

INTRODUCTION



YOU CAN'T BUILD A MARRIAGE ON FEELINGS THAT FLUCTUATE WITH THE DAY, Pope Francis told a group of engaged couples at the Vatican in February 2014. Marriage must be built on the solid foundation of true love. Such love, he said, comes from God. When we give our hearts to each other with this kind of love, that's all we need. God will do the rest.

Making room for God in our marriages turns out to be the secret of happiness. When we imitate Jesus and die to ourselves out of love for each other, we chase away selfishness, cruelty, and harsh words, and we open our hearts to self-giving love, kindness, and words of love. Pope Francis understands this well, as you will see in these reflections.

In this booklet, we walk for thirty days with Pope Francis, pondering and praying with his powerful teachings on love and marriage. We hope to learn here once again how we can promise to love forever and live in the joy of that love.

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1 | FAMILIES ARE FUNDAMENTAL

Building strong families is how we create a strong society. It is in the family that we learn to live with others despite our differences. Here we belong to each other. And this is the place where parents pass on the faith to their children.

Pope Francis reminds us that the family is the “first church” in which faith is passed from one generation to the next as we experience love, forgiveness, and generosity with each other. When we learn about these things in our home, we also begin to see God’s presence and grace there. Indeed, what a privilege to share daily life when we live it as a faith experience.

PONDER

To whom am I called as family? How do I share my faith with them? How do I show them that I believe God loves me and extends that love through me to them?

PRAY

Dearest Joseph and Mary, open our hearts to the beauty of our family. Give us the courage we need to love each other above ourselves. Amen.

2 | A COMMON STORY

It is significant that each and every one of us experiences the basic need of stable love, an open door, and someone else with whom we plan and share the story of our lives.

Pope Francis points to a deep desire on the part of every one of us, a desire to have a home. We want to be welcomed when we walk through the door. We want people there to know and love us. We want to share dreams, schemes, and hopes for the future with our dear and beloved ones. The daily events and activities of our family create our most important story, for in it we discover the hand of God touching us with love.

PONDER

Think back over the last month or two of your family life. How have you shared dreams and hopes together? How have you experienced the hand of God touching you?

PRAY

Mary, mother of Jesus and our mother too, help us create a home where the desires of our hearts are met with faith. Guide us to your Son, whose love we share. Amen.

3 | THE SCHOOL OF HUMANITY

The family is the place where we learn to be fully human. The shared life that spouses create is the basis of this. How families embrace children, how they protect each other, and how they bring the generations together are the beautiful outcomes of this.

Pope Francis reminds us that how a family lives together is very important. It's not enough to simply remain faithful and together. We must also create a "community of life" in which all our family members can prosper. This is the "domestic church" of which Vatican II spoke so eloquently.

PONDER

What can you do to make more vital each of the pope's suggestions in the quote above? How can you build a "domestic church" in your home?

PRAY

We welcome you into our home, O Lord, and we open ourselves to the grace of your love. We offer you our very lives in thanks. Amen.

4 | STAY CLOSE TO THE LORD

Don't be afraid to make a strong commitment of love and embrace marriage. Let your love grow deeper and bring the Lord into your lives; prepare yourselves well to be a married couple, but then trust that Jesus remains with you. He is part of your family, and he does not leave you alone. Embrace him.

Here Pope Francis is speaking to engaged couples, but his advice is good for us all. God is love; when we love each other as spouses, we are *in God*. Marriage isn't merely a bond between two people; it is a community of love in which two people share God's eternal love. The Lord is within our marriage.

PONDER

If the source of our love is God himself, then how is that love part of daily life: forgiveness, generosity, turning the other cheek, and serving one another as spouses?

PRAY

Jesus, you are the source of our love. Help us to turn our hearts to you as we love one another. Fill us with your love. Amen.

5 | MARRIAGE IS A VOCATION

When we marry, we are responding to the divine call that we love one another. The sacrament builds on the love that is already there because God has implanted it within us. Marriage comes from giving this love to each other; God's love remains the basis of it all.

