

DEVOTED FOR LIFE

*What God has joined together, no human
being must separate.*

—Matthew 19:6

As I stood before the altar gazing into my young bride's beautiful blue eyes, my nerves quieted, and I felt a deep peace descend upon me. Tenderly holding her hands and surveying her sweet face, I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with this woman whom I loved like no one else on earth. I couldn't wait for her to become my life-long companion and, God willing, the future mother of our children. I longed for us to *be devoted* to each other for the rest of our lives.

In exchanging our sacred vows that day, Margie and I understood that we were giving ourselves in love, establishing an indissoluble union that would last our lifetime. We were promising, before God and all our loved ones, to faithfully *love and cherish each other*, “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health . . . until death do us part.”¹

Standing before the priest and our families and closest friends, who were our witnesses, Margie and I understood that we were pledging to love each other no matter what might transpire in the days, weeks, and years to come. On our wedding day, none of us have any way of knowing how our love will be challenged over the years. We hope we will have good times, good health, and enough resources to care for our material needs. We don't even want to think about the possibility of relational difficulties, sicknesses, or the lack of resources with which we might have to contend. Furthermore, we usually aren't cognizant of how our collective wounds and sins will inevitably make

it difficult to love and honor each other the way we promised at the altar. And most of us certainly aren't thinking about that last phrase of our vows: "Until death do us part."

Although marriage requires a daily dying to self-centeredness, I certainly wasn't thinking about death on my wedding day. But that last phrase of our vows—*till death do us part*—means a lot more to me now. A little over a year ago, I had to face the reality of those words as I said goodbye to my lifelong companion. Looking back on our nearly forty-two years of marriage, I realize we experienced all the ups and downs mentioned in our vows. We shared some joyously good times and some painfully difficult ones. At times we loved and served each other admirably; at other times we were more selfish and neglected each other's needs. We were financially poor for our first several years while I went to graduate school and started my career. But we always had enough to cover our needs. Though we had a modest income by American standards, we were well-off in comparison to most of the world. We had ample resources, and in the end we were rich in the things that matter most: a life-giving relationship with God, beautiful children and grandchildren, a loving family, meaningful work, trustworthy friends, and a supportive community.

During most of our years together, Margie and I were both in relatively good physical health, apart from an occasional cold or seasonal influenza. But then a year and a half ago (as of this writing), Margie was diagnosed with the sporadic form of a rare, degenerative neurological disease, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. CJD affects one in a million people in the United States each year and eats away at the proteins in the brain causing rapid decline in both cognitive and physical capabilities (including dementia, loss of ability to walk and talk, and diminished motor-skill coordination). Like most people who are diagnosed with this disease, Margie's capacities deteriorated progressively. Within four months after her first visible symptoms, she passed away. Despite her physical and mental decline, we intimately experienced God's presence.

In the words of Charles Dickens's famous novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, "They were the best of times and the worst of times." Far

sooner than any of us expected, our marriage vows had reached their culmination.

Ups and Downs of Marriage

I entered our marriage with the full intention of being devoted to Margie for life. I had witnessed and experienced my parents' divorce, which added to my determination to have a good marriage that lasted a lifetime. I believe Margie entered our sacrament with the same desires, but without the fearful intensity I brought into it, since her parents remained married for more than sixty years.

On our wedding day, Margie and I both desired to be happily married and to share the overflow of our love with our future offspring and extended families. Though we have had many joyful seasons and beautiful memories, our marriage was not a storybook romance by any stretch of the imagination. When we were first married, we were both largely unaware of how each of our unhealed wounds and habitual patterns of self-centeredness would compromise and eventually threaten our love for each other. After the first few years of marriage, we began to drift apart. Our hearts became nearly deaf to God's voice and numb to each other's pain. Wounds brought into our marriage were compounded by the many ways we continued to hurt each other on a daily basis. In response, I became emotionally distant and slowly withdrew my affections, without fully realizing the damage this was causing Margie and our two beautiful daughters, Carrie and Kristen, who were preteens at the time.

Though I remained faithful to Margie outwardly, my lack of devotion to her soon became evident to both of us. Unresolved conflicts, unrepented sins, and unaddressed wounds led us both to pull back in self-protection during this difficult time. Haunted by the thought that I had fallen out of love, I became vulnerable to almost incessant temptations to deny our sacred vows and divorce the one to whom I had tenderly spoken my promise of unconditional love. I lost sight of her goodness and beauty and began to rationalize and justify my lack

of affection. Ironically, while overly preoccupied with her faults and failings, I remained largely blind to my own.

