prayer is to place the focus of our prayer on developing an ever deepen devotion to one another. Too often, we can become distracted from that priority by external events or circumstances which press in on us, absorbing our concentration or upsets which loom so large. We believe we can think of nothing else. The prime agenda of our Father in dealing with a married couple is to make them more married, to inspire and empower them to love each other more deeply and to appreciate one another in His name. He knows nothing is more important to our well being and happiness and the happiness of those around us. Our Father wants us to be intimates of one another as we approach intimacy with Him.

We must accept our Father's priorities in our relationship with Him. He is concerned with what is affecting us but wants to approach those areas in the context of our love for one another. He knows that when we are truly devoted to one another, we can handle anything. Then, He will be most able to influence us. He has brought us together in the name of His Son, as a Sacrament, and wishes to enter into our lives as two in one flesh. Our attitude, as we approach, should be one of openness to be inspired to respond more generously to our spouse. That is the most important result of our prayer. It should be the overriding intention of a couple every day of their lives. Whatever else they seek from God, it must be in the context of being good for their love for one another. Then, they will be always looking for our Father to increase their capacity to love their spouse more completely and generously.

This does not imply that after we pray we're supposed to drop everything on our minds or forget any issue between us. That would serve no purpose. We would begin to fear prayer because it would mean we would have to bury any differences between us. It could also lead one or both of us to use prayer against the other making it a way to escape deep communication between the two. Quite the contrary. As a result of our openness to Him, we will now come to anything between us, together and as a couple, truly be-

longing to one another, rather than as adversaries. The problem remains the same, but we are different. Instead of being across from one another with the issue between us, we are now side by side looking for what is best for the two of us rather than as separate persons trying to cut a deal.

This is most important for a couple. They must consciously develop the attitude that whenever something comes between them, they are to deliberately put it aside. Anything between us is not God's will for us. We have the power to exclude it.

A fourth dimension of our discipline in prayer is to listen. Too much of our prayer is our conversation. We should be much more contemplative in our dealings with God and one another. The listening we mean is not a sterile silence but an active participatory attentiveness. We should use all our faculties to experience whatever the Lord communicates to us. The silence is not one of not saying words but of uncluttering our minds, of stepping away from getting our point across and finding out what is on His mind. One good way to do this is to ask the spouse what he/she is experiencing in their exposure to the Lord. Often, the Father speaks to me much more clearly thru my husband/wife than directly. There is less static. Furthermore, in our prayer, I should be listening to my spouse. There is a vulnerability in prayer which gives a special openness enabling me to hear and understand her/him more powerfully. Also, the sincerity and faith of my beloved in prayer will draw me closer. The person is at her/his best. I will be able to appreciate them better.

The biggest part of our listening is not to go into prayer with a set determination of what will come of it. That is the death of marital discussions. When a husband or wife has their mind made up, even when right, the interchange between them doesn't go well. The same is true in our conversations with our Father. Too often we pray to make God an ally in our plans. We want Him to approve what we are doing, change the other person's mind, or give us something we can't achieve for ourselves. Instead, we should be approaching Him to discover what He wants of us, His plans, and how we can be more the person He wants us to be. The same should be true in all our dealings with our spouse but most especially during prayer. As a result of prayer, our spouse should

experience the totality of our love and the completeness of our devotion to her/him. Prayer should not be a nice spiritual oasis, a time out from the hurly-burly of our day but an intense renewal of our intimacy, an increased empowerment of our ability to love one another. If it becomes that, both parties will have an eagerness to pray with one another.

In other words, prayer should be practical and effective. Too often, people pray because they are supposed to but don't look for any immediate results. Oh, all of us, if asked, would say we believe in the power of prayer, but when asked to give examples of its effectiveness, we are hard pressed to give more than a few. It's almost like winning at Bingo. We always hope ahead of time, but it's a total surprise when we win. Prayer should not be that way. Our Father is a loving Father who wants to respond to us with utmost generosity, but we have to let Him. A big barrier to effective prayer is our lack of expectation. We simply don't look for results. We consider prayer to be just prayer. That is all it is supposed to be. We do it, as well as we can, and then it is over with for this time. We think, "It's not really supposed to go anywhere." There is an additional reason - the curse of independence. We have been rigidly trained to do every thing for ourselves. We want to run our own lives. We'd rather do things our way.

A bigger factor is lack of trust in God. We fear that doing things His way will be too hard. We think His way is always tough. That is making a sadist out of God. He is a loving Father. When your children come to you for something, what is your reaction? Our Father is at least as loving a parent as we are. Prayer should always lead to results. When it doesn't, it's because we don't let it. Often, He is calling us to change: our minds, our conduct, above all our hearts. At times, we are so set in our ways, we find it difficult. There are even moments when we recognize we are only punishing ourselves but are so stubborn and hardhearted, it seems impossible to change. That is when we surrender to God and one another, if we are to be truly happy.

Much unhappiness is self imposed. If we focus our prayer to our Father together and make the aim of our experience of our Father the gentling of our hearts toward one another, our Father will truly be able to be an effective part of our lives and make our love for

each other truly divine. Then we will be able to live out the ambitions He and we have always had for one another. Those we had when we first met, fell in love and pledged ourselves to a life of love.

To summarize. We need a specific time and length of time to pray. Most particularly, we require a couple frame of mind. We are to approach our Father as a couple, at all times, even when not in each other's presence. The prime concentration of our prayer is to be led to a greater closeness to one another. That is our Father's priority for us. Listening should be the chief activity in our prayer. Finally, trust in God and his plans for us must salt our prayerfulness.

## **DEVELOPING A COUPLE MENTALITY**

Now, obviously, on any given occasion, there are many things to pray about: health of either of us or a family member, finances, career changes, children, purchase of a home, friends, and so forth, but the overriding topic of our relationship with our Father should be our marital love in all its aspects. This must be central to any spousal prayer. Not so much from the perspective of going to our Father when things are not going well or when we have a problem but primarily to be led by the Father to create an ever deeper love for my spouse, to experience His ambition for us, to take on His vision of what our love is all about and what we can accomplish in, with, and thru one another. We shouldn't go to Him with our vision of what a good marriage is and ask His help to accomplish what we have already decided we want out of our relationship. No, we should let Him establish what our vision for us should be and determine how we are to love and be loved.

This takes great openness and humility. We have to start our prayer by asking Him to imbue us with His attitude toward our spouse. Too often, we go to our prayer with a very definite outlook, for good or for ill, about our spouse and our marriage. Love is divine. We want a God's eye view rather than our own when it comes to our marital attitudes. Sometimes, when upset, it will take time to get away from our preconceived notions and to calm

down before we can even begin to listen to our Father with any real openness, but we cannot proceed until we have allowed our Father to bring His gentleness of heart and tenderness into us. Many times, if honest with ourselves, we won't want our hearts changed. That, of course, is when change is most necessary. We are convinced our spouse is the one who ought to change and hope God will do it, since we haven't been able to get him/her to move. That is the first change. God is not our secret weapon to turn to and use to shape our spouse up the way we want.

On other occasions, the problem will be more in terms of being so absorbed in something pressing upon us: a problem with one of the children, a fight with a parent or a struggle at work which causes us to not even think about our husband or wife. Then we have to discipline ourselves to put whatever it is aside and focus for a time with our Father on our beloved and gradually become a spouse, fully and consciously, once again. That sounds funny. "Of course, I am a spouse." That's true. There are times, however, when we don't think that way. We become single again in our consciousness.

This happens not just when we are irritated with one another. More frequently, it is when we are absorbed in some activity, plan, problem, or situation that draws all our attention. We don't consciously and deliberately say, "I'm not a married man/woman right now." In fact, we would be horrified at the thought. Or, if someone asked, "Are you married?" we would snort, "Definitely!" But we don't always think that way. We are sometimes so taken up with what is bothering us or calling for our attention that we lose sight of our spouse. We're not necessarily hostile; we've just lost his or her presence. So, I've become a mother, an employee, a problem solver of one kind or other, a party giver, a Church worker or whatever. This is such a normal and natural occurrence that we see nothing wrong. Our attitude is, "Everybody does this; we can't help it."

There is a strong and prevalent dimension of settling down in marriage. As a result of such a habit, the magic goes out of our love, and we start to identify with the old Peggy Lee song, "Is that all there is?" There is a hopelessness about that; so much so that we teach it to our young people when they fall in love. We tell them



to enjoy it now because the honeymoon will soon be over. We tell them to settle down which implicitly means the spark will then be gone. We think that is only practical, the way life is, nothing can change it. Actually, it comes out of our own life experience in marriage when we spend more and more of our day locked into thinking as a single. Each of us has our own life for much of the day. Then, we have our life together. In some of our life together, the singleness carries over. No one has made a deliberate decision to be this way. It just happens as life proceeds. We say to ourselves, "Wasn't it so nice, when all we had was one another? I wish it could be that way again." We think it is something beyond our control. There is nothing we can do about it.

