Some practical experiences and underlying considerations from a father about married life and family life

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1. “Levels” of conjugal love

It usually helps married people (especially after the first 5 to 7 years of marriage) to bear in mind that in married life each spouse gets to know the other at different levels, through a gradual process, learning what true love means.

a) Physical attraction

This is usually the first impulse in matrimonial love. There are married couples who think they can remain at this level. The result is harmful; this inability of transcending the level of sensations and converting it first into a deep feeling towards the other and then into a full love, inevitably leads to treating the person as a thing, an object. The effect is easy to predict: if I’m no longer physically attracted to you, then I’ll have to look for someone else who does give rise to that attraction within me. There is nothing wrong with the level of physical attraction. The mistake is to consider it the essence of married love, and to want to go no further. Love, in fact, starts at this stage, but does not end there. It is not the final goal. It is a level that has to be surpassed, or rather still, enriched by the following levels that give it meaning and raise its significance, making it fully human.

b) Falling in love

The next level is falling in love. This makes us say, beyond mere physical attraction, “How good it is to be with you!” It is a higher level than the previous one, which it raises up and ennobles. The spouse’s personality, his or her moral qualities, and way of being are discovered and appreciated more and more. There are couples who settle for this phase of agreeable, even intoxicating, feeling. But herein lies also its limitation, so to speak. One rejoices in the feeling of love, instead of falling more deeply in love with the other. Then, as with the previous level, when this feeling disappears, we think our love has died out and we are tempted to replace it with another that will make us regain the feeling we have lost. Falling in love is good and needs to be nurtured throughout married life, but it is not the end of the journey, nor is it the essence of love. We have to go deeper.

c) Loving with the will

This is the fully human level, the level of the intelligent, free will with which one decides, going beyond the sensations and feelings they may awaken, to love one’s spouse and dedicate oneself to making him or her happy. A will, so to speak, that takes hold of the heart and leads it where we want: to the person beloved, at every moment, and in all places and circumstances. It is a will that affirms, “I love and I want to love more and more.” As a writer of classic literature has said, “I did not marry you only because I loved you, but so that I could love you more each day”. Married people have to build up the future of their married love day by day.

Marriage is a “promise” of love and not only a “pact” or agreement. “Nowadays we often encounter a weakened or pact-based version of love which includes the idea that it might only be temporary. In practice this approach means abandoning promises: nobody wants to make a commitment with respect to a future choice, since love is understood as an arrangement, in which one expects that there will always be benefits.” (R. Yepes)

2. Chastity within marriage: “affirmative affirmation” and “affirmative negation”

a) “Affirmative affirmation”

The virtue of chastity in married life leads us to use our initiative and to increase our love for our spouse in a positive way. Some possible expressions of this: spending a few minutes each day thinking of ways how to express our affection and consideration for our spouse; frequently expressing our love and...
thanking our spouse for doing the same; surprising our spouse in some little way which shows our interest; finding moments to be alone together, talking and relaxing in the best possible conditions and fostering mutual attraction.

b) “Negative affirmation”

This consists in avoiding anything that could cause our love to cool down. The meaning of this “negation” is eminently positive: it is all about making our married love grow. We need to know how to keep our distance with people of the opposite sex in the work or study environment, whilst on journeys, etc. The fact that we are married should not lead us to give less importance to over-familiarity. We must avoid showing to other people the closeness that we would share with our spouse. For example: do not remain alone with a person of the opposite sex in a room, in the car, or on a journey for work, etc. Do not speak of the personal problems we would talk about with our spouse. Do not let other people make those intimate confidences that might create bonds between us, or try to find in others the “understanding” that we do not find in our own spouse. It is easy to be naïve about these points, forgetting that at times any other woman or any other man is in a better position than our spouse to present “intermittently” his or her best side. It is a mistake to think that we can take fewer precautions with people of the opposite sex who are physically less attractive. Experience teaches that in these cases it is easier to make inappropriate confidences and to make room for a certain amount of intimacy that to begin with seems insignificant. (Problems with the children, an undertaking that the couple don’t agree on, advice as to a gift for one’s own spouse…). But this can start to weave a net of little threads that become difficult to cut, and that, sometimes, are scarcely seen as something negative, until one day, at a time of special sensitivity when our defences are down can lead us to fall into serious infidelity.