This time of great testing in our marriage reached a crisis point when I turned thirty-three years old—the same age as my parents when they separated. Our children were around the same age I was when I lost contact with my dad for several years. To my dismay, I found myself living through my worst nightmare—and bringing my wife and children into it—against their will. To paraphrase Yogi Berra, it was *déjà vu* all over again. Yet despite my lack of emotional connection with Margie, I knew that I could not take lightly my sacred vows, since they were made before God and our family and friends. It was during this season of our marriage that Margie’s confrontation over my lack of devotion became a catalyst for much-needed changes in my life. Feeling trapped, I prayed in earnest like never before.

Calling Out to God

Every night, after tucking Carrie and Kristen into bed, I would close the door to our bedroom and call out to God in desperation. I hadn’t yet faced the unhealed wounds from my parents’ divorce. But I knew I didn’t want to cause my wife, our children, and myself the same kind of pain and damage that my parents, siblings, and I experienced. At the same time, I couldn’t see any other way out of this nightmare. I felt completely out of control, as evidenced by having panic attacks for the first time in my life, whenever I thought of the possibility of divorce. Only now, in retrospect, can I see the Father’s providential care for us throughout this time, bringing my wounds to the surface so that I could be devoted to him and to Margie the way I desired.

God initially answered my prayers through a neighbor who invited me to a Bible study with a small group of men. At the first meeting, I listened as one of the men read this passage from scripture: “Because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth” (Rv 3:16). As he read these words aloud, it seemed as though Jesus himself spoke them directly to me. Apparently, Jesus didn’t appreciate my half-hearted commitment any more than Margie did.

Stunned by the force of his words, I left the meeting with heightened anxiety. After reflecting on what transpired, I realized that the Holy Spirit was showing me that my marriage to Margie was a mirror reflection of my relationship with Jesus. Until that moment, I hadn't realized that the deeper issue in our marriage was within me, rooted primarily in my lack of devotion to Jesus. I had retreated to my intellect to protect my heart from the pain of my parents' divorce. I couldn't love Margie and our daughters well unless I first opened my heart to Jesus' love and devoted myself wholeheartedly to him in return.

These shocking realizations prompted me to engage in some serious soul-searching. Jesus' confrontation, like Margie's earlier one, ended up changing the trajectory of our marriage, as well as our children's lives. The changes in me and in our marriage were slow at first. But progressively, the Holy Spirit led me through a process of healing to address the long-ignored wounds from my childhood and adolescent years—and to confront my pride, which had kept these wounds hidden from my sight.

Healing in Marriage

Healing is a process. As you will read in the chapters to come, Margie and I continued to heal, to reconcile, and to learn what it means to be devoted to each other right up to the final months of her life. Our healing was not a quick fix, although there were certain turning points that gave us additional strength to continue walking in the right direction. In the end, we shared a beautiful intimacy with God, with each other, and with our children and grandchildren. Our family and friends could see the fruit of what God had done in our marriage, in and through our many struggles. A few months before Margie died, her sister Ann remarked, "I am touched to see you both so deeply in love with each other, even more than when you first met."

Throughout our marriage together, we enjoyed many memorable moments. But few were as impactful as those we experienced during those last months of Margie's life. One of my many cherished

memories came in the last weeks of Margie's life as we spontaneously reaffirmed our wedding vows. The occasion was inspired by our daughter Kristen and son-in-law Stephen returning from his parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary. As they were sharing about Stephen's parents reaffirming their vows, Margie perked up, looked at me, and lucidly stated, "I want to do that." I was delighted she wanted to, because she had often resisted doing so in the past when I suggested it. Even more, I was amazed at her ability to process the conversation so cogently despite her compromised ability to articulate her thoughts.

As I knelt in front of Margie in the wheelchair, I looked into her beautiful blue eyes. The tender look on her face reminded me of our wedding day. I began with a proposal: "Will you marry me?" With childlike innocence, she responded with the sweetest smile and a decisive yes. Tears sprang to both of our eyes, as well as our daughter Kristen's. A few seconds later, with tears flowing freely, I reaffirmed our sacred vows, which had given us the grace to persevere through all our challenges. Slowly emphasizing each phrase, I repeated the words from our wedding day: "I, Bob, take you, Margie, . . . for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish until death do us part."

Reaffirming our vows this final time impacted us both profoundly, even more than when we professed them on our wedding day. Through the years, in the face of our trials, our love had matured. It had now reached its culmination. Staring death in the face, we were no longer afraid of our weaknesses and failures. We knew that our love, strengthened by God's grace, had finally proven to be stronger than death (see Sg 8:6).