But, there is something we can do; we can insist to ourselves that our marriage is always in the forefront of our consciousness. The temptation is to believe this is not possible. There is too much to do, too much responsibility, too much on our minds, but all we have to do is reach back into our own life experience to recognize it is possible, because we have done it. When we first met, fell in love, and the first year of so of our marriage, being absorbed in thinking about one another was a constant reality. We still had responsibilities - college, job, family, and friends, but we never lost sight of the reality of being lover and beloved. So, it is possible.

We've gradually drifted away from that prioritization without making any conscious decision to do so. That drift has been effective over the years; we are well into the habit. Sometimes, we are so into it that it becomes as natural to us as breathing or brushing our teeth. We become comfortable with only momentary twinges of regret. The only way to undo a habit is by constant little decisions to undo the continual practice we have adopted. We established the habit that way in the first place. We made one little choice after the other to think about us only after taking care of something which seemed more pressing at the time. We can let go of the old ways and substitute the choice of a married way of thinking. We established the practice of putting pressing responsibilities ahead of thinking about us, so that it now seems natural to give our marriage only our left over time and thoughts. But there is hope. We can change this habit, exactly the way we formed it, one step at a time. We can make the conscious decision to be aware of our spouse in everything we say, do and think, including prayer.

One important factor to consider in my prayerfulness as a spouse is to ask myself what is usually on my mind in my approach to God. Too often the subject matter of my approach to the Lord could be that of any good believing person. But, I am married. That should be the overriding fact of my life. Therefore, my prayer should be different than that of a single. There should be a specifically marital overtone in my approach to our Father.

The implication, of course, is not that married people pray better than singles nor that many of the topics of our communication with God are not similar to others in other states in life, but there should be an essential difference in the married person's mentality. It's as though I met you and we talked for a while, but I came away without any awareness of your marriage and no knowledge of your spouse. Something would be wrong. Not in the sense that anything was improper about our conduct or that what we had talked about was bad, but you did not make your identity clear to me. The core of who you are is lover and beloved. How could we have talked for any length of time much less with any real meaning without the core of your experience in life and your basic identity coming up?

This applies even more strongly in our prayer. A religious should have a different mentality with God than one who is not. So should a priest. What would you think, if you spent some time talking to a priest or religious and never discovered they were such? Wouldn't you say there is something wrong? A feeble excuse for them would be to say, "It just didn't seem relevant." Or, "It didn't come up, we were talking about other things." Whatever the topic, our conversation should be colored and enriched by their vocation.

How would you react if you spent some time talking with a person who then offered to find you a date? Wouldn't you say there was something wrong in the way you spoke if they didn't realize you were married? It isn't merely a question of revealing the fact of my marriage but that that reality should pervade every aspect of my being and effect all my thoughts, words, actions, and other relationships.

So, the first step in approaching our Father should be to identify

ourselves to one another and to Him as lovers. It is not good enough to make the statement; we have to experience it in the depth of our souls. We have to put aside anything distracting us from one another and simply become totally conscious of each other in the Father's presence. We need to call upon our Father's help to do this. We must beseech Him to pour into us His yearning for our total devotion to each other. This is His highest hope for us. He knows this is where our true happiness lies. As a tenderhearted Father, He most desires our happiness. We want to fully experience His total yearning for our love for each other. Just be in His presence and feel him drawing you two closer and closer to one another. See how pleased He is when you are totally responsive to each other. That marital closeness should be the primary experience a couple has of God's presence through prayer.

## **COUPLE ENVIRONMENT FOR PRAYER**

The normal focus of prayer for a husband/wife should be to increase their ambition for their love relationship. The core of that ambition has to be sexual. Their sexual experience of one another distinguishes them. We are not talking here merely about the act of love making. We are talking about a total sexual responsiveness in all aspects of your life together. Even the best husbands and wives spend a great deal of their time with one another in an asexual way. This is not God's plan for them at all. It might be fine for a brother and sister living together but not for a married couple. So, the basic question a spouse has to ask in prayer is, "How sexually responsive am I, right now, toward my husband/wife?" Anytime I am not fully sexually responsive, I am not living out my married vocation. The problem is that we think the word sexual refers only to intercourse. Making love is the culmination of our desire for each other, but no matter how frequent and powerful our love making may be, it is not enough unless that love making spills over to pervade our every moment. Our sexual awareness of one another makes us distinctive from all others.

It is, unfortunately, necessary here to emphasize that, when we talk about sexual responsiveness, we mean something much

broader than sexual intercourse. We are talking about the climate of the relationship, the whole way the couple perceive one another and interact with each other when driving in the car, putting the kids to bed, working on their income tax, eating dinner, even when they are apart from one another, as well as when they are in bed. In a way their sexual responsiveness should be like 3D glasses. They change the picture. Without them you get a distorted view of the screen. The same is true in a marriage. When I don't perceive my spouse sexually, my view of her/him is distorted. Even the most active, satisfying and frequent "sex life" doesn't do it. After all, even if a couple were to make love two or three times a day all their married life, that would only take up part of their time together. We want their sexual power to be totally involving, so that in all their dealings with one another they are more conscious of their beloved than themselves. In other words, we want them to be completely married all the time. Only when sexually responsive to one another do they truly experience being lover and beloved. The act of making love is essential but the sexual aura and total sexual environment brings that love making, past and to come, into all their dealings with one another. It makes them completely different and unique to each other.

Our God is pretty wise. He knows we are human with all the foibles, faults, and sins that state implies. So, He has gifted us with the antidote to these inclinations. He knows, because He made us, that when we are sexually conscious of one another we are least likely to fail one another and Him. When we talk to Him about our needs in marriage, we are most likely to petition for patience, forgiveness, understanding, thoughtfulness. Those are wonderful qualities, but our Father knows that if we were to pray for sexual desire, we wouldn't need to pray for those other virtues, because they would be a natural part of our sexual responsiveness to our spouse. When we pray that way, we are praying like a brother, sister or friend rather than a spouse. Whenever we are sexually aware of our beloved, we are most patient. What annoys us when we are sexually neutral become things to smile about, endearing qualities when sexually aware; it is so easy to forgive when in love. We are more understanding and thoughtful; we can't do enough for our beloved.

We humans are funny creatures. How many of us would include

“being sexual” on a list of admirable qualities? That attitude makes it so much harder. Our Father wants to make it easy for us to be good to one another. We think sexual awareness is the reward God gives us for acting well with our spouse. Actually, it is the means God gives us to enable us to live out our vocation to love and even make it a delight. A common saying among the married is, “We have to work at our marriage.” Or, “Being married isn’t easy.” No wonder so many of our young men and women don’t choose to marry. It shouldn’t be an endurance contest or a workout. God wants it to be a delight. That’s why he grants us the favor of sexual desire. In fact, He insists upon it for His couples. He doesn’t want it to be a pleasant oasis they turn to from time to time. He calls them to live their sexuality as a life style.

When sexual desire is strong, vibrant and, above all, constant in a couple’s life all, the things about marriage which can be a chore or sacrifice become not only manageable but a pleasure. The activities themselves remain as demanding as ever. They don’t suddenly change their characteristics. We do not change our instinctive likes and dislikes nor does our personality change. Now, though, they are seen in the context of something for my beloved. That makes it a different ball game. Now, what I am doing is not the focus of my attention but, for whom I am doing them. They can still remain burdensome in themselves, things I would not choose to do on my own, but it is different when they are for his/her sake; they will make them happy or improve the quality of their life. That’s what motivates me most. The “what” becomes minor in the aura of the “for whom”.

All good couples have experienced this phenomenon, not only in the beginning of their relationship, but in their marriage. The mistake they make, however, is to wait for it to happen naturally, when they are feeling especially warm and loving. They should deliberately and consciously foster a strong sense of passion between them as the normal and natural environment of their marriage. Before doing anything they realize might be heavy or boring, they should examine their heart and discover just how sexually excited they are about their spouse. We are not talking specifically about desire for intercourse but rather an awareness of the other’s masculinity or femininity that predisposes us in their favor. Unless they can honestly say to themselves that their passion is eager, they

should pray that our Father fill them with the desire he wants for them, at this time. Otherwise, the task and the unpleasantness of it will be what they are most conscious of rather than the pleasure they will be giving their wife/husband.