The times we live in may make us have to be more aware of this negative side, because the environment can influence us in many ways. However, “affirmative affirmation” is the more important. We need to encourage married people to be determined to win over their husband or wife time and again, loving them as they want to be loved; knowing how to nourish a broader range of married intimacy, sharing their thoughts, communicating their state of mind at the right moment, and seeking to form a single heart.

3. Love between parents is a condition for bringing up the children

“The firm love of the parents is an absolutely necessary condition if the family is to constitute an environment in which to form their children’s character. (…). Afterwards will come recommendations, techniques, formulas, positive procedures and prescriptions for achieving the objective – the formation of the children. But all the recommendations together will be scarcely a drop in the ocean compared with the deep and extensive universe of family love in which the children are brought up. (…). It would be like sewing beautiful stitches in the void if they do not take place within the sphere of family love.” (C. Llano)

“When we bring a child into the world, we take on the obligation of trying to make him happy. To achieve this (…) the first duty is to make our spouse happy, even with all of his or her defects. For children to be happy they need to see that their parents are happy. A child is not happy when he is swamped with caresses and presents, but only when he can share in the happy love of his parents. If his mother has quarrelled with his father, no matter how much she later covers the child with kisses, the child will experience a deep wound. What he wants is to share in the family, in the love his parents have for each other. Begetting a child is the same as committing ourselves to making our spouse happy.” (U. Borghello).

4. A psychological commitment: “to burn one’s boats”.

One author explains that spouses who do not commit themselves fully to each other in marriage because they are afraid of being disappointed, provoke precisely what it is they fear and wish to avoid. Without total commitment they are more attentive to defects than to virtues, and they have a tendency to make comparisons thus provoking disappointment. On the other hand they forget that, in a certain way, “disillusionment” forms part of the nature of love. Disappointments always occur in love, but they are the chance to strengthen that love. It is only love that can see further and discover
in the beloved not only what he or she is, but what the spouse can become if that trust is not withdrawn. In married life sometimes disappointment is experienced because we do not behave as our spouse expects us to. But there is no reason for this to be a brake. It can give us the impetus to love in a more disinterested way. They say that “the door to happiness does not open inwards”; the person who goes on thinking only of himself only manages to close it with greater force. “The door to happiness opens outwards”, towards others. We have to enter into marriage in order to make our spouse happy, and that is when we find our own happiness. Love demands sacrifice... a sacrifice that is “well rewarded”.

5. Living out our Commitment

Each night we should be able reply affirmatively to these two questions: Have I shown affection to my spouse? Was he or she aware of it?

In family life we have to put all our energies into play. Carelessness may be perceived as a lack of love or disloyalty: “if he forgets to phone me it’s because he doesn’t love me” “The fact that he doesn’t hang that picture means I don’t matter to him”, etc. Our judgments of third persons are generally more moderate: spouses are very demanding of one another.

Married love is “all-embracing”, in the sense that we love by being and by not being, by speaking and by keeping silent, with out gestures and our telephone calls, walking, going up in the lift, going to the doctor, drinking a coffee and doing the most mundane tasks ... in everything.

We should realise that negative behaviour generally causes a greater impact and provokes a more immediate response than positive behaviour. The latter works more discretely and provokes more medium and long-term reactions, and has a deeper effect on us. The former, on the other hand, may not leave any trace if we rectify promptly, if needs be, asking for forgiveness. Giving way should not be seen as renunciation, but as an achievement.