As I consciously restated these vows one last time, I could see how God's love had been perfected in our weaknesses. I finally came to terms with my limitations as a husband and Margie's shortcomings as a wife. We gave what we were each capable of giving, as best as we could, considering our limitations. His mercy and grace made up for what we lacked. In the end, I handed Margie over to Jesus, knowing that he was her *True and Eternal Bridegroom*—knowing he loved her the way I always wanted to but never fully could. My love for Margie

was temporal and marred by my wounds, sins, and selfishness. Jesus' love, by contrast, is perfect and eternal. I realized in that moment that our marriage, though vitally important to our salvation and the source of much fruitfulness, was an imperfect representation of our eternal marriage that will reach its perfection in heaven.

I share these details of our marital history as an invitation for you to reflect on your own. I encourage you to look back upon (or forward to) your wedding day. Think about the meaning of your wedding vows and the vicissitudes of life that you will continue to encounter in the future. And though it is challenging, contemplate that moment when you will say goodbye to each other and one of you will hand the other to Jesus in preparation for the eternal wedding.

With all that in mind, I invite you to take a moment to reflect on the history and future of your marriage. (If you have never been married, use this as an opportunity to reflect on your future marriage or your relationship with God and others.)

Take a Moment

1. What about my story shed light on your personal history and marriage relationship?
2. If today was the last day of your marriage (or life), would you be fulfilled and feel satisfied? What would you regret? What would you be grateful for?
3. What was your intention when you spoke your wedding vows (or baptismal vows/ordination or religious vows)? What do they mean to you now?

Covenant Love

We can only know true love by understanding God's covenant love for us. I am convinced that our greatest happiness is realized in coming

to appropriate these deepest truths of our relationship with him. Take to heart these words revealed through the Old Testament prophets to describe God's promise of intimate and unrelenting love for each one of us individually and for us collectively: "I will betroth you to me forever: . . . I will betroth you to me with fidelity, and you shall know the LORD (Hos 2:21–22). "As a bridegroom rejoices in his bride so shall your God rejoice in you" (Is 62:5). "I swore an oath to you and entered into covenant with you . . . and you became mine" (Ez 16:8b).

Have you ever really pondered these images of God as your Bridegroom claiming you as his own, delighting in you and promising his fidelity to you? This imagery becomes even more concrete in the New Testament with the revelation of Jesus as our eternal Bridegroom. Jesus' heartfelt devotion for his bride (the Church) is the pattern God has established for every marriage (see Eph 5:21–32). Through him and in him, we come to a fuller understanding of God's limitless love for us. The nature and extent of this love is revealed throughout the Bible. Numerous passages reveal that Jesus, our Bridegroom, loves us with perfect devotion; *freely* (see Jn 10:18); *fully* (see Jn 15:13); *faithfully* (see 2 Tm 2:13); and *fruitfully* (see Jn 15:5).

Only in considering Jesus' love for each of us can we understand God's full intention for marital love. If you are married, or planning to marry, your wedding vows are among the most important words you will have ever spoken (second only to your baptismal vows). They are your personal pledge to love your spouse with Jesus' covenant love, through the power of the Holy Spirit, *freely*, *fully*, *faithfully*, and *fruitfully*.² These sacred vows bind you together as husband and wife through all the challenges and hardships of life. Moreover, they are a living sign to the rest of the world of Jesus' covenant love for his Bride.

The world sorely needs this authentic witness of Christ's love revealed in holy marriage. But we know that in our human weakness (sin, wounds, and selfishness), we all fall short. That is why we desperately need his mercy and grace to sustain us. Only by keeping Jesus as our standard of truth and source of strength can we clearly see the nature of covenant love. I have come to realize that we love

our spouses to the extent to which Jesus is the primary object of our devotion. Fr. Julián Carrón explains why this is so: “If you do not love Christ, Beauty made flesh, more than the person you love, the latter relationship withers, because Christ is the truth of this relationship, the fullness to which both partners point, and in whom their relationship is fulfilled. Only by letting him in is it possible for the most beautiful relationship that can happen in life not be corrupted and die in time.”³

I had to come to terms with these eternal realities the hard way. My hope is that you can learn from my experience and from the teachings of the Church what I discovered along the way. This Christian vision of love and marriage stands in stark contrast to the counterfeit “loves” of this world, to which we have all been overexposed through novels, magazines, movies, television shows, and most of our interactions in life. This worldly love is not really love at all. It is a thin disguise for lust. It does not give freely, fully, faithfully, or fruitfully. Rather, it takes from the other and uses the other person as an object for self-gratification and selfish gain, and then discards them when they are no longer useful or desirable.