Everyone is called to love. It is a vocation, which means a “calling.” And it is a gift. With this gift and with the certainty of this call, we can be certain in our marriage that God is present, as Pope Francis reminds us. There is no fear of anything; everything can be faced together! Even when times are bad, sickness surprises us, or pain is present, God remains with us, pouring love into our marriage.

PONDER

God's presence is grace: a power to do what needs to be done. How do you experience this grace in your marriage?

PRAY

God of love, help us to be more aware of your presence between us as a couple and within our family and household. Amen.

6 | OUR DAILY JOB

Marriage is a daily task. The couple in love becomes intimately involved with each other, each acting like a goldsmith: the one polishes and refines the other, making each other into more beautiful women and men.

Isn't the simile that Pope Francis uses here a lovely one? In marriage, we become like a goldsmith, gently shaping and forming one another into being a better man or woman. Each act of forgiveness teaches forgiveness to the other. Each moment of romance shapes the heart for love. A shared meal, a tender touch, a shared laugh—each reminds us of the eternal and compassionate love of God.

PONDER

When was the last time you wrote a love note to your spouse? How do you express your love to each other?

PRAY

Give us the courage to reach out to each other with open hearts, O Lord. Let our words always be words of love. Amen.

7 | BUILDING A HOME

Growing in love is like building a house together. Little by little, the raw materials of love and life become something quite lovely. This is something that the couple must do with each other; they build their home together.

The great insight of Pope Francis here is that love must be built. Just as one would build a house from the foundation to the roof, so we who marry also build a life of love. This is something one person cannot do without the other. We must both bring our hearts to this work. When we do that we also experience happiness and deep joy. We live in the trust of each other's love. Your love-house will not fall down!

PONDER

What steps can each of us take to build a more loving marriage? How can we open the door of our home and our hearts to allow God to dwell with us?

PRAY

Holy Spirit of love and peace, enter our lives with the force of divine love. Help us build a home where you can live. Amen.

8 | LOVE IS THE ROCK

Love is not a feeling. Feelings come and go with the days and weeks. Love is more. It is a commitment to live through good times and difficult ones, through sickness and health, through thick and thin. Love comes from only one source: God. God is the basis of true marriage.

Love is not a feeling; it is a commitment. It is a decision. We choose the good of another: to be with him or her in good times and in bad. This is a decision, Pope Francis is telling us. It doesn't waver or weaken. It's not subject to the ebb and flow of feelings. When we allow the Lord to be within our commitment of love, we will find the strength to work through difficulties and emerge in peace.

PONDER

Have you made a decision for love? What does this decision lead you to do on behalf of your spouse? How do you survive challenging times in your life?

PRAY

Grant to us, O God of love, the power to work through difficulties when they arise and to trust in your loving grace. Amen.

9 | OUR DAILY LOVE

In the wonderful prayer that Jesus taught us, we say, "Give us this day our daily bread." A married couple can truly say, "Give us this day our daily love."

Daily love. Daily bread. Pope Francis reminds us that they are one and the same. As a couple, we fall into one another's arms each day, giving each other assurance, encouragement, attention, and affection. This is our daily bread, the bread of life. And it is also our daily love. We must decide to do this each day. We must say the words "I love you."

..... PONDER

In what ways do you offer your spouse such daily love? How do you show your love, your trust in him or her, your affection?

..... PRAY

Give us the courage to touch each other with love, O God. Help us to focus on each other's needs above our own. Amen.

10 | A REFLECTION OF GOD

God created us and gave us the ability to love each other. Our love, therefore, reflects God. When a married couple shares romance and deep sexual union, they fulfill what God intends: full and reciprocal love.

Given the flood of sexual innuendo in our culture today, we may forget that sexual loving and intimacy is a gift from God and an outward sign of the sacrament of matrimony. We are created to love like this, both physically and emotionally. It is, as Pope Francis reminds us, our calling. Because it is so sacred, we should treat it as a holy moment in our lives.