If you were to ask good couples what is the most important quality for a top flight marriage, you would be likely to get answers such as: a sense of humor, respect, compatibility, the ability to take things in stride, being in touch with feelings, the ability to communicate, listening skills, the capability to say I'm sorry, generosity, patience, and not holding grudges. These are all great virtues, but, for God's sake, we could look for them in a roommate or from a parish priest. The most essential quality in marriage, one that will carry these other qualities along with it or make up for one or the other that is missing, is sexual passion.

Marriage is not to be a life with sex. It is to be a sexual life. That should be our main concentration in prayer. We should beseech our Father to open us more and more to being sexually aware of each other. Frequently, we ignore this aspect of our vocation, thinking we have a more than adequate sex life. That means we are having intercourse with sufficient frequency and pleasure to satisfy each of us. That's wonderful and good, certainly of no little import, but it is only one essential aspect of our sexuality. When we limit sexuality to love making, we are not addressing it as a lifestyle. Moreover, we tend to put limitations on our sexual responsiveness. We place demands upon the other person to live up to before we will exercise our sexuality. For example, they have to be properly disposed, it has to be in the right time and place, we have to have had good communication with one another as a preliminary, and so forth. That is a denial of our vocation. So, we yearn with our Father to remove this barrier that we have set up to our relationship. We really need Him to step in here and assist us. The attitude that verbal intimacy has priority over sexual intimacy is so pervasive that it is very difficult for us to overcome our inclination to act that way.

## SEXUAL SPIRITUALITY

The real test of spirituality in a married person is how sexual they are in their total relationship with their spouse. Unfortunately, we tend to separate spirituality and sexuality. Sometimes, we even see them as opposites. Sex seems so fleshy, so unspiritual. Oh, we know sex is God's gift to us, but it is hard for us to see sexuality as God's way of sanctifying a married couple. Remember, everything since Jesus is incarnational - the holy is enfleshed. So our sexual desire for each other is the first and foremost call of our prayer. As we approach our Father, we ask him to reveal to us how pleased he is with our sexual responsiveness to one another, right now. It is not enough that we be satisfied. He must be. We will be much more open to Him and much less likely to be manipulative in our prayer, if we are fully immersed in the lifestyle He has invited us to which is sexual. Our sexual openness to one another is our vocation. It is not a part of it but the core of our way of life.

Our sexuality is the essential mark of our vocation in the Church. No matter how often we go to Mass, how often we pray, how generous we are in helping those in need, we are not fully and meaningfully responding to His call to us unless the sexual aura is in the air we breathe with one another. Furthermore, our sexual desire for one another should be a gift we bring to the Church. This is the root expression of our sacramentality and should be discernable to our brothers and sisters in the Community of the Faithful.

Since it is His call, we have to turn to Him to discover His terms for our marriage and above all seek further strength and power in this area. We tend to think that once we have hit puberty our sexuality is fully developed; Then, it is solely a question of not misusing it. On the contrary, our sexuality continues to develop; it is like our brain. We are constantly building on what we have already learned. There is so much more about our sexuality than we have experienced and developed already. Yes, our bodies are fully sexually mature and have been for some time, but now there is the question of our sexual personhood. That is the work of a lifetime. More importantly, there is the question of our sexual relationships. This, most of all, demands divine intervention, if we

are to be all we can be sexually. When it comes to sex, we tend to turn to God only if something is wrong or if we find ourselves tempted to abuse it. That is not the normal situation for the good married couple. So, they don't see any need to have God become involved. It becomes something just between self and spouse. The result is a severe limitation of their potential for sexual greatness. Good couples should go to God in order to discover how to be superstars sexually. That is His yearning for them.

## **PASSION**

Therefore, the prime couple prayer is for passion. This should be a constant daily prayer to fill their imaginations and broaden their horizons. They should pray to be lifted beyond their ambitions for their sexuality and be imbued with our Father's hopes. They should pray with great earnestness for this and demand a response. They cannot just say, "Well we prayed and nothing happened. It seems it is not God's will for anything to change right now. God will answer our prayers in due time." The due time is now. The problem is not God refusing to answer our prayers, it is our not being disposed to accept his answer because of hurts, upsets, distractions, or possibly complacency. One thing clearly true about our sexuality is that there is always more. We have never exhausted our full potential. We have to allow Him to lead and guide us beyond our human imagination and ambition. Since our marriage is a Sacrament, the quality of our sexual relationship with one another, which is the essence of our sacramentality, is of great import to the People of God. A couple's sexual experience of one another is deeply personal, but not private. Our sacramental relationship is a holy mission to the whole community of the faithful to reveal how totally and absolutely Jesus loves His Body, the people of the Church and how we, in the Church, are to respond to one another, in his Name. Therefore, the people of the Church have a real stake in how well a sacramental couple do with one another sexually. That is so important to internalize.

Families weren't chosen to be this model, nor were priests and religious, nor holy individuals. Only couples have the power to prophecy to the Church its core identity, but they only do so in the



context of their sexual devotion to one another. They can be very generous in giving of their time and talent to their parish, and they should be. They can be very prayerful and have a great sense of social justice, but those in other vocations can do those things for and with us in the Church equally well. The married couple's unique gift to us and their essential sacramental witness is their passion with and for one another. They have to have a higher ambition for their passion than they would have on their own. The well being of the Community of Believers is in their hands. The power of their sexual devotion to one another is the greatest gift they bring to the Church.

## **PRAYER OF OTHERS**

When we are full of sexual awareness of one another, we create an environment around us which makes the Church more attractive and believable. So, the people of the Church should be praying for us in this important area of our lives. Of course, couples have the prime responsibility to pray this way for themselves, but this concerns the quality of life of the whole Body of Christ. We all have a stake in our couples' passion not just for their sake but for ours.

Couples should call upon those closest to them, in the Church, to make their sexuality a fervent and constant intention. This sounds strange because we are used to seeing our sexual relationship as our own business, but we are linked in intimacy with the Body of Christ. Anything, affecting us in such an important matter, affects them. We would have no problem with a suggestion to seek prayers if we were out of work, sick, or having problems with one of the children, but in this area, we are reluctant, if not horrified. We miss the point of our Sacramentality. Our relationship with the people of the Church is more determined by our sexual experience of our spouse than by any other single factor. As the saying has it, "All the world loves a lover.". The sexual dimension of that love attracts us all. Young lovers discovering one another brings this comment from us. Tragically, after marriage, this beautiful sexuality which has come to full bloom, becomes somewhat suppressed, reduced, or hidden. We pray to restore it to its full

splendor and bring it out to the light of day.

Our relationship is at its best when we are experiencing a heightened sexual consciousness of each other, and so is our relationship with everyone else. We are much less judgmental, much more ready to forgive, much more generous, much less self-centered, much more of a delight. A phenomenon of the Living in Love or Marriage Encounter Weekends is that so many couples, after falling in love all over again, find Church a much more enjoyable experience. They even say the homilies have gotten better. Actually, the homilies haven't really changed but their attitude has.

The first people in the Church we ask to pray for us in our sexuality are our children. They are the ones to profit most from our increased sexuality. Whenever we experience a heightened sexuality with one another, we are much more tender-hearted with them. Often good women come to Confession and ask for prayers to be more patient with their children. The better intention would be - passion for their husbands. That often doesn't go over very well. The more outspoken are likely to say, "He has enough passion for the two of us." An excellent reply to that objection, probably better unspoken, is, "Lady, if you had your share, he wouldn't need a double dose."

Truly, passion is God's way to be a good father/mother. When in neutral or upset at our spouse, and a child acts up, we are likely to say to ourselves, "You're just like your father and I may have to put up with it from him, but I don't have to take it from any snot-nosed kid." On the other hand, when in love, we would say the same, "You're just like your father..." and smile. Same situation. A totally different reaction. The power of sexuality!

When experiencing sexual desire for our spouse, we see the children as our beloved's gift to us. When that desire is absent, we are more likely to see the children as our own. When we see the children as our own, we are more inclined to put demands upon them and look for them to live up to our expectations. We are tempted to take out our resentments against our spouse on them or to seek our emotional satisfaction thru them. The best atmosphere in which to raise a child is a highly sexual one. That is when the child has its greatest security and is able to be truly

appreciated.

In dealing with their children, when the marital relationship is such a priority, a father will perceive himself as acting in her name rather than his own. Too often, the parental interaction is carried out apart from the marital relationship, not in opposition to, but apart from it. It is my relationship with my son or daughter. This is as serious a mistake from the child's perspective as from my own. The child's true identity, as the fruit of our love, is obscured in such circumstances. We do not suggest a mother/father must always explicitly mention to the child that they are acting in the name of the other or say, "Remember, I'm a husband before I'm a father." That, though, has to be very clear in my own awareness in any thought, word or action about my child.