6. Notes on communication in marriage

a) “Presumption of Innocence”

If it is important in general to be inclined to think well of people, it is essential for spouses to cultivate this habit between themselves: “presuming innocence” at family level. To say to oneself, for example, “Even though he hurt me when he did that or made that comment, I know that he didn’t want to hurt me”; or “I’m not surprised that he forgot what I said, with all the things he has to do!” Or “It’s understandable that he arrived late, somebody must have caught him just as he was leaving!”, etc. As a general rule we have to think “My spouse doesn’t hurt me because he intends to hurt”. This open attitude enables the couple to face up to negative situations in a more serene and constructive way. If we are upset by the conduct of our spouse we should understand that he or she makes mistakes more out of clumsiness or ignorance than out of bad will. We should not see a negative intention in the way he or she behaves. We also have to avoid sarcasm disguised as good humour, because it ends up destroying trust.

b) Beware of those “hidden expectations”

Expectations are what one spouse expects to receive from the other, sometimes thoughtlessly under the influence of a cultural model or advertising... It is important to bring them out into the light because otherwise they will influence us negatively when the other spouse does not behave as we expected, and destroys our expectation.

Many people keep such incidents to themselves for a long time, without talking simply to their spouse about them, so that, if they are reasonable they can continue the behaviour, and if they are not reasonable then they are dropped. There are various reasons for this silence: sometimes we think there is no need to talk about them (“He already knows me and he knows what I want, and he’ll do what I think”); at other times it is out of fear of disagreement, a situation that arises when one of the two is afraid of the other’s reaction and feels insecure; and other times because they consider that affection can do everything and if their expectations are not met, their affection will be great enough to overcome all difficulties.

c) Know the different ways of communicating and emotional reactions.

A lot has been written about this. Here we only mention some common situations.

- Questions. Women ask questions more frequently, as a way of keeping up the conversation and of
showing that they are involved in things. On the other hand men only ask questions when they want to obtain some information. Sometimes the husband tries in vain to solve the problems his wife raises with her questions, when really she is not looking for solutions – often she already knows them – she just wants understanding and some affectionate or personal comment.

- The way of keeping up a subject of conversation. Once husbands have said what they have to say, they have achieved their objective and they tend not to go on any longer. Wives tend to establish connections and they continue the conversation until they get what they set out to obtain, often coming up against the disagreeable surprise of not having been listened to, because their husband thought the matter had been settled.

- Each topic in great detail. The wife generally gets satisfaction from sharing her thoughts and emotions in detail with her husband. The husband, on the other hand, tends to feel more comfortable talking about politics, economics, sport etc. If they don’t realise this, it may happen that the husband gets impatient listening to so many details.

- The objective of each spouse’s communication. Another tendency it is good to be aware of is that the wife wants to comment on her experiences simply to share them with her husband. The husband may interpret this as her consulting him about problems that need solving. The more recurrent the subject and the more details she brings to light, the more the husband worries; he begins to see it as a difficult and complicated matter, so then he tends to get sad, thinking that he has failed by not getting his wife to stop worrying about things. A husband forgets that it is a good sign that his wife should comment on the details of her life, because it indicates trust. She is expecting interest, real support, and is looking for serenity and stability.

When there are lacks of understanding between the couple, misunderstandings tend to become more noticeable if they don’t find a remedy. Wives may over emphasise the negative aspects, comment on details that annoy them (sometimes in spite of themselves, since even though they don’t want to, they can’t stop doing it) and they feel urged to let out just everything they have inside. Husbands are the opposite, when faced with a conflictive situation they often keep quiet and shut themselves up inside themselves, even though this does not mean they are going to do nothing. Sometimes when they do decide what they should do they fail to inform their wife about their decision.

This path may lead to the risk of each spouse radicalising his or her own character and creating a distance in the marriage. It is important to understand that a person does not show his emotions, or does not behave in a particular way because he wants to annoy, but because he has not learned any other way of doing things.

- Misunderstandings about sincerity. We need to unmask two misconceptions with respect to sincerity in marriage:
  a) A false claim to integrity, which, taken to the extreme leads to the neurosis of having to say absolutely everything, not because it interests the other spouse who may not even want to hear it, but in order to place sincerity higher even than charity, forgetting that veritatem facientes in caritatem (Eph 4, 15). It is not materially possible to “say everything”; we need to find the right balance and select. There is also a sphere, in part incommunicable, that refers to our interior life and our relationship with God. There are those temptations and suggestions that everyone feels they may succumb to and it would be indelicate and counterproductive to speak about them outside of spiritual direction.
  b) A deceptive “emotional sincerity”. Some people think erroneously that they are more sincere when they say everything that comes into their head at moments of annoyance of lack of control. It is a mistake that leads to a lot of problems. What we say when highly emotionally involved is sometimes not what we think (and in this sense it is not sincere). At such moments we can seek to hurt rather than to tell the truth. We have to know how to wait, to ask for forgiveness, and to take the sting out of things.