PONDER

How does your intimacy as a couple reflect the face of God? How does it unite you and make you one?

PRAY

You are the source of unity and love, O God. Pour into us the desire to love with passion and tenderness, as you also love us. Amen.

11 | A DIVINE GIFT

*When we ask each other gently for the favors of daily life,
we show each other both respect and kindness.*

*When we thank each other, we acknowledge that our spouse
is a gift from God for which we are eternally grateful.*

Pope Francis is speaking here to engaged couples as they prepare to marry, but he reminds us all that our spouse is given to us as a gift. He or she is sent into our lives to fulfill and complete us. For our part, then, we are grateful for this gift. We recognize the ways in which God is touching us through this person and receive this gift thankfully.

PONDER

What specific gifts has your spouse brought into your life? How has God touched you through your spouse?

PRAY

*Thank you, O God of love, for my spouse.
Help us to be a sign to the world of the presence
of your love among all people. Amen.*

12 | GOD'S LOVE

When a man and woman celebrate the sacrament of matrimony, God enters into their marriage, and others see God in them. Like an icon, their marriage demonstrates and makes present God's own love.

An icon is an image that conveys what it is. Marriage conveys the love that God has for us, as Pope Francis tells us. Because of this, marriage is terribly important to us. No other icon of love is as powerful as two people joined as one, living in love, forgiving each other for their faults, sharing meals, welcoming children into their lives, and opening their door to neighbors, friends, and even to strangers. This is an icon of God.

PONDER

What does your marriage convey to those who see and know you? How do others see the face of God in your marriage?

PRAY

*We thank you, O God, because through marriage we can see how you love and forgive us.
May we always trust in your love. Amen.*

13 | MAKE PEACE

*Here is the secret to long-lasting and happy love:
it is knowing that love is stronger than any argument
or disagreement you might have. Therefore,
end each day with forgiveness and peace.*

Pope Francis reminds us that even if we have been angry, even if a plate was thrown, we should always remember this: we must never finish the day without making peace with each other! A kiss, a hug, or a single word of kindness. This is the secret that protects love and creates a sense of happiness and trust. We trust that we will forgive in the end and sleep with the comfort of love.

PONDER

How do we as a couple forgive each other? How do we end our arguments with love?

PRAY

Give each of us the humility, O Jesus, to admit that nothing is more important to us than living with our love for each other. Amen.

14 | LOVE IS THE BASIS

It is wonderful as a family to share daily moments and big events: meals, trips, holidays, and the tasks of housekeeping; but it's also essential that you make sure there is love between you. Authentic love leads to great joy, and it all comes from encountering Jesus within the family setting.

Pope Francis reminds us that it is not enough to own a house, go through the daily motions of life, and celebrate birthdays. We must also cultivate love, and we must do so intentionally. We do that by allowing Jesus to be our source of grace and our teacher: learning from him how to forgive, how to embrace, and how to practice the art of self-giving love as he did on the cross. This is what leads to “authentic love.”

PONDER

Think about the ways that self-giving love is practiced in your marriage, between you as spouses and among your family members.

PRAY

We accept the grace of dying to ourselves, O Jesus, and we imitate you as we treat each other with love. Amen.

15 | A JOURNEY OF FAITH

At the moment of the wedding, a couple doesn't know what joys and pains await them in marriage. They're setting out on a journey together, like Abraham and Sarah did. That is what marriage is! We set out and walk together hand in hand, putting ourselves in the Lord's powerful hands.

When you walk in the forest of life, you do not always know what may be around the next bend on the pathway. Pope Francis wisely teaches us that marriage is also like that. Who can know on the day of the wedding what will come along in life: children or no children, illness or wellness, poverty or wealth? Love is stronger than them all.