I'm not a separate person who happens to have a number of relationships, some of which are interlocking. I am a person in relationship and all my relationships flow from the marital. We love the Scripture passage which says, "It is not good for man to be alone," but we apply it to companionship only and do not want that to apply to the core of our being, our sexual delight in our spouse. When we are that way, we are least alone. We see our relationships as important to our life, even essential, but nonetheless as extrinsic to our inner being. My identity is not an isolated ME but I am loved. So, I am not a lone person but a beloved. The children's prayers will keep us coming back to home base. Their appeals to God in their innocence and sincerity will help us to keep our eye on the prize of sexual devotion to one another.

Another reason to seek our children's prayers is because they are the ones who love us most in this world and whom we love the most next to our spouses. They really do want what is best for us but won't know what that is unless we tell them. They do pray for us, but for the most part it is non differentiated prayer. It would be so much better for them and for us, if we could point their prayer in the specific direction of our sexuality. This takes a lot of trust and vulnerability but is well worth it. Another big advantage is that the children can experience their prayers being answered right before their eyes as they see us change as a result of their prayer. One of the biggest deficiencies in raising our children is that they are not allowed to make a significant contribution to the well being of

the family. That's one reason our children are so peer oriented - they are able to make a difference with their peers. Not being able to do that with us is a big cause of leaving home so early. When the children pray for our passion, we have a constant reminder and encouragement.

There is no age factor here. Any and all of our children can participate in this from the littlest to the oldest, from the two year old to the forty-five year old. Each can pray in their own way. It is a great preparation for marriage for the young ones and a strong encouragement in their own marriage for the older sons and daughters. We should encourage them to make this a daily prayer for us, not just one offered when we are out of sorts.

We have all been taken aback on occasions by the insightfulness of our children's questions and comments. That particularly applies to their dealings with God. They have such an innocence about them. They get to the heart of the matter, in ways that awe us. The very fact that they don't know that much and are starting from ground zero gives them a perspective which opens new awareness in us. The same will be true when it comes to our passion. Point out to them how different you are toward one another and to them when you are excited about one another compared to when you are not. They live with you so they will be able to understand what you are saying quite readily.

Simply ask them to pray each night in their prayers for your delight in one another. Their prayers for that will be a God sent gift, helping you to face where you are with each other at that moment. Then you can be an answer to their prayers. Tell them to pray for this, anytime they think you need it.

As they grow older, their understanding will develop and their prayer will become more mature. This will be their gift to you and to themselves. It will help them to see that they can make a real contribution to the well being of the family. Furthermore, as they pray for your sexuality, they will be helped in their own. This should be the prime way children should pray for their parents all their lives.

We should ask them not only to pray this way by themselves but

to pray with us for this intention. Furthermore, give them permission to call us to pray with them, especially when they think we most need sexual prayer. They are the ones who best know when we are in most need of this grace. They live with us. They profit or suffer from the tides of our moods. They are quite alert to how we stand with one another, sometimes even before we become aware ourselves.

Next to the children, the most obvious members of the Church from whom to seek prayerful support for our sexual responsiveness to each other are our mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, grannies, aunts, and uncles. Blood is terribly important in God's plan for our well being. One big advantage of including our blood family in our journey toward an ever increasing sexual experience of one another is that it will lead to a tighter bonding with the family. The American culture is not very good at supporting family relationships. Once we grow up and marry we have "our own" family. Sure, we know we came from a family, but that is basically past even though we still have some continuing social obligations to them and a responsibility to take care of them in their old age. A fascinating phenomenon I have experienced in going around the country and asking people to identify their family members is that the only ones who mention mother and father, much less brothers and sisters, are singles. The married mention their spouse and children. Naturally, when I point that out they say, "Well, of course, my mother and father," but they don't think that way in their daily lives.

So get your Mom and Dad, brothers and sisters and other family members to pray, frequently and sincerely for the well being of your sexuality. It will do their own marriages a lot of good also. At first blush, it is likely to lead them to think something is wrong. Isn't it interesting that we tend to think of prayer only in terms of problems and not in terms of greatness? It might be a little awkward, at first, but they will get over that and the results will be outstanding. Often, as they grow older, parents feel useless in the lives of their children. This is a cross for them to bear and is so unnecessary. Their prayer for us in this area will give them a real purpose, which will be a joy.

Then, get the most prayerful people you know in the parish to pray for your increased sexuality. It doesn't matter how young or

old. Some could be kids in first grade and others people in their eighties. What is important is that they be friends and spiritual people. The same is true about their state in life - married, single, divorced, widowed. You want a barrage of prayer directed to the Father, in your name, to increase the power of your Sacrament. It is always so helpful to have backing. We are much more likely to carry out resolutions of ours, when others know and are involved. For example, if I want to lose weight I am more encouraged to stick at it, if I tell others about my determination than if I keep it private.

But we have to be open and honest with those we ask to pray for our sexuality. That is true whether they are immediate family members or friends in the parish. We can't keep the object of their prayer hidden by just asking them to pray for a special intention of ours. Tell them we want them to take on our sexual love for one another in their intercession for us with our Father. Explain it is not because we are having trouble, precisely the opposite. We have such great dreams and ambitions which we cannot achieve on our own. We need the help of God and also everyone who loves us. They may not understand right away, but as time goes on they will grow in appreciation of your sincerity and goodness. Moreover, it will help them to become more serious about their own sexuality.

We should also keep them up to date with the effects of their and our prayer. This does not imply we should go into explicit detail about our love making. That's not the focus of their prayer. We don't need help there. Furthermore, it is too personal. No, what we have asked them to win for us from our Father is the sexual atmosphere of our home. That is what we talk to them about so they can be clued in to how they should pray for us in this matter.

## **PRAY FOR OTHERS**

It would be a big help to our own sexuality to expand our prayer for ourselves to take on, in our prayers, the sexuality of those closest to us. We should pray for the sexual climate in the homes of our married sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, brothers

and sisters. Nothing we could pray about for them would be better for them. Naturally, it would be good and bonding for us to tell them what we are doing with the reassurance that we are doing so, not because we feel they are doing badly but because they are so good and we want even more for them. Even if we don't tell them, the prayer will be effective for them and for us. It always helps us to listen to God's answers to our own prayers when we consider the matter important enough to ask for it for others. Actually, the more sexual we become with one another and the more we experience the difference it makes in our lives, the more we will yearn for this for those we love.

## **GRACES FOR HUSBANDS AND WIVES**

Good husbands and wives pray about their marriage all the time. That is one of their best qualities. They know they can't do it alone. Love really is divine and the Lord must be involved. But, because we are human, we can be manipulative in our prayer. We can go to God and ask Him to make our marriage better. That is fine and good as long as we don't really intend to have Him shape up our spouse. One wife told me that she had prayed for years about their marriage. Her husband was a good man and she loved him very much, but she didn't think he always understood her. She prayed constantly about this until she finally heard the answer God had been giving her all along, "Don't talk to Me. Talk to him and then come back and talk to Me." She did that and had a whole new world in front of her.

In another situation, somewhat similar, I was talking to a young woman who had just finished taking some pre-marriage courses. She was quite enthused about them. I asked her what she had learned. She replied that she had discovered that her fiancé was not listening to her. Fair enough. That was a good insight, important to recognize before the marriage. Then, I asked what she had found out about herself, what did she have to change. Her answer was, "I guess something." That reply does not bode well for their marriage. Always, when praying for a better marriage, start with yourself. You are the one most in control of yourself. If you decide to change for the better, the marriage can be instant-

neously improved. Your prayer should be, "Lord, tell me how to be a better husband. Reveal to me how to be a better wife."

In marriage, the most prevalent defects of the husband are most likely to be irresponsibility and cheapness. In too many cases, the man leaves the primary responsibility of the marriage, the children and the home to his wife. Oh, better husbands help out when things get rough, some even a great deal, but that's just it - he helps her out. It is her responsibility and because he is a good guy, or possibly, more likely, from an enlightened self interest, he pitches in, when he judges she is overwhelmed. Most of the time, he takes for granted that she will handle things; he doesn't even think about it. He thinks he does his job, earning the living, and she has to do her job which is to keep everything running smoothly at home.

Even with so many of our women working, things haven't changed all that much. The average husband may do a few more of the chores around the house, but he is really pitching in and making it easier for her. She has to take the leadership in the relationship dimension of their lives. It's all on her back. This drives our wives up the wall. It is so unfair. Then, if she complains, he is shocked, because he sees himself as so hardworking and such a nice guy.