- The myth of “spontaneity”. We generally think that spontaneity comes without any effort. In marriage we have to make an effort to form our spontaneity. We need to know how to bring to the home the courtesy and consideration for others that we often practise outside the home.Courtesy must be spontaneous to us, rather than thinking that spontaneity in the home means giving free rein to
any whim or bad manners. For example: there are husbands who refuse “to practise” paying their wife compliments (“It’s not my way” “It doesn’t come spontaneously”), but they have no difficulty in learning how to play golf, in spite of that being more difficult.

There are others who say they are unable to change those little habits that do not help family life: (they start reading the paper as soon as they arrive home, sit in a particular armchair, speak in a tedious tone to their wife...) and, nevertheless they can pass from an automatic car to a manual one, or from having the brake on the right on the bicycle to being on the left on the scooter without any problem... It is not so difficult to change our routines: to get up earlier, to greet him (or her) when they arrive home, to offer the best to our spouse, to show wonder at his or her concerns... It is the courtesy of love, loving decisively with the will. A simple rule: the husband should consider whether he feels a little uncomfortable sitting reading the papers whilst his wife is doing the housework (often after having worked outside the home). The wife, on her part, should learn to sit down sometimes with her husband, even though there are plenty of things that need tidying up.

Things in love which are done out of habit become routine, as they are not the result of personal decisions, but arise from comfort seeking which is simply shared rather than passed through the sieve of love. Very often this inertia is involuntary and can easily be changed (otherwise, we would have to call it by its name: selfishness). The mere fact of knowing that it exists is already an important step towards overcoming it. Then we need to make a resolution and practice putting it into effect: that is love.

d) We should learn to rationalize what it is that makes us angry. Anger has a sequence, a progression. First we perceive that we have been hurt in some way. Then we get angry. Then we want to return the hurt; and lastly we hit back.

We have to be convinced (not everyone is) that giving way to anger is not a good thing in marriage. It is irrelevant that sometimes it is the occasion for a greater good – the reconciliation that comes after the outburst. It is true that the marriage relationship may be strengthened after reciprocal forgiveness and it seems to be born again out of its own ashes... But in itself it is not a good way of building up marriage.

If we are to overcome our anger, we have to know how it works. The first stage is the grievance or the feeling of hurt. To get rid of it completely belongs to experts, but to exercise a certain control is within everybody’s reach. Especially if we are convinced that the majority of grievances that we perceive are not real, they are in the imagination, they are the product of our touchiness. If we try to get rid of one “each month”... (from tomorrow that habit of my wife or my husband won’t annoy me…”; “from now on it won’t annoy me if he doesn’t realise that ...”), the family will soon be far more cheerful.

The second stage is to lose our temper. If we have overcome the first stage and don’t perceive the grievance, we don’t generally get annoyed. And if we do get annoyed? Don’t worry. Don’t give it any importance; or we could try to understand why we get upset: “Why am I annoyed?” “What is the real reason for my annoyance?” “What circumstances make me feel pressure?” It’s worth asking ourselves this from time to time, because otherwise we shift the problem over to our spouse. If we are sincere with ourselves, we almost always find that the real cause has to do with a number of internal elements and that its origin is more in ourselves (personal defects, tension at work, disappointment with our own behaviour...) than in our spouse.

Then comes the third stage: the urge to attack. The experts coincide here, “Count to ten”. Another ten, and then another. Because if we reach the last stage, attack, then harm will be done. One temptation that we can have is to think that if we control our anger and our “spontaneous” tendencies, we will lose our personality. It is just the opposite. Forging our character and developing our personality consists mainly in overcoming ourselves for love of God and of other people. The person who masters himself has character. The weak person is the one who allows himself to be dominated by his temperamental tendencies, which, paradoxically, are often the least human tendencies in so far as they are scarcely belong to our intellect and will.

