
INTRODUCTION

“I Want It My Way!”

“Authentic married love is caught up into divine love.”

■ VATICAN II¹

There is no perfect marriage. There are only imperfect men and women who marry to find happiness in each other’s company. Case in point:

It was a hot and humid Kansas summer afternoon and Teri and I were about to install a screen door on the front entrance of our newly purchased home.

This was our first home-improvement project after eighteen months of marriage. We had taken great care to select just the right door, so with much confidence and enthusiasm I collected the tools I needed, tore open the cardboard box, and prepared to mount the door on the frame. (I remembered how my father used to fix things around the house when I was growing up. He seemed to know what to do instinctively.) As I pulled the door out of the cardboard box, Teri frantically rummaged through the container looking for the printed directions.

“John, wait,” she said. “Let me read the directions to you before you get started.”

“I don’t need directions,” I replied. “I know what to do. Trust me!”

Teri finally found the directions and began reading them to herself. Meanwhile I was outside working on the door. I felt proud to be taking care of the physical needs of our house, and shortly thereafter I proclaimed, “Voilà, all done! See how easy it was? No need for the directions.”

“Good!” Teri said. “Great job!”

I grabbed the handle to open the door but it wouldn’t open. I pulled harder. Nothing budged. “What’s wrong?” asked Teri. Noticing my hesitation and puzzlement, the tone of her voice changed, and she said with indignation: “I knew it! Now you’re outside and I’m inside, and the door doesn’t open. This is just what we need!” I was speechless.

I was still examining the door to figure out the problem when Teri stood right across from me on the other side of the screen with the directions in hand. “Listen to me!” she said as she started reading the steps aloud. “Step one....Step two: Remove the screws from the frame that keep the door from accidentally opening during shipment.”

“Oops! We missed that!” I said.

Teri promptly corrected me with a righteous tone: “Don’t say ‘we.’ *You* missed that because you didn’t want to follow the directions.”

“Okay, okay,” I said. “I’ll take the door down and start over.”

As if that wasn’t enough humiliation for my oversight, I also had to endure Teri’s scrutiny of my every move to ensure it complied with the written directions. I was fuming inside. “Why doesn’t she go in the house and leave me alone to do it my way?” The more I repeated this thought the angrier I became. You can imagine how the rest of the day went.

This incident was painful for both of us and left us with hurt feelings. As we look back at this event after almost thirty-five years of marriage, we recognize a pattern that has repeated itself many times in our relationship. It is the tug of war we carry on when we each decide, “I want it my way!” The outcome is always the same: The relationship is hurt and both suffer no matter who wins. This tug of war is rooted in selfishness.

The fact is that all couples experience this same tug of war, especially in the early years of their marriage. Many struggle with it and often let the hurt feelings keep them from enjoying each other's company. Some get stuck in it and create a miserable life for themselves. Still others, not knowing what to do, give up on the marriage. All of the pain and unhappiness caused by selfishness is unfortunate because it's unnecessary. Each one of us can learn to control our selfish tendencies and enjoy the beautiful relationship that marriage is. *Happy Together* offers you a blueprint for marital happiness. It shows you how to overcome your self-centered tendencies by learning self-giving love.

► A BLUEPRINT FOR HAPPINESS

Happy Together contains a blueprint for a loving marriage that is based on the Christian belief that God made the relationship of husband and wife in his own image. John Paul II explained this belief in his *Letter to Families*: "The divine 'we' is the eternal pattern of the human 'we,' especially of that 'we' formed by the man and the woman created in the divine image..."² And he added: "Husbands and wives discover in Christ the point of reference for their spousal love."³ Benedict XVI reiterated this belief in his recent encyclical on love when he wrote, "God's way of loving becomes the measure of human love."⁴

Marital happiness is achieved when couples love as God loves. In this book you will learn the attitudes and behaviors that are the essence of divine self-giving love. In practicing these in your relationship, you will experience the happiness you dreamed about on the day of your wedding.