The prime defect here is not so much walking away from the tasks but being uninvolved. Most often, he doesn't even realize he's failing. He doesn't know who his sons' teachers are, that his daughter is coming down with a cold, or has a big ball game coming up, or his son has a big test this week. He expects his wife to clue him in. Why should a forty-four year old man have to be reminded to call his mother? Frequently, a man will pride himself on clearing decks to get to one of the school activities of his children, but his wife has to tell him it's happening. Too often, the wife alone goes to the Parent/Teacher meetings. She's the one to think ahead and plan the family parties for birthdays, anniversaries, First Communions, etc.

Two intentions on the top of any husband's list to counteract these tendencies are enthusiasm and generosity. It is such a gift for a wife to have an enthusiastic husband. Too often, he runs for couch-potato-of-the-year, while she desperately searches for



something to catch his interest and get him involved. When a husband is enthused about his wife, he will not leave all the responsibility on her shoulders. He will be active in her life and interested in her interests. He won't be unconscious about what is going on around him in the home. This is such a magnificent gift for a husband to give his wife. Often, a man is reluctant to pray for enthusiasm. He's afraid he'll get too much. Then everything will change; he won't be able to watch the ball games, read the papers, or do his hobbies. That is probably true, or, at least, they won't be as pervasive as they have been, but he will get so much. Their relationship will be so much better, and he will live up to his determination, when he married her, to make her the happiest woman in the world. This is the answer to the question, "What happened to those dreams we had when we were engaged?"

Generosity is such a wonderful gift for a man to pray for. It means so very much to his wife. This is not just generosity in terms of money. That is good and helpful and something to pray for, but it is even more important to be personally generous with his time and attention. He should be generous in sharing her interests and be fully involved. Too many husbands dole out sparingly their time, interest, and attention. So, the man has to pray for the very generosity of the Father himself.

The antidote for the good wife is earnest and consistent prayer for compassion - to walk in his shoes, to feel what he feels, to respond the way he responds. Her temptation is to concentrate her efforts on getting him to understand her. Both the man and the woman are likely to believe that she is much more complex than he; she needs much more attention and understanding. Part of this, a big part actually, is that the woman is much more in touch with her feelings than her husband. When she receives the gift of compassion, she will use her gift of being in touch with her feelings as a power she has to be able to bring out his. She should be able to get a hint of his feelings, even when he doesn't have a clue, because of her long experience in this area. Furthermore, she will be able to give him the vocabulary he doesn't have for himself, when it comes to feelings. Compassion is such a grace in a wife, one she should yearn for daily. That is when a woman is at her best, and she is most able to get beyond herself and focus on her beloved. Compassion is to the wife what enthusiasm is to the

man. When those great gifts are present in a marriage, it gives them a potential to create a magnificent love. Of course, as a basis for these virtues the couple needs an exquisite sexual devotion to one another.

## **WEDDING BED CRUCIFIX**

There is a very simple, down to earth and practical way for a couple to pray with one another on a regular basis. Many couples have received a crucifix as a wedding present and put it over their bed. Others have gotten one for themselves during the course of their marriage. If you don't have one, now is a good time to do so. Having a crucifix over their bed, blessing their love has been an honored tradition among Catholic couples. It brings the Lord into the core of their life with one another.

While wonderful merely to have the crucifix there, we can make it much more powerful and influential in our lives. Each night on retiring, sit down on the bed very close together, take the crucifix off the wall and hold it between you. Recall the special moments you have experienced today - the little kindnesses, the gentle looks and touches, the flashes of intimate understanding. Offer them to Jesus as a consolation and solace for him. Bring to mind any hurt you have received from your spouse, any slight, any sense of distance. Place it on the cross so that it becomes his pain rather than your own. Let him take it on himself for you. Then, think of any way you might have offended your beloved: a bit of indifference or coolness, thoughtlessness, anger, unresponsiveness. Place that on the cross also. Then kiss the crucifix together drawing healing from the Lord for the hurts you might have suffered and forgiveness for the sins you may have committed against your spouse. Then turn to one another, embrace warmly, and kiss each other gently.

This is a beautiful way to close your day with one another, in the Lord. One of the pieces of advice given young couples over the generations by wise mothers, fathers, or pastors is to never go to bed angry. Everyone admits this is excellent advice. A distance slept on becomes much more deeply imbedded, much more firmly

set in our subconscious. It becomes a more major offense than the one we started with; making up is harder to do.

The unresolved offenses seem to pile up. It leads to a situation of getting into the habit of having arguments with one another in our minds, preparing things to say, excuses to offer, building up evidence of how the other person is wrong. We replay the hurt. Going to bed together should be a quit claim on the day. Whatever negative has happened during the day should go down with the sun. We should prepare for a new day of light and peace by the way we go to bed with each other.

That is not always so easy to do. We may have built up a momentum that is hard to reverse, having brooded about it during the day. Our humanity so intrudes upon our love making. It is difficult to feel any warmth or closeness or even to desire any. Without the Lord, we just don't feel we can or should have to make any outreach to a partner who has been so insensitive or hurtful. We are confident that we will ultimately return to good feelings about one another, but now is too soon. If we have this practice of turning to the crucifix every night as a regular part of our going to bed, it will help us get beyond our own limitations. This habit will remind us who we are, that we have a strength beyond ourselves. The Lord, himself, will lift us up and empower us. As we are forgiven by him, we will forgive our spouse. Then, our sleep will be one which refreshes our love and revivifies us rather than hardens our resolve to get our point across.

Of course, not every night will we have something between us. There are actually many more nights when we go to bed matter of factly. It's time to sleep, so we retire without thinking very much of anything other than the fact of being tired and ready for rest. This brief exercise with our crucifix can bring us closer to one another and remind us, even in the routineness of our actions, of the wonder of our love. It will put us to sleep with a smile on our faces. Every time we go to sleep, it is a little death. There is something final about sleeping. It calls for a surrender of control. That is why there is a special intimacy about sleeping with one another even beyond the sexual connotation. We embrace one another to reassure us in our vulnerability. That should be more than a matter of fact experience.

Besides, we are not just a married couple, we are a Matrimonied couple. We have chosen one another and have, equally, been chosen by the people of the Church to be their Sacrament. We are called by them to be a visible expression of Christ's love for his Father's people. Our love for one another is to be a power cell energizing the Community of Believers. We definitely need Jesus to be a frequent, consistent and intimate companion to our love.

## **PRAYING SCRIPTURE AS A COUPLE**

Scripture is essential to all of us in the Church. The Lord, Himself, speaks to our minds and hearts. He guides us, through this Sacred Book, to the true paths of joy. Moreover, we cannot experience fully what it means to be sacramental, unless we are familiar with Scripture. It is not only God's Book; it is the Book of God's People. Scripture expresses who we are to God and one another. In a very real way, it is a proposal from the people of the Church to us, "Will you be ours and will you let us be yours? We invite you to live our way of life. We call you to leave all other values and ambitions and take on ours as your own. We want you to be bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, in the Body of Christ." We are not our own couple; we are the Faithful's couple. That is what being a Sacrament means. So, we have to make the Book of the Church, Scripture, an important part of our lives. There is no substitute for Scripture.

It is not merely a question of reading Scripture now and then. That is helpful. No reading of Scripture is to be scorned, but we should be much more ambitious. Our goal should be to make Scripture an integral part of our life, salted in us. Then, those inspired revelations become part of our way of thinking. We want it to so permeate us that, automatically, words of Scripture come to us in all circumstances of our life. We want to become people who not only know the Bible but become scriptural. The Lord offers, thru his Word and People, an alternate way of living. We are given freedom to choose a different way of doing things. Our Scripture should be well thumbed. It should not be a coffee table book, most impressive for visitors to see. The really impressive Bible is dog eared and obviously used. We should wear it out regularly and have to get another.

As in all aspects of our spirituality, the couple dimension has great importance. An individual husband and wife, who read and pray Scripture as a regular practice, are most admirable. They will be richly fed. Great inspiration will come to them. Each will be more generous and loving with the partner. However, the couple dimension is a wonderful addition. Then, they will receive the power of the Lord and of His people directly through their love relationship. As in all other facets of His dealings with us, He wants to reach out to us through our coupleness. Our love is most important to us and to Him. The Lord's greatest ambition for us is that we love one another more. As that occurs, we will love Him more and have more love to spend on others.

A positive suggestion, as a way to bring our love relationship with one another into our experience of Scripture, is to read it together. Choose a passage to read that you mutually agree upon.

