

serious effort to reclaim the love they've lost, many spouses in low-conflict marriages choose to divorce.

- Having children and a family also used to be the number one reason why people married. Not so today. Studies show that a growing number of Americans are viewing children as an obstacle to happiness. The upshot is that today many couples are having fewer children, while also waiting longer to start a family. Once again, the underlying implications of these trends seem to suggest that self-growth and self-fulfillment have taken front and center stage, and children and family life seem less important.

The Bottom Line

So here's the bottom line. Timeless values like commitment, sacrifice, fidelity, love, honor and respect have always helped couples strike a balance between individual, marital and family needs. They make us better, rather than bitter, while also helping us avoid the self-centered trap that undermines marital satisfaction and the oneness to which God calls all couples.

Father Charles directs the Archdiocese's outreach ministry to intermarried couples and their families. For more information, log onto the Interfaith Marriage Web site using the following address:
www.interfaith.goarch.org.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

INTERFAITH WEB SITE
www.Interfaith.goarch.org

Center for Family Care
www.family.goarch.org

OUTREACH & EVANGELISM WEB SITE
www.Outreach.goarch.org

PUBLICATIONS

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*When You Intermarry
Ministering to Intermarried Couples
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Life's Circumstances Can Make You Bitter or Better

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The other day, I had occasion to meet informally with a couple who'd been married for 51 years. By their own admission, their journey together was littered with a number of setbacks and challenges related to finances, health, parenting and extended family. But despite these and other similar challenges, both stated they had endured them together, and grown closer as a result. They also stated that sacrifice, mutual respect, commitment, love, honor, fidelity had often made all the difference in their efforts to overcome "the bumps in the road."

Toward the end of our conversation I decided to describe some of the work I do with couples, and asked if either partner had any secrets they'd like to share - especially for younger couples. The husband offered this quick, rye response. "Oh, I don't know if we have

any real secrets to share. In fact, I'd say that the secret to being happily married is anything but a secret. But since you asked...." At that point, to my delight, they waxed rather eloquently on the subject of marriage and what they had learned for several minutes.

And just as it looked as though our conversation was coming to an end, the wife looked fondly at her husband, and then at me, and observed, "You know, maybe I do have one secret you might share. Tell them...." Pausing to collect her thoughts she continued, "tell them that life's circumstances can either make you bitter or better. But if you remain committed to the things that help marriages work, you'll avoid getting bitter and you'll get better at being the married person you want to be."

I came away from this encounter refreshed and encouraged by this couple's philosophy. I also gained an even deeper appreciation for the timeless values that served both this couple, and endless marriages before and after them.

Bitter, Rather than Better

Sadly, I've met many bitter and broken couples who weren't nearly as successful at being married as this couple. Most had different stories to tell. These couples described an endless litany of issues, problems and

challenges that made them bitter, rather than better. And as I think back now, remembering the anguish on their faces, and the anger, resentment, dashed hopes and regrets that characterized their comments, I can't help thinking now that if these values had played a more prominent role in their marriages, their stories might have sounded significantly different.

Maybe We're Too Self-Absorbed

No doubt, previous generations of married couples have had their share of problems. And in some ways, I would maintain that some positive changes have taken place to change the inherent landscape of modern marriages. Yet, despite these positive changes, divorce rates are up and more spouses than ever report being unhappy in their marriages. Moreover, I believe one reason to account for all this marital misery is closely related to the fact that love, commitment, sacrifice, respect, fidelity aren't as commonly valued as they once were.

Certainly, these concepts sound nice when they're strung together. But my work and readings suggest that far too many people today associate these values to a bygone era that belonged to their parent's or grandparent's generation. In their place, a new set of values, and a new type of thinking that emphasizes self-fulfillment, self-determination, self-sufficiency and self-

improvement have taken center stage in the hearts and minds of an increasing number of people in our society.

By the way, did you notice the emphasis on self? It's as though the average person is less interested in their relationships and a little too self-absorbed. Moreover, it's my contention that this increased preoccupation with self has had subtle, negative consequences on marriage and family life. Confused? Not convinced? Well, perhaps these few examples might help you better understand what I mean.

- Over 40% of all marriages are ending in divorce. That's no surprise to most people. However, did you know that a sizable number of these failed marriages are labeled "low conflict couples" by experts who study divorce trends? In other words, these marriages reveal little or no evidence of any serious destructive behavior. In these failed marriages, spouses have simply fallen out of love with one another, and opt to divorce. This, despite the fact, that there are many reputable studies and lots of information in our popular media indicating that children generally do better when their parents remain together. Yet, since we live in a society that places a high premium on self-fulfillment, rather than making a