PONDER

Think back over the journey of your marriage and talk together about the ups and downs, the surprises and the unexpected turns in the road. How do you now see God's hand in all of that?

PRAY

*Walk with us, O Lord, as we continue on this lifelong journey of marriage and love. Fill us with trust in you.
Amen.*

16 | WE NEED MARRIAGE

The sacraments are not like parties! The sacrament of marriage is not merely about flowers, dresses, and receptions. Christians celebrate the sacrament of marriage because they know they need the grace that flows from it!

What Pope Francis is pointing out here reminds us of the words of the rite of marriage. We might say something like this: “Honey, I will love you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I promise to love you and honor you all the days of my life.” These powerful words open up for us the grace of the sacrament. Only in that grace can we live in the covenant of marriage.

PONDER

Think about the ways in which you love and honor your spouse. Connect such love to its source: God’s love flowing freely into your heart.

PRAY

Thank you, O Lord, for the wonderful sacrament of marriage to which we have given our hearts; in marriage we encounter your own sacred heart. Amen.

17 | PRAY TOGETHER

I encourage you to pray together from time to time as a family. When the husband prays for his wife and the wife prays for her husband, the marriage bond becomes strong; one praying for the other.

Pope Francis wants us to pray together. We might ask: how can we? Prayer is something personal, and besides, there is never a good time, a moment of peace. But praying together is also a matter of humility, of realizing that we need God, like the tax collector in Luke who began his prayer by admitting his need for God's mercy. Shared prayer is only possible for those who are willing to be vulnerable with each other.

PONDER

Is it possible for us to pray together as a family? Can we begin by praying the Our Father together around the table? Can we pray for one another?

PRAY

Jesus, you teach us to pray. Help us now as a couple and a family to pray with each other as we follow your pathway. Amen.

18 | HARMONY

The source of joy in our married and family life is the presence of God among us. It is God's love we experience and share with each other. This love is welcoming, merciful, and respectful toward all. God alone knows how to bring us together and create harmony out of diversity.

Pope Francis reminds us that the true joy that we experience in the family does not come from material objects or from the fact that everything seems to be going well. True joy comes from a profound harmony between persons, something that we all feel in our hearts and that makes us experience a sense of well-being and togetherness.

PONDER

Think back to a moment when there was a lack of harmony in your family. Can you see how it may have been caused by our failure to make God central?

PRAY

We offer you this day, O Lord, and we welcome you into our family life. May the love and forgiveness you demonstrate for us prevail among us all. Amen.

19 | A COMMUNITY

A family is a sort of “religious community.” Like sisters or brothers, married couples and their children live a “vowed life” of permanence, fidelity, and love. The community of the family is bigger than the persons that belong to it. It is the sacred place where one learns to love, and it is the center of human life.

Pope Francis reminds us that a family is made up of real people who love, talk together, and make self-sacrifices for one another. As such, we can plainly see that the family is the driving force of the world and of history. Our personality develops in the family: by growing up with our mom and dad, our brothers and sisters, and by breathing in the warmth of the home.

PONDER

What “lessons of love” do we teach in our family? How do we teach each other to practice self-giving love?

PRAY

Jesus, we seek to imitate you as we live in family-community with each other. Give us the courage to die to ourselves. Amen.

20 | WHEN LOVE FAILS

When two people struggle but fail to love and make marriage work, and this happens often, we stand with them in solidarity. We feel their pain and we walk with them. We do not condemn them! In fact, we are close to them because they have suffered such loss.

We would be foolish to think that every marriage will succeed. The pain of losing the one you have loved, of seeing love go cold, is terrible. The sense of helplessness as such a loss unfolds can lead us to great sadness and a sense of failure. Pope Francis knows this and calls us to reach out to those around us for whom marriage has failed.

PONDER

It won't take very much for you to bring to mind couples who have just not succeeded in marriage. How do you think God regards them? How have you reached out to them?

PRAY

Open our hearts with mercy and compassion, O Lord, to walk with our sisters and brothers in their pain and loss. Amen.