Don't simply let the Book fall open on its own, taking whatever passage appears. There is an element of superstition there. We like to say such a practice allows the Holy Spirit to choose. That may be true, but it might also be the crack in the paste, binding the book together. Furthermore, in doing that, we end up with the same passages over and over. The vast majority of Scripture, we never get to read. We get a bunch of favorite passages which warm our hearts and reinforce us in the life we are already living. The challenging ones, those that call us to face hard choices in the Lord, never seem to pop up on their own. However, if from time to time you choose to just let the Book open where it will, have the spouse very much in mind. Have the mentality of offering a gift to your beloved. Hold it out as a surprise gift, not being sure of what it contains. Say, "Will you trust me by accepting it and help me to discover the surprise."

The more recommended way is to take a Book from Scripture, the Gospel of Matthew or St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, for example, and decide to read it all, bit by bit. We need the words of the Lord in context. It is far better to read in sequence than to merely take isolated snippets. The meaning will be clearer and more powerful. Embrace one another, warmly, to establish the mood of your love. Then, one of you read the part of that Book you have chosen for this evening, while the other listens intensely,

carefully absorbing all that is said and the way it is said. Scripture is intended to be proclaimed. Therefore, it is not recommended that both of you silently read the passage. Let one person read while the other listens not only to the words but also the person reading them. The proclaimer is part of the message. For that reason, it is good to alternate the reader. Even if one is not a very good reader, switching back and forth between you should be done. Sometimes the very struggle to read, with the sincerity and love contained in that effort, is significant.

The reading should be slow and meaningful, with the reader putting herself/himself into it. This is not simply a reading of words, done competently. It is a revelation from the Lord, through this beloved person. Both sources of the revelation are important. Each must come through, the Lord and His messenger. The listening partner will discover far more through the love with which it is communicated, than through a flat reading. Be faithful to the passage. Don't add any comments of your own. But your body language, the expressions on your face, the tone and timbre of your voice, the way you touch the beloved, adds to, emphasizes, and clarifies the reading.

Let the words sink in calmly, peacefully. It is not necessary to speak immediately. Let the words and the delivery echo in your hearts. Don't try to analyze or interpret. Keep your mind as quiet as your mouth. The Spirit will take us over and tell us what He wants us to hear, when we permit. Then, share with one another, what you are hearing from the Spirit. Listen to one another. We sometimes want to come up with an agreed upon meaning. That is not always necessary. More important is to hear and internalize how the Spirit speaks to each of us. Clarity will come, over time. Scripture is more likely to raise questions than give answers. As a result of our exposure to Scripture, we should, often, be puzzled, left with decisions and changes to institute.

A very positive effect of sharing Scripture, in this way, is how it reveals to us the faith and goodness of our spouse. We feel their reverence, caring, openness to the Lord, desire to grow. We find a whole new dimension of this woman/man I have been living with for so long. We learn about the Lord in fresh and gentle ways. His message is hugged into us, we are tenderized into being more

open and responsive.

It might be that one spouse has more experience with the Bible, either through private reading or by being a member of a study or prayer group. Both partners will be inclined to make the more experienced one the expert. That one will expect or be expected to take the lead all the time in the reading and the sharing. That is a serious mistake. Then, it can become a lesson, and the other person will not be fully invested. Besides, who says that the experienced one is more insightful or inspired? After all, Peter and the other disciples, on Pentecost, were sent forth to preach the Gospel, and it hadn't even been written. They were certainly not experienced. They did quite well. We don't have to be experts or even practiced in reading Scripture. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. He will provide.

Initially, the more talkative spouse is inclined to speak or the silence becomes unnerving. Isn't this, often, the way in our conversations with others? There is a need to fill the quiet moments with words. Perhaps, I'm afraid my spouse will jump in first and I'll forget what I wanted to say. Actually, in the silent moments, the Lord is waiting for us to be able to listen to him.

## **PRAYING THE OUR FATHER AS A COUPLE**

Another beautiful couple prayer is to take the Our Father, slowly and prayerfully, phrase by phrase. There is no rush on this. It doesn't have to be done on one occasion. If done well, this will extend over a number of prayer sessions. Take a phrase such as "Our Father" and mull and ponder the words in your hearts. Drain out the full meaning of each word. What it means to you personally and to you, as a couple.

"Our" - it is not my father but our father. What does that say to me? Have I been treating Him as mine? If I have, does that lead me to a separate prayer life, does it cut you out, at least somewhat, from my relationship with God? How can I make Him more ours? All these thoughts and others which come to me and I share with you can lead to deep insights and greater closeness.

We fill one another's souls as we exchange how the Lord is revealing His "our-ness" to us.

This can be so rich and meaningful that it fills our prayer time, we never get to "Father." That is fine. Don't push on to "Father" just because it is part of the phrase. Let the "our" sink in and saturate you. It is such an antidote to our accustomed independence and privacy. This is an essential revelation not only for our marriage but also for our participation in the Church. The relationship with God in family life and in the Community of the Faithful is intensely "our".

Share your mutual experiences of "our" back and forth with one another in the presence of the Father. In all probability, there will be interesting differences. This will offer new awarenesses to each of you. You will come to a deeper consciousness of each other's attitudes about family and how to achieve that bonding. Not only the belonging to the Father, but your being tied to one another and the Church will be part of your new understanding. This can be a very exciting prayer occasion. You may well wish to return, if not immediately, at some later point, and review "our" with the Father. There probably will be nuances from the first experience which will enhance your new approach to this prayer.

At another time, take the word "Father." This is a magnificent basis for prayer. Really, there is none better. We are talking about God's identity to us and us to Him. Breathe the name "Father" in and make Him present to you with a depth you have never achieved before. Let all the fatherliness you have ever experienced in your lives help you to get a fuller understanding of God's relationship with us. Be careful not to just be nostalgic, but feel free to bring up incidents from our life with our blood father as a reflection of our heavenly Father. Talk back and forth with one another, the three of you. What a sacred name that is! Call upon the life each of you lived with your own father. Share what it means to be a father yourself or the paternity you witness and reverence in your husband.

"Father" is not a word or a concept. Father is His inner nature. Also, it reveals our vocation. That should be our whole life, to be His daughter, His son. It is awesome and breathtaking to think



about and make real. The consequences of accepting His paternity are life altering. Draw upon each other's faith and the way each has been touched by His paternity. Be patient with yourselves. Take time to savor the full flavor. There is no need to complete this in one sitting. You have all the time in the world. You can come back to this awareness again and again.

A big barrier can arise if our exposure to our own blood fathers has not been all that good. Unfortunately fathers are not perfect. There may well be incidents in our past which are unfavorable. Maybe, He was very critical or preferred my brother to me for example. Concentrate during this prayer time on the most positive moments you recollect. Don't be distracted from them by the bad times. We want during this prayer to roll over in our minds the occasions when he was most like the Father with us.

It may not be so simple. Possibly, the sad truth is that my relationship with my father was not good at all. There may be harsh memories - quarrels, abusiveness, rigidity. Or, maybe, I have no real experience of my father, at all. He may have been withdrawn, uninvolved in my life, cool toward me. He could have even abandoned you. As a consequence, the word father does not bring up anything positive. It is a turn off. My reaction is one of tenseness, anger, frustration, rejection, or cringing. This is certainly understandable. The circumstances call for nothing less.

However, these feelings toward my own father transfer themselves to God. They lead me to be fearful of Him or angry. I tend to stay with Jesus and avoid the issue. Or, I make God androgynous. I run away from his paternity. Or, I let the title, Father, stand but that is all. It is a form of address with no personal meaning to me. We have to do something about that because this is not a question of preference; His very identity to me is at stake.

It is good that this has arisen in my consciousness, even though it makes me uneasy. My history with my human father carries scars that limit my happiness in life. Try though I may, there is no possibility of running away from them. They are buried deep within me. Two necessary steps must be taken to release me - forgiveness and healing. With God's power and grace my forgiveness must be poured out upon my father, difficult, unreasonable though it may

be. This is a gift to my father, of course, but even more to myself. I will free my human father from his sins which live on in me. He may never know it, he might not even care, but his sins continue until they are forgiven. But the biggest effect will be on myself. Until I forgive, those sins of his have possession of me. They determine how I look at myself and how I interact with others. In a very real way, those sins have become mine. Not, in the sense, that I am responsible for them, but because they form me into the kind of person I am. I must release myself by releasing him.

I do not forgive because my father deserves forgiveness. Forgiveness is never earned. It is always freely offered. Also, I will be giving a gift to our Heavenly Father. With my forgiveness, I will allow Him to be Himself with me. As long as I hang onto my father's sins against me, I will not want to be a son/daughter in either the human or divine sense. I will push away in protectiveness. Pater-nity will always be a problem for me, something I connect with my pain.