7. Work and family. We should make time for the family within a society that is always in a
hurry.
The love of spouses needs time. Affection comes from spending time together. In this it is very easy to delude ourselves and look for material substitutes that never completely fill the need to share as love demands. We have to spend enough quality time with the family for this to work. We have to look at our situation, at the time we really have, without false hopes and dreams, and from that build a family life that is as intense as possible.
The experts in family guidance talk about an effective tool: the diary. Our diary should have not only our professional commitments, the appointments we have to attend, but also those times that we ourselves fix for the good of our family and our personal lives. If time for the family is written in the same place as our “important” meetings we won’t miss it. If not, it will become buried beneath the thousand and one urgent things we have to do each day. If a client wants to meet us at 7.30 in the evening, but we have planned to be home by then, we can tell him we have another meeting, which is absolutely true, and arrange another time or another day. If we have to arrange a telephone call it is better to ask people to call during work time (perhaps switch off the mobile phone after a certain time at home).
We should consult our spouse when deciding how to use our time, because he or she should have a say in the matter; we are not the only one to be affected. We have to see unusual events, for instance, spending more time at work, as taking away from the family something that belongs to it. Sometimes we can’t do anything else, but if we do it with mutual agreement, this will help foster serenity.
Anyone who seeks to sanctify ordinary life has to seek “unity of life”. We mustn’t build up airtight compartments between work, family, relationships etc. Unity of life demands that everything should be informed by the love of God and be directed to his glory. It is essential that we learn to make the Holy Mass the “centre and root” of our Christian life: direct everything towards the Mass and from there obtain the strength to raise it to God’s glory.
When we make the sanctification of our daily work the “door-jamb” or “hinge” of Christian life we have to remember that a hinge without a door is useless, just as a door cannot function without a hinge. Making our work the “hub” doesn’t mean that it is more important than the family, but that it occupies a particular place – that of “hub” – in the overall sanctification of ordinary life.

8. In moments of crisis “the solution is up to me”
“Whenever we come up against a difficulty in our relationship we should know that there is just one person who must act to improve the situation: me. This is always possible. Generally however, we take it that it must be the other spouse who should change and this hardly ever happens (...) if you want to change your spouse, you yourself must be the first to change in some way” (U. Borghello).
It’s no use waiting: the solution is in our own hands. If we want, love will overcome the crisis. If we see the problem and don’t acknowledge that we ourselves must change, then we become a central part of the problem.
Here it would be good to mention forgiveness once again, forgiveness that comes quickly without allowing time for pride to swallow it up. We have to explain to couples that it is good to practise doing this. It is hard to begin with, but once we have learned how to do it, the words and the gestures come as though by magic and they are another way of nourishing love.

9. Epilogue: from “you and I” to “us”
When love between spouses matures, it forms an “us” that turns our individual biographies into a co-biography. This “us” implies the establishment of a common undertaking, which is essentially the good of the spouses and opening up of conjugal intimacy to children, that is to say the family. Marriage commits us to integrate our own biography into a common enterprise; to fuse our personal journey into our married journey. Any other way marriage ends up by becoming an intimacy that is self-seeking; two selfish people who live together.
This community set up by marriage, this “us” is much more than merely living together; it is not only being “beside” or “with” the other spouse. This is not enough to define the marriage community. The “us” that is the foundation of the commitment to marriage is to be found in much deeper ground. Spouses do not give one another what corresponds to them, or more than what corresponds to them, or
even more than the other could ever have dreamed of, since it is not a matter of amount but of married love. It is both spouses who form the “us” of marriage in every respect, because everything is put into common and comes to new life as “ours”.

It is only then that we can welcome our spouse when he or she cannot or does not want to give. The husband loves his wife (and vice-versa) not only as himself (this is due to everyone), but with the love that he has for himself” (J. Hervada) The spouses become “a single unit of life and for life” (P. J. Viladrich).

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