21 | HURTS AND WOUNDS

One of the great marvels of married and family life is that every element of that life—childhood and youth, engagement and marriage, spousal intimacy and love, friendships and social life—are all included in God's healing touch. God heals every aspect of our lives.

Pope Francis reminds us that God heals us. When we have wronged or hurt each other, forgiveness comes through Christ and the ministry of the church. On our part, we must be willing to work at restoring the wounded relationship, to forgive the other, and to forgive ourselves. Grace is more powerful than sin; the light overcomes the darkness.

PONDER

What are the aspects of your marriage that most need healing? Open your own heart to the healing power of God.

PRAY

Jesus, healer of the sick and lame, grant us the healing we need to restore what was lost by our selfish actions and words. Lead us back to your love. Amen.

22 | FREE AND FAITHFUL LOVE

In their sexual intimacy and loving, Christian spouses reflect the face of God. Such loving is an outward sign of the sacrament and a source of grace for the couple. It strengthens their union, teaches them self-giving, and opens the door to the gift of children.

Pope Francis reminds us that in our sexual and romantic loving we are a sign to the world of permanence, fidelity, and the presence of God. We must carefully guard our romantic lives so they do not become demanding, violent, or selfish. If we mirror God's love to our spouse, we will learn to become attentive to each other, honest, kind, and tender. Such love is the kind that God shows to us.

PONDER

Talk together about your romantic life. How does it reflect the sacred and profound divine love from which it flows?

PRAY

Father of all, we offer ourselves to you, body and soul, and ask you to form and shape us ever more in your image. Amen.

23 | GRANDPARENTS

Grandparents play a vital role in family life. They participate in passing on our human and religious heritage and they provide a safety net for the children.

We don't live alone, Pope Francis reminds us. Even if we are geographically distant from each other, we can remain spiritually close, helping each other grow in faith and trust in God. Not only can we reach out to each other at times of birth, death, and illness, but also to celebrate birthdays, holidays, and achievements in life. The love we have for each other is the basis of this. It reflects the love of God for us.

PONDER

What are some ways that our extended family can play a larger role in how we grow in our faith? How can technology play a role in this endeavor?

PRAY

O God, you are the source of life and love for us. Draw us near to each other as a family—parents, children, grandparents, friends, and even neighbors—so that we can all grow together in your loving embrace. Amen.

24 | GIVE YOURSELF FULLY

In marriage, we give ourselves completely without calculation or reserve, sharing everything, both gifts and hardship, trusting in God's Providence.

The art of self-giving love, Pope Francis reminds us, is vital to marriage. In self-giving love, we imitate Christ. Here we die to ourselves; we love our enemies; we turn the other cheek; we forgive seventy times seven times; we are tender instead of tough, kind instead of mean, and open instead of closed. We give it all without holding back, and it is love freely given. We trust that God is leading us just as God led Jesus on the way of the cross.

PONDER

How does your love for your spouse reflect the self-giving love that Jesus showed to us all by accepting the cross? How does this self-giving love lead to joy for you?

PRAY

Jesus, you lead us on the way of self-giving love. Grant us the grace to love our spouse and family as you have loved us. Amen.

25 | PLAY WITH YOUR CHILDREN

The daily availability of a father or mother to their children is very important. I like to encourage you to spend time with your children: talk with them, pray with them, and play with them.

The gift of children offers us yet another way to give of ourselves—our money, our time, our attention, our mornings and evenings. On our part as parents, we learn to spend time with our children every day, playing with them, listening to them, offering them comfort, security, and affirmation. Even if we are busy with jobs or other matters, the daily life and shared meals of the home must be our number one priority. As parents, our vocation is to stay home.

PONDER

To what sort of “dying to self” do the children in your life call you?

PRAY

Mary, mother of Jesus, teach us to give up ourselves for the sake of our children, just as you did for Jesus. Help us to love them selflessly. Amen.