This forgiveness can call for heroic virtue when the sins my father has inflicted upon me have been especially grave and/or I have fostered the bitterness in my heart for an extended period of time or the hurts are still being imposed. I need to pray to my heavenly Father to lift me beyond myself, to give me His power to forgive. My temptation will be to talk to Him about what my father has done and how he needs to change. I have to turn my Dad over to our heavenly Father with my full absolution. I ask God to overshadow me with His own forgiveness of my father. Then, I turn to my spouse and ask him/her to reinforce me, to gentle my heart and pour compassion in me. Ask that beloved wife/husband to cradle me in their arms and draw the forgiveness from my hardened heart.

Forgiveness is a necessary step, more for my sake than my father's. As long as I withhold forgiveness, I clasp my suffering more tightly to myself. Each day that passes without forgiveness makes my suffering more imbedded in me. It becomes my life style. My personhood becomes more and more defined by the father wound. I am really validating my father's sins against me, authenticating them. My lack of forgiveness is a greater sin against myself than the sins of my father which need to be absolved.

Healing is what we seek most of all. The forgiveness is merely an essential precondition. I need that first, in order to accept the healing. Until I give up the sin causing the hurt, I will not give up the hurt. Turn to your spouse with all the pain in your heart, with the suffering accumulated over the years. Hold it out to your husband/wife as your gift of trust to them. Ask them to take it on themselves because of their love for you. Believe in them, have confidence that they love you that much. Bring it all out, hold nothing back. Concentrate on the hurt you presently experience. You don't want solely to focus on your father's actions. Your spouse can do nothing about them. They are done and accomplished these many years. Talking over and over again about what he did can call forth nothing from your spouse but anger and frustration. They are powerless in regards to them.

What they can do something about is your pain. Offer it to them in its fullness, describing it to the last detail, so that they are experiencing it just as you are. Let them replay to you the pain you have shared, so that you can see that they really do understand. They are not merely being nice, sympathetic. They have actually taken you on, have gotten into your very soul. This may not occur immediately. Hurt is so personal, so highly individualized. Furthermore, you have lived with it so long and ran it over so many times in your mind, it is second nature to you. The deeper the hurt the more it will take to transmit it to your spouse. Be willing to spend many moments of prayer together until this suffering of yours is totally reproduced in the loved one, so that it is no longer yours alone anymore but a mutual experience.

Then, the two of you turn to our Father and make the hurt His. Bring it to Him and turn it over completely and absolutely, not holding back the slightest trace of it. Help each other with the description. Make sure there is no dimension of your pain the two of you do not describe to our Father, down to the last detail.

Listen to His response as he talks to you about your hurt. Be sure He hasn't missed anything. If you hear Him talking about how you should forgive, then be sure you have. You may well have forgiven up to the level of the "Kiss of Peace" forgiveness, but are you holding on to any last remnant. You hold no grudge against your

father, you wish him nothing but good, but there is that last step of walking away completely, no longer seeing yourself as an offended party. Of course, you have been offended. That is the fact. But when I live offended, that is another story. When I see myself as abused, it is part of my self definition, even though I have basically forgiven. That is what we are talking about here. If you hear our Father saying to you things like, "This is the cross I have given you to bear. Think of the hurts you have inflicted upon others. No life is perfect, you have it better than most. Offer it up." That is NOT the Father talking; that is you talking. The Father is interested in healing you, not advising you, much less shrugging His shoulders and suggesting there is nothing to be done other than endure.

Once you are sure both your beloved wife/husband and our Heavenly Father have fully understood and taken on your pain, make it theirs. Give full and complete possession to them. As a sign of that gift of yours to them, bow your head and let your spouse lay hands, in the name of the Lord, upon you. Surrender totally to that touch. Remember your wedding day. You pledged, "With all my worldly goods I thee endow." Your pain is part of your dowry. Up until this time you have kept it to yourself. You have held it back. Now, in full surrender, you give it over. Feel the power of the Lord in the tender touch of your wife/husband as they reach down to your soul to extract the last ounce of your pain. Hear your spouse say with the force of the Father Himself, "My dearest one, be thou healed."

Those two words of the Our Father can be the occasion for many moments of prayer. On other occasions, take each one of the other petitions - "Hallowed be Thy name, Give us this day our daily bread, Forgive us our trespasses, etc." Draw the last drop of meaning out of each and every one. Become closer and closer to one another in the presence of our Father. Doing this together, over an extended period of time, will reveal each other's goodness and faith. You will see more deeply into each others hearts. As you have shared one another's bodies so entirely, now you will participate in each other's souls. Our Father will come to mean so much more when you experience Him through one another.

"Amen" is a wonderful word. It should be the story of our lives as

believers. "So be it," puts our agreement and stamp of approval not only on any prayer we have said but upon all God's interventions in our lives. It says, "That is the way I want it to be. I commit myself to your way of living, Lord." We take on the heart of Mary, assenting with her, "Be it done unto me according to your word." Too often, we treat Amen as an ecclesial version of, "Roger, Over and out." It becomes for us a signal that the prayer is over. We have finished. Rather, it should be a sign that the prayer has begun to take effect. We are committed to put it into operation. "Amen" is our pledge to the Father that what we have talked about has taken hold. We are on our way, together with Him. He can count on us to be His kind of couple.

That is not only true in the Our Father but in all our prayers. Notice, all the prayers in the Liturgy call forth that promise from us. It must be said, at least a dozen times. In our use of the Our Father, as a couple, take each phrase in it, the way we have been suggesting. Then, during each occasion of prayer, say, "Amen." Put your seal on those words, "Father" or "Deliver us from evil" or "Thy will be done." Give your approval. The word "Amen", itself should be an occasion for frequent prayer. We need to pray in order to learn just what we mean when we say it, at this particular time in our lives. This is such a fundamental word in our lives as believers. We should constantly mull it over in our minds to discover how much more we have come to understand this response, as we grow in closeness to the Lord. It should be a renewal of our Baptismal vows.

This exercise with the Our Father shouldn't be done all at once. We don't have to take each phrase one day at a time. In fact, it should take more than one day with each one, but they don't have to be done day by day. In fact, it is not recommended that you do so. Do this on one occasion. Then, use a different method of couple prayer, say Scripture prayer. Next, another type of prayer of a couple and so on. Or, if you are excited and stimulated by one of the phrases of the Our Father, stay with that for several nights. The main point is not to get into a rut. Use variety in your approach to our Father.

## OTHER WAYS TO PRAY

There are so many ways to pray, such rich opportunities to turn to the Father and experience His presence and love. We can never run out of the possibilities of prayer. For example, share your Eucharist with one another. We go every Sunday, often, more frequently. Spend a little time with one another sharing what you have experienced through this beautiful Sacrament. Talk together what this time has meant to you. Draw forth your beloved's faith to add to your own. Most important of all, listen to our Father speak to you about what it means to Him that you are a Eucharistic couple. Let Him tell you what His Son means to Him and how He looks on you as the Body of Christ. Naturally, something like this cannot be accomplished on just one occasion. There is too much depth here. This is valuable to do, since all too often we receive and, not too long after, it is out of our minds. It doesn't last with us. There used to be emphasis on the necessity of a thanksgiving after Holy Communion. That would be a good practice to resurrect by bringing your Eucharist to one another and the Father.

Memories are such a gift in a good marriage. You enrich one another with the memories you create with each other and also with those you bring into your marriage. That should apply to religious memories as well. Your spouse doesn't know the whole you, if he/she only knows what has happened after you met. You did have twenty or so years to prepare for one another and should not withhold that from your beloved. The Lord has loved you all your life long. He has been pursuing you with His grace since the time you were conceived. Those moments of His touch are intended for your spouse as well as yourself. Talk together in His presence. Blanket each other in these warm memories. Ask the Father how He recalls those times with you and what He wants you to get out of them. Listen to Him tell you how much you mean to Him, how His love for you churns within Him.

Share with your beloved and the Lord the hopes you have for your children spiritually. They are your mutual creation, the three of you. Certainly, nothing can bring all three of you closer to one another than talking about your children. Be very honest. As a

couple together say what you really mean, not what you think should be your hope. Listen to your wife/husband. Listen to our Father. Let their hopes expand your own. Simply share your own vision and listen to theirs. Don't limit it by how you think the children will respond. Too often, we underestimate them. In any case, what we are doing here is revealing our hearts in this trinity of love. We are aiming at bringing us closer to one another.