► HOW TO BENEFIT FROM THIS BOOK

Happy Together is an invitation to open your heart, listen to God, and let God's grace guide you in loving your spouse. It is an invitation to make your married life a spiritual journey toward each other and toward God.

The chapters that follow have been written in the spirit expressed by Pope Paul VI: “It is married couples themselves who become apostles and guides to other married couples.”⁵ They contain insights, personal stories, and anecdotes that couples have shared with me about their journey to follow God’s call in Christian marriage.

It is my hope that your reading will prompt you to love your spouse in a way that brings the two of you closer to God and to each other. I encourage you to read these pages together. However, this joint exercise is not necessary in order for your relationship to benefit. If you cannot read the book with your spouse, read it on your own and start practicing unilaterally and unconditionally the six steps of the blueprint outlined in these chapters.

Growth in love requires making changes. Effective change always begins with each one of us individually taking the first step. Your loving actions will not go unnoticed. Your spouse will respond in kind because goodness invites goodness,⁶ and “Love grows through love.”⁷

To assist you in this journey, each chapter contains recommended readings from Scripture and provides questions for personal reflection or for couple exploration. In addition, chapters five through ten provide practical suggestions for introducing grace-filled behaviors into your daily interactions.

As you apply what you learn, you will become a sacrament of God’s goodness to your spouse. Together, the two of you are the visible image⁸ of God’s love to your children, and your home becomes a patch of God’s kingdom within your community.

► PRAYER IS A POWERFUL TOOL

Learning to love your spouse as Christ loves is a challenge that is best accomplished with God’s grace and the support of your Christian community. Therefore, I encourage you to recite often the following prayer, asking God’s help for you and your spouse. Pray as well for all other married couples who need God’s help. Then, when you encounter difficult mo-

ments, remember that you are not alone. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us: "Christ dwells with them [the spouses], gives them the strength to take up their crosses and to follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another's burdens, to 'be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ,' and to love one another with supernatural, tender, and fruitful love."⁹

Prayer is a tool that opens our hearts to God and disposes us to receive God's many graces.¹⁰ And, when our hearts are open to God, spouses feel the presence of love in their midst and experience the happiness they seek in each other's company.

Prayer for Couples

O Lord our God,

We thank you for bringing us together as husband and wife.

We ask your Spirit to open our hearts,

and we ask your Son to teach us to love.

To grow in communion with you and each other is what we desire.

Grant us the will to welcome and accept each other,

*the perseverance to keep our promise to always be present
to each other,*

and the generosity to give unselfishly day after day.

Grant us the humility to ask forgiveness, the courage to forgive,

the compassion to console, and the care to heal.

Grant us eagerness to serve without expecting to be served.

With your help our unity will grow to resemble your communion,

and our hearts will be filled with joy.

This we ask through Jesus, your Son and our brother.

Amen.

▶ ENDNOTES

1. Abbott, Walter M., S.J. *Documents of Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* New York: Guild Press, 1966, #48. “Authentic married love is caught up into divine love and is governed and enriched by Christ’s redemptive power and the saving activity of the church. Thus this love can lead the spouses to God with powerful effect and can aid and strengthen them in the sublime office of being a father or a mother.” These words summarize the essence of this book.
2. John Paul II. *Letter to Families*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1994, #6.
3. *Ibid.*, #19.
4. Benedict XVI. *Deus Caritas Est*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2005, #11.
5. Paul VI. *Humanae Vitae*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1968, #26.
6. John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, #14.
7. Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, #18.
8. “By the joys and sacrifices of their vocation and through their faithful love, married people will become witnesses of the mystery of that love with which the Lord revealed to the world by his dying and his rising up to life again.” Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, #52.
9. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1997, #1642.
Also: “By the very fact that the faithful give such consent, they open up for themselves a treasure of sacramental grace from which they draw supernatural power for their fulfilling of their rights and duties faithfully.” Pius XI. *Casti Connubii*. Vatican City: Vatican Publications, 1930, #40.
10. “The grace of matrimony will remain for the most part an unused talent hidden in the field unless the parties exercise these supernatural powers and cultivate and develop the seeds of grace they have received.” Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, #41.