26 | HOLY WEDDINGS

Everyone wants a lovely wedding, but what makes a wedding full and deeply true is always the presence of the Lord. It is the grace that comes from him that binds two people together. It is the presence of Jesus that offers the “good wine.”

Pope Francis is speaking here to a group of engaged couples, but his advice is well taken by us all. Our household, our family, our relationship as spouses—each must have within it the presence of Christ. As a couple, then, plan to make your wedding day and your marriage a chance to give yourself to others rather than expecting gifts from them.

PONDER

How does your relationship as a couple serve the world? This may seem like an odd question but only if you become servant lovers can your marriage succeed.

PRAY

Just as you told the servants at Cana to do whatever Jesus told them to, Mary our dear mother, so lead us to follow Christ in our marriage. Amen.

27 | A GESTURE OF LOVE

Every couple has a tussle now and then. To make peace at those times, it isn't necessary to call the United Nations to come to the house and settle things. A little gesture is all you need: a kind touch or a word of forgiveness, that's all, and then let it be! And tomorrow begin again.

It is true that married life has many difficulties: work, not enough money, problems with the children...and often the husband and wife become irritable and argue. Do not be sad about this: this is the human condition. In the end, if we back up a step, offer each other a moment of tenderness, and remember that our love for each other is more important than winning the argument, then love wins!

PONDER

How important is it for me to “always be right” when we discuss things as spouses or as a family? How can I step back and be the “big one” more often?

PRAY

Dear Saint Joseph, grant us the peace of heart and tranquility of life that prevailed in your home with Jesus and Mary. Amen.

28 | THREE MAGIC PHRASES

There are three things we can say to each other that are always needed, three ways of expressing love that need to be said at home: “May I?” “Thank you,” and “I’m sorry.”

Pope Francis is giving us a key in these three magic phrases. Number one: “May I, please?” allows us to be gentle with our spouse. Number two: “Thank you, honey.” We thank each other for what we do for one another. Number three: Since we all make mistakes, that other phrase which is a bit hard to say but which needs to be said is: “I am so sorry. Please forgive me.” With these three phrases your marriage will go forward in peace.

PONDER

Think back over the past week and recall each time these three phrases were used in your marriage. Think also about times when they could have been used but were not.

PRAY

Gentle Jesus, create in us a desire to treat one another with the reverence and respect that shows our love flowing from your sacred heart. Amen.

29 | COUPLES WHO STRUGGLE

Every marriage is blessed and made holy by the love of Christ. That love is able to sustain their love and renew it when it becomes lost, wounded, or simply tired. The love of Christ can restore the joy of living and loving together.

We know that sometimes we spouses do wound and hurt each other. We seem to lose our way and our love. It is just at these times that we should let the ministry of the church through the sacraments tend to us and heal us. These are the times when we must also turn to each other again to ask forgiveness and express our love; the grace to do this comes only from Christ himself.

PONDER

In what parts of your family life is healing needed? How can Christ help you sustain your love and renew it?

PRAY

Lead us to love, O Christ, and help us respond through your grace. Give us as a couple the joy of sharing our lives. Amen.

30 | REMEMBER THE CROSS

In marriage we are called to imitate Christ. That means we are called to die to ourselves out of love for our spouse. This is what gives marriage permanence and joy, that we sacrifice ourselves for each other.

The plan inherent in marriage is truly wonderful! It is expressed in the simplicity, and also the fragility, of the human condition. Marriage brings together the spouses in such a way that they live a sort of self-giving lifelong journey with each other. In this, they imitate Christ, but this is possible only when we go to the cross, as Pope Francis reminds us. We must learn to die to ourselves as a couple so that love can prevail.

PONDER

What do I need to be more willing to give up in order to build our marriage? How can I be more tender and loving with my spouse?

PRAY

Grant to us, we pray, O Lord, the grace to accept those things to which we must die in ourselves, and to embrace the ways in which we are called to love. Amen.