Sometimes, bring the Blessed Mother with you two, when you pray. She is such a gift in our lives. Talk to one another about our experience of Mary. Share how you first heard about her, the persons who introduced you to her, high points of your experience of her, what you would like to improve in your relationship with her, how you would like your children to experience her. Then listen to the Father tell you about Mary and what she means to Him. What it meant to Him to create her, all the times in her life she said, "Amen" to Him, how much He trusted her in giving His Son into her hands. Let Him tell you how He wants Mary be a part of your lives, what He wants her to mean to you. Let him tell you what a wonderful gift he has given you in Mary and how much He loved her attitude toward Him. What a wonderful example of submission she is. That is exactly the way our Father wants us to come to him. Being close to Mary should give us the courage and strength to be submissive to the Lord. Then listen to Mary tell us how much she loves the Father, how she experienced Him in her life, what she learned about Him from her son. Hear her speak to you of her love for you. Let her tell you what your children mean to her and how she wants them to love her. Experience her maternal feeling for you.

## **HE SENT THEM FORTH TWO BY TWO**

Any time we experience the Lord, we should feel an urgency to be generous to others. Our love for one another, which He has granted us, is not merely for ourselves. It is not a private affair. Our times with our Father, are also intended to be fruitful. He has called us to be a Sacrament in His Church, the Body of His beloved Son. We share in the mission of Jesus to proclaim the Glad Tidings. We are, through prayer, to feel impelled to spend our love

on others. We are very good people but, too frequently, we are like the people invited to the Wedding Feast who begged off. "I married me a wife, bought me a farm, just hired an ox." We, too, tend to hide behind our jobs and, especially, our children. Then, there is the old reliable, "I'm only a lay person." We truly have to listen to the Lord and hear His call to us to enter into the lives of others with our love and grace. The Father wants to use us as His instruments, bringing His presence to those in need.

Isn't it fascinating that the first time His Son sent forth the Apostles and Holy Women it was two by two? That should bear a tremendous message for couples. The Lord is telling us something. The normal outreach, in the church, should not be as individuals but together. Of course, we are not saying that those in single vocations in the Church have no role in the apostolic life of the church, but their bringing the Lord to others should not be done singly. Such has been too often the customary practice in the Church. Our couples need to take the leadership in ministry, as a model to the rest of us. This does not mean becoming part of the structure but bringing the Lord to others with whom they are in contact, in the normal functioning of their lives. The Little Church should be the prime source of outreach. It is from our homes that the Gospel can most effectively be proclaimed. Hospitality should be a highly developed virtue in any sacramental couple.

A regular part of our "Amen" should be: "To whom Lord, are you sending us?". Prayer should always have the effect of revealing to us how much we have to give. It should help us see how generous God has been to us and how much we have to give to others. Our hearts should be tenderized and a great spirit of compassion should well up within us. In a very real way, the prayer is not complete, until it is spent. It should be so vibrant within us that we simply cannot contain ourselves.

## THANKSGIVING

While praise is the prayer of choice, the dominant theme of our approach to God, part of the atmosphere we want to establish when we go to our Father, is thanksgiving. We should constantly



be calling to mind the gifts with which he has showered us. We want to develop an awareness of how loving our Father is and how much he wants good things for us.

This is especially important, when we are asking for things. After all, what is the point of asking, if we really don't believe he can or will respond. It would be like a husband going to his wife seeking her assistance in becoming tender, if he really didn't see her as tender. Or a wife asking her husband to help her become better organized, when she saw him as disorganized. We have to see and celebrate all the Father has done for us to give us confidence in his responsiveness to us personally.

We want to be filled with a deep sense of his generosity to us. It is a great antidote to taking God for granted. We want his generosity to fill us up. We can go back over those times in which our Father's personal love, in special ways, has been abundantly clear. This might have been a time of great healing. We want to focus on the sign of the healing and its effects. Recreate the atmosphere, the tenderness that welled up between us and the joy that overcame us.

## **CONCLUSION**

Getting beyond self is the key to a great marriage. That is not easy to do. It normally takes heroic virtue. So, as a married couple, God gives us the gift of sexuality. It is so powerful and all pervasive, it overwhelms our natural tendency toward self. When we have created a truly sexual environment between us, we are absorbed in the other person. Our happiness and well being is not determined by how we feel but how she does. Our joy in life does not come from within ourselves but from what he is experiencing. We are empowered through our sexual desire for our spouses to live out the biblical call of death to self. Our Father is such a loving Father. He wants to make it easy for us to be his kind of woman, his sort of man. When we really let ourselves go with sexual responsiveness, we are most likely to be generously other centered and loving.

Because we want God to constantly remind us of the total love

he desires for us, we can become distracted from our sexuality. That sounds odd but it is true. But He is single minded about the climate of sexuality He empowers us to create. For example, He wants us to establish the highest possible intensity of desire for one another before we make any decisions, but we are likely to do exactly the opposite. We are inclined to say, "We have to be serious now because we have to figure out what to do about our oldest son and his problems in school." Or, "We may have to make a job change, and we have to concentrate on that right now." Or, "We're talking about whether my mother should come to live with us. We can't get distracted." Or, "You know I love you but right now we have to save that for later."

God's view is different. He says, "Any time you face an area of choice, whether large or small, I want you to make it as a couple. You are most a couple when you are sexually aware of each other. So, before you even approach the topic, build up your sexual consciousness of one another. Furthermore, during the course of your discussions on the issue it is probable that you will become so absorbed in the "what" that you will lose sight of the "who." Periodically, stop and come back to me and I will restore you to one another by reminding you of the necessity of your sexual devotion to one another." God's way is different and better. We so concentrate on making the right decision we lose sight of being the right couple, at all times, to one another. When we have sexual passion, everything else falls into place. This is God's special gift to a couple. He intends us to use it fulsomely.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Father Chuck Gallagher, S.J. is the founder and Executive Director of the Pastoral And Matrimonial Renewal Center, whose focus is on the development of lay spirituality and leadership in the Catholic Church. He was the driving force behind the Worldwide Marriage Encounter movement and its first Executive Director.

Father Chuck is the author of dozens of books, audio and video tapes and programs devoted to strengthening marriage, family life and the life of Faith. As a renowned popular speaker, he has travelled extensively throughout the world, giving workshops and implementing these programs. He is the initiator and co-author of the Living in Love Retreat Workshop for married couples and the author of the series of Living in Love Companion Booklets.

Father Chuck's great love for people and his constant encouragement enables them to develop a fuller and deeper love for one another. He has touched and changed countless lives. He is not only a priest and counsellor but a friend to many. His magnetism, vision and enthusiasm has developed faith communities throughout the world. Across the globe, people feel his understanding love and have responded overwhelmingly.

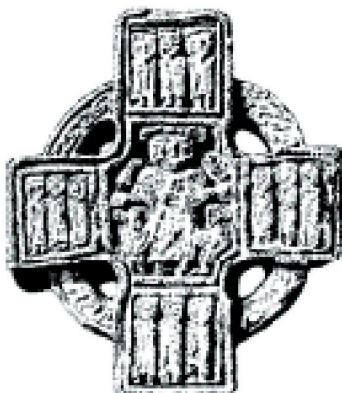




The seal of the Pastoral and Matrimonial Renewal Center is of the ringed head of a High Cross from Castledermot, Ireland. The crucifixion represented on early Irish crosses is almost universally the crucifixion according to the Gospel of John (Jn: 19:37). It is the glorified Christ who is represented: Christ as king and as priest, breathing forth the Spirit at the moment of his death. The spear pierces his side and blood and water flow out: the water symbolic of the Spirit and of Baptism, the blood of Redemption and the Eucharist.

The crucifixion in early Irish art is not shown as Jesus alone and abandoned, but it is a peopled crucifixion - it is Jesus among his disciples, Jesus risen and present among the people of his Church. Jesus Reigns in the midst of his disciples, gathered in unity, who are also his apostles, sent to proclaim his salvation to the four corners of the earth.

Drawing by Sr. Pauline McGrath, O.P.







## LET 'US' PRAY

### The Two Of Us And The Lord

Prayer is such a powerful experience. The Lord truly does make His presence felt to us. He wants to be close to us and have us experience His tender caring for us, always. What He most wants for a couple is what they most want for one another, the deepest possible devotion and intimacy. Nothing pleases our Father more than when His Sacramental couples enjoy each other to the fullest. He wants them to be completely happy with one another and with Him, at all times.

This is a practical guide to husbands and wives. It helps them to see their potential to love one another and the Lord. It is down to earth, meat and potatoes, marital spirituality. The focus is on their sexual love for one another as their basic spirituality. Specific examples of how husbands and wives can pray with and for one another make up the heart of this Booklet. It holds out opportunities for them to develop their Sacramental spirituality to the fullest possible degree.

