Family Connections

Preparing for the Journey of Marriage

by Philip Mamalakis, Ph.D.

Few days in our lives are as memorable as our wedding day, and few decisions more significant, than deciding to marry. While couples spend hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars on the wedding, which will last a few hours, they often neglect to prepare for the marriage, which we want to last a lifetime. All couples dream of living "happily ever after" but many are unaware of, and ill-prepared for, the normal challenges and struggles of marriage. The sad reality is that almost half of all couples will experience the pain of divorce because strong feelings of attraction are not what you need to have a great marriage.

Research indicates that couples who take some sort of marriage preparation have a lower divorce rate than couples without marriage preparation. Preparing for marriage means…

Learning what marriage is for

God is the author and architect of marriage. He reveals to us, through the Scriptures, the Church, and the Tradition, His purpose and plan for marriage. Couples get married for a variety of reasons, but couples need to learn that a successful marriage needs to follow God's plan for marriage.

Marriage is a journey together, a journey of getting to know ourselves and each other, and a journey of becoming one. "O Master, stretch out Your hand…and join your servants; …Yoke them in oneness of mind; crown them in one flesh." *(Orthodox wedding prayer before the crowning)*

Becoming one means learning how to make decisions together, not apart, and working together through the challenges and disagreements of daily life. It's easy to work together when spouses agree on things. Marriage is a journey of learning how to build oneness with your spouse when you disagree.

"Marriage is a journey of love," writes Elder Aimilianos. I remember how much I loved my wife on my wedding day. After 20 years I realize how limited my love was for my wife back then. It is easy to love my wife's good qualities, or when she sees the world the way I see it. Marriage is a journey of learning to love each other as you discover the faults and when we you see things differently.

Marriage is about learning to love each other with God's love, with Christ-like love. Christ's love for our spouse is selfless and unconditional. God's love is much deeper than feelings, which come and go. God's love is expressed as a commitment to serve and care for someone, no matter what we're feeling. Christ's love is expressed as putting our spouse's needs before our own desires. God allows the predictable struggles and challenges of marriage so that we can learn His perfect love. "Marriage is the key that opens the door to discover…perfect love." (St. Gregory Nazianzus)

This journey of acquiring God's love for our spouse is a process of healing of our own sins, rather than trying to change our spouse. Preparing for marriage means learning that God's plan for couples, on their wedding day, is that they do live "happily ever after," but not by getting all our desires met, or trying to change each other. Rather, it is by learning how to love with Christ-like love, and allow God to change us.

"If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us."
(1 John 4:12)

Learning the danger signs

All couples have differences and all marriages experience disagreements and difficulties. Happy couples learn how to work together through these differences. When couples chose to react selfishly, then criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling to enter their relationships. When these selfish types of reactions fill a couple's relationship, intimacy and oneness are undermined and couples slip down a slippery slope toward marital meltdown and divorce. Couples need learn how to recognize these warning signs that they are sliding down that slope and learn to address their difficulties in a way that nurtures intimacy and oneness.

Getting to know each other

Everyone enters marriage with certain expectations about marriage, assumptions about the world, and ideas about love and family life. We acquire these things from the families we grew up in. The list is endless of the ways the families in which we grow up shape our expectations about everything from the role of the Church in the home to the role of the dad in the home.

Preparing for marriage means getting to know your own family, and your fiance's family, and deciding together how you would like to do things in your new home. These mature conversations facilitate oneness and put good patterns in place for how couples work together in the home.

It's one thing if you discover, after the wedding, that your wife prefers Miracle Whip to real mayonnaise. It's another thing to discover that she wants a career, and you want to have kids right away, or you want to attend church and he wants to sleep in on Sundays. Preparing for marriage means making the time to discuss the larger issues that can undermine oneness in marriage if they are unaddressed. Issues related to faith, finances, parenting, in-laws, communication, sexual intimacy, problem solving, and personal time versus couple time need to be addressed before the wedding. Discussing this issues as a couple, and with your priest, prepares couples for all the issues that will arise along the journey of marriage.

Engaged couples can feel a lot of pressure to go through with the marriage without addressing these issues. While it's disruptive to postpone a wedding until these issues are addressed, it is more disruptive to get divorced because one of these issues was not attended to before the wedding.

Learning to communicate

We inherit our communication style, in part, from our families. Before the wedding is the best time for couples to learn how to speak and listen to each other in a way that builds oneness and intimacy. Learning to speak, as an offering of our thoughts, feelings, and ideas, allows couples to grow in intimacy as they work though difficulties.

No marriage struggles from too much listening. Rather, listening is the first casualty in marital discord. Listening is a sacrificial act of self-offering to your spouse. Real listening requires that we suspend our own thoughts, feelings, and agenda, and allow the other to be heard. Real listening is an act of veneration that nurtures oneness in the midst of daily life. Couples do best when they learn the importance of listening and make time to listen to each other.

Making a plan

As engaged couples learn about the path of marriage, the danger signs, about each other, and how to communicate, they can put some strategies in place before the wedding to help them stay on the path of marriage. Several of the strategies include:

Ground rules: Like guardrails along winding roads, ground rules keep happy marriages on the path on oneness and salvation. Couples need to make ground rules together around those areas they have difficulty, whether it's anger, communication, finances, or time together. We show our love to our spouse by sticking to these ground rules no matter how we feel.

A guide: Couples who desire to stay on the path of marriage need a guide, a priest who knows the path, to work with them, to lead them on the path of marriage, and assist them when they get stuck. It is the priest, with the Gospel in hand, who leads couples on their very first steps of their marriage in our wedding ceremony.

Couples are united in Church, in the midst of a community of friends, family, and faithful. Couples who desire to stay on the path of marriage keep their marriages, and their homes, Christ-led, intimately connected to the Sacramental life of the Church.

Forgiveness: All couples have struggles and all couples make mistakes. Happy couples learn how to incorporate forgiveness and repentance into their daily and weekly lives. Christ offers to each of us the sacrament of Confession, to help us get back on the path of oneness and salvation.

Prayer: We participate in the life of Christ and His Church by incorporating prayer into our marriage and our homes. Couples who learn how to pray together, and as a family, invite the Holy Spirit into their union. It is the Holy Spirit who transforms a couple and unites them into one. Oneness is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

Mandatory marriage preparation for all couples

We need to make marriage preparation a priority as we prepare for our wedding day. The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese Center for Family Care developed a three-part marriage preparation program designed to address this need, **The Journey of Marriage** in the Orthodox Church. For more information about workshops in your area contact Center for Family Care familycare@goarch.org.

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A Prayer for the Service of Marriage

Bless this marriage and grant unto these Your servants (Name) and (Name) a peaceful life, length of days, chastity, love for one another in a bond of peace, offspring long lived, fair fame by reason of their children, and a crown of glory that does not fade away.

Account them worthy to see their children's children. Keep their wedlock safe against every hostile scheme; give them of the dew from the Heavens above, and of the fatness of the earth. Fill their houses with bountiful food, and with every good thing, that they may have to give to them that are in need, bestowing also on them that are here assembled with us all their supplications that are unto salvation.

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