

# INTRODUCTION

## WHY YOU WANT THIS BOOK

Every person who gets married in the Catholic Church today is making some pretty bold statements:

- Almighty God wants me to love my spouse for the rest of my life.
- I am making a commitment to love this person, even if he or she becomes difficult.
- Even if my spouse becomes nearly impossible to live with, I will continue to act in an attitude of love toward him or her.

- Loving my spouse is part of my personal path to holiness.

Like I said, pretty bold statements.

Considering the ease of divorce in the event of problems, the ease of cohabitation as a substitute for marriage, and the frequency of women choosing to become unmarried mothers, entering into a sacramental marriage is, at the very least, countercultural. Marriage is no longer the socially expected, normal life path that people coast along on auto-pilot. Marriage is an adventure in cultural renewal, an adventure in self-consciously building up what Blessed John Paul II called “a civilization of love.”

The book you are holding in your hand is designed to help you live up to these bold commitments. Perhaps you want a better marriage for yourself or someone you love. Maybe you are about to get married and want to start off on the right foot. Or maybe you have young friends who are about to marry and you want to support them. Maybe you have a friend whose marriage is in trouble. Maybe you are frustrated with your spouse.

*So why this book, rather than all the many others out there?* This book empowers you. You do not have to wait for the other person to go to therapy, get an attitude change, or anything else. You can have a better marriage starting right now. You can take steps today that will bring you closer to God and His plan for you, and for your marriage.

*But why should you want a better marriage? Why not just coast along with a “settle-for” marriage? Why not join the parade and get divorced?* Because deep down, you believe in the power of love. You want to learn more about what spousal love is and how to love rather than give yourself an exit option.

*Spousal love for the sake of the married couple:* The family is the first school of love. The family is where men and women learn to overcome their disagreements and bring their complementary differences together in a unified whole. Our recent popes, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, have both expressed thoughts along these lines, many times.

*Spousal love for the sake of the children:* The family is where children learn to love and be loved. The

parents' love for one another is the greatest gift they can give to their children. The stability and lovingness of the parents' union is the foundation for their children's entire lives. Children whose parents remained married in a low-conflict union throughout their childhoods have the best life chances. Children of divorced or never-married parents are at risk for a whole variety of problems, including a reluctance to trust and to form marriages of their own.

*Spousal love for the sake of society:* When marriages break down or fail to form, the entire society suffers. Children deprived of parental love and guidance have a way of creating problems for others. Adults who are playing the field at an age when they should be settled in love can create instability around them. Taxpayers end up footing the bill for expensive services that try to take the place of absent or preoccupied parents. And every person who has been disappointed in love is a sitting duck for all kinds of alleged substitutes for the family,

whether taxpayer-supported programs, “alternative lifestyles,” or religious heresies.

We become mistrustful of anyone who claims to love us, even God Himself. In our loneliness and lovelessness, we may become vulnerable to people who claim to minister to us, but who may not have our best interests at heart. In our woundedness, we may become suspicious of those who really do want to help us and do have our best interests at heart.

Having a happy marriage matters to a lot more people than just the two of you. And a happy and successful marriage is about more than you and your feelings. It is far better to work with the marriage you have rather than to keep trying to switch out the partners, hoping for a better deal.

## WHAT THIS BOOK IS NOT

This book is not therapy or medical support. In other words, this book is *not* for people with addiction issues or domestic violence issues. Addictions today, sadly, can include much more than drugs and alcohol. Increasingly, sex and pornography

addictions are becoming huge barriers to marital happiness. If you believe you or your spouse has any addiction issues, I beg you to seek more help than you can get from a little book like this one. You may need medical support, therapeutic help, a self-help group, spiritual advice, or legal counsel.

If you are dealing with domestic violence in your marriage, you must also seek assistance. No book is enough to help you discern what to do in that extreme situation. You may need to live separately from your spouse, for your own safety and the safety of your children.

In all such cases, I would urge you to confide in a spiritual director or your pastor. You want to be sure that you are living in accordance with the will of God and if you're Catholic, the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Except for these dire circumstances, my statement stands: You are better off working with the marriage you have, with the partner you have, than trying to switch around partners.

Because you see, one of the biggest barriers to your own happiness is certainly you! You will be part of any other relationship you get into. If you decide to live alone, you will be living with yourself. You might as well learn some of these important strategies for better relationships now rather than later.

## A WORD ABOUT HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Don't leave this book around for your spouse to find. I'm not kidding. This book is for *you*. The whole point of the book is that *you* can improve your marriage, even if your spouse doesn't change a bit. I advocate that people speak as clearly as they can about what they think, want, and need. Dropping hints and leaving stuff lying around can be manipulative. Either speak up, if you want something from your spouse, or work the tips yourself, without necessarily telling your spouse what you are doing.

Someone has to take the first steps in love. Someone has to be the first to let go of old resentments. Someone has to be the first to forgive. Someone

has to give the first compliment or express the first gratitude. It needs to be you. Why? Because you have this book in your hand. Because you care.

Last, have some fun. Loving your spouse is your unique key to heaven. Our Lord wants us to be joyful, even when the path seems difficult. Your efforts to find and create joy in your family will pay for themselves many times over, even if your spouse doesn't change a bit.

One last observation: Both of us are Roman Catholics, and our publisher is a Catholic publisher. Everything in this book is consistent with Catholic teaching. Because the truths taught by the Catholic Church on marriage and family are held by many faiths, most of what is in this book will be perfectly compatible with most forms of Christianity and Judaism. You can give this book to your friends in mixed marriages or friends from other Christian churches. They, too, will find it very helpful.

So, enjoy the adventure of building a better marriage for yourself, your family, and your community. And we'll see you in heaven, if not sooner!

TIPS 1-6

# MAKE A DECISION TO LOVE

*Love is a decision, not just a feeling.*

# 1

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Think about what is in your spouse's interest. A loving person wants the best for another and is willing to follow through with actions.

Many disappointments in married life can be traced to one basic misunderstanding: we think love is a feeling. We think we are “in love” when we like the way we feel with the other person. But timeless wisdom shows that love is more than a feeling. Love is a decision. You can improve your marriage by making a decision to love. In fact, you can improve the lives of many people by making the decision to do what is in their interest, even if it is inconvenient for you at the time.

## 2

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Help your spouse grow by being the first to step outside the comfort zone.

It is easy to be tempted to hold ourselves back from emotional and spiritual growth because we are afraid that our new selves will not be accepted by our spouse. Fear is never a good excuse to refrain from growing closer to God or each other. Make a leap of courage by pushing yourself emotionally and spiritually, and hope that your spouse will be inspired by your actions. Be patient with yourself and your spouse.

# 3

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Remain in solidarity with the other person, especially when he or she is suffering or struggling. Love sits by the bedside, even when it is painful to watch.

An easy way to show support for your spouse is to be present and available to them when they are going through a challenging time. It might be frustrating to listen to your spouse complain, or it might be sad for you to watch your loved one in pain, but your silent presence will communicate to both of you your commitment to your relationship.

# 4

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Allow yourself to be surprised by joy. A loving person knows that he or she does not know everything and is willing to learn more about the other person. Your partner undoubtedly has many wonderful qualities you have not yet discovered.

Here's a great excuse for a date night: Why not go to dinner and try to come up with stories you have not yet told each other? Start by thinking of your earliest memory and working your way up from there. Make a game of it! It could be lots of fun, and you'll likely learn a great deal more about each other.

In the true story, *A Severe Mercy*, Sheldon Vanauken and his wife wanted so much to know and experience everything the other had ever done that they made a point to read every book the other had ever read. Now that's devotion. And you can have it too.