Unlike the authentic life-giving love that Jesus models, worldly love is based in seduction, manipulation, and coercion (as opposed to loving freely). It is epitomized by grasping and self-centeredness (rather than loving fully). This counterfeit love is marked by infidelity and perversion (rather than loving faithfully). Finally, it is evidenced in contraception and abortion (as opposed to loving fruitfully). Because of original sin, we are all prone to relating to one another in these selfish ways. Tragically, many in today’s culture have almost completely lost sight of true love and have been seduced by the cultural counterfeits.

This is precisely why being devoted in love is so vitally important. Our sacred vows rescue us from a world of misery while also providing an authentic witness to the world of true and lasting love. We are promising to love each other with the purest love of Christ, made possible only through our ongoing yielding to the Holy Spirit. This is for our own good, for the good of our children, and for the benefit for the entire body of Christ, as well as the world.⁴ True love makes

marriage sacred—it transcends the deficient “loves” of this world and elevates marriage to a living expression of Jesus’ free, full, faithful, and fruitful love. If we have eyes to see, all this is represented beautifully in the symbolism of a Christian wedding ceremony.

Wedding Symbolism

The traditional Christian wedding ceremony is rich with symbolism, pointing simultaneously to the love between husband and wife while signifying the ultimate marriage of Christ and his Church. According to the imagery employed by St. Paul, every groom is called to be a living icon of Jesus Christ (see Eph 5:25). This means that at every truly Christian wedding, we can look at the groom and see a visible representation of an eternal mystery: Jesus offering himself in covenant as a living sacrifice for his bride. Note that the groom is ordinarily standing before the altar, the place of Jesus’ sacrifice. Have you ever wondered why the groom is traditionally dressed in black and wears a white shirt? Black symbolizes his dying with Christ; white is meant to symbolize his purity of heart. (I didn’t understand this at the time of my marriage and wore a tan tuxedo instead.)

While the bridegroom stands at the front of the church, the bride ordinarily remains veiled from sight in the back of the church. One of the most suspenseful moments of any wedding is the time of revelation, when the groom first lays eyes on his radiant bride. Traditionally the bride is dressed in all white as a symbol of her purity, because she is called to represent the Bride of Christ “*in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish*” (Eph 5:27, emphasis added). She is a living representation of the beautiful and holy Church prepared for Christ at the end of time.

For any bride brought up in the Church, this would not be her first time wearing a white “wedding” dress. Most likely, she wore an immaculate white gown on the day of her Baptism as well as the day of her First Communion. In Baptism, she was cleansed by “*the bath of water with the word*” (Eph 5:26, emphasis added). In First

Communion, she received a foretaste of the ultimate communion at the “*wedding day of the Lamb*” (Rv 19:7, emphasis added).

Do you see how important it is for both bride and groom to be in a state of grace as they prepare to be married? We are literally called to signify the purest love between Christ and his Church. No matter how impure we have become due to our false loves up until that moment, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is available as a way of cleansing and healing us before we enter Holy Matrimony. (I regret that I did not fully appreciate this reality when Margie and I were married—it would have saved us a lot of heartache.)

In many Christian weddings, the bride’s father is the one to walk his daughter down the aisle. The aisle represents our life journey, preparing us for our marriage to Christ at the end of time. Human fathers represent the Fatherhood of God, who prepares the Bride of Christ before handing her over as a gift to his Beloved Son. Mothers represent Mary, who gives her son away at the Cross. Fathers and mothers have a responsibility before God to prepare their sons and daughters for marriage, to protect their purity, and to teach them by word and example what it means to love authentically.

As the father of our two daughters, I remember vividly those moments walking each of them down the aisle. It is hard to express the range of emotions that I felt offering my daughters (Carrie and Kristen) as precious gifts to their husbands (Duane and Stephen). It was both a sobering time of letting go and a joyful celebration. In some ways, the letting go resembled my handing Margie to her eternal Bridegroom at the end of her life. A whole lifetime of prayers and desires for our daughters came to culmination in those moments. Their mom and I had prepared them, prayed for them, and prayed for their husbands since the day they were born. Now it was finally time to release them, because “*a man shall leave [his] father and [his] mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh*” (Eph 5:31, emphasis added).

This symbolism of handing over in the wedding ceremony reflects a deeper reality. Just as we must let go of our attachments to the world to be married to Christ, so too must every bride and groom be free of