

Ministry RESOURCE

SEVEN-DAY VIRTUAL MARRIAGE RETREAT A Retreat with Pope Francis

Day One: "Marriage Is the Icon of God's Love"

Pope Francis:

"The image of God is the married couple: the man and the woman; not only the man, not only the woman, but both of them together. This is the image of God: love, God's covenant with us is represented in that covenant between man and woman. And this is very beautiful!" (General Audience, April 2, 2014)

Breaking open the theme:

It is a beautiful truth! A husband and wife image God in their marital union. As the Second Vatican Council taught, married love is "caught up" in the divine love of God, who is a communion of Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 48). In the union of husband and wife there is mutual love and reciprocity, which reflects the love of God himself. In Ephesians, St. Paul teaches that Christian spouses reflect a "great mystery": the nuptial relationship between Christ and his Church (Eph 5:21-22). In their ordinary lives, husbands and wives can be a visible sign of Christ's love for his Church by giving themselves in fidelity and service to each other and to those around them. This is a high calling . . . and a beautiful one!

Reflection:

Think of an example of a good marriage. The husband and wife go out of their way to do nice things for each

other. They give of their time and energy without asking for anything in return. They are faithfully committed to their marriage and are ready to make sacrifices for the other. Some could say they are head-over-heels in love with one another, even after many years! Does this describe your marriage? When spouses exhibit marital behavior like this, they help us understand what it means that marriage is an image of God's love. Husbands and wives are called to display those qualities of love that Christ himself displayed on the Cross.

Put it into practice:

1. **Pray:** Read together 1 Corinthians 13, St. Paul's hymn of love.
2. **Reflect:** Is your love for each other patient, kind, etc. (from the list in 1 Corinthians)? Where can you grow?
3. **Do:** Place a picture from your wedding day in a well-trafficked area of your home (if there's not one already), and put on it or next to it the words, "We are called to be an image of God's love." Consider this your daily reminder.

Prayer for Married Couples:

Almighty and eternal God,
You blessed the union of husband and wife
So that we might reflect the union of Christ with his
Church:
look with kindness on us.
Renew our marriage covenant.

Increase your love in us,
and strengthen our bond of peace
so that, [with our children],
we may always rejoice in the gift of your blessing.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Day Two: “Christian Love Is Concrete”

Pope Francis:

“You see that the love John speaks of [1 Jn 4:11-18] is not the love of soap operas! No, it is something else. Christian love has a particular quality: concreteness. Christian love is concrete. Jesus Himself, when He speaks of love, speaks to us about concrete things: feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, and many concrete things. Love is concrete.” (Mass at Casa Santa Marta, January 9, 2014)

Breaking open the theme:

The love between Christian spouses should not rely on romantic feelings alone. As Pope Francis said, Christian love is concrete. It reveals itself in our everyday lives. Words and affectionate language have their place, but actions speak volumes as well. Christian love is marked by selflessness. It seeks to give rather than receive. Spouses are called to love in this way: to give to their spouse in the practical happenings of everyday life.

Reflection:

As time passed and they grew out of their “newlywed phase,” Jimmy and Sandra found that the affectionate language they had once used was fading. Instead of being sad about leaving an intensely romantic period in their marriage, the bride and groom developed new ways of showing their love for one another. A heartfelt

“Good morning, I love you!” conversation turned into doing both the cooking and cleaning when one of them had a long day at work. And yet, as more of their romantic notions transformed into practical self-gifts and mutual service, the couple found that they fell even more deeply in love.

Put it into practice:

1. **Pray:** Read Matthew 25:31-46 together with your spouse.
2. **Reflect:** Think about the concrete acts of love in this passage: feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, etc. Which is hardest for you, and why?
3. **Do:** Is there a chore your beloved dislikes? Do it for them . . . with a smile.

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Day Three: “The Family Is the Domestic Church”

Pope Francis:

“Families are the domestic Church, where Jesus grows; he grows in the love of spouses, he grows in the lives

of children.” (Address, National Convocation of the Renewal in the Holy Spirit, June 1, 2014)

Breaking open the theme:

The family can be seen as a domestic Church in two main ways, as explained in the bishops’ pastoral letter *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan* (pp. 38ff). First, the family is a community that is nourished by the Church, especially through the sacraments. Second, the family is a reflection of the life of the Church. It is called to be a place of faith, hope, and love, just like the larger Church. The love of Christ abides and “grows” in the family, as Pope Francis said. In the domestic Church, spouses and children learn how to share Christ’s love. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, “Here [in the home] one learns endurance and the joy of work, fraternal love, generous—even repeated—forgiveness, and above all divine worship in prayer and the offering of one’s life” (no. 1657).

Reflection:

When Dave and Katie were dating and engaged, they often went to Mass together or prayed a Rosary together. As they started their journey as a married couple, they quickly realized how essential these times of prayer were. They noticed that when they slacked in their faith life together, their marital happiness decreased too. But when they relied on the sacraments and participated in the life of the Church, they found it easier to mirror that life of love in their own relationship. As Dave and Katie’s first child Maria grew, she began to imitate the loving and prayerful acts that her parents demonstrated, and the family grew together as a domestic Church.

Put it into practice:

1. **Pray:** Read Philippians 4:6-7 together with your spouse.

2. **Reflect:** How do you incorporate prayer in your marriage? In the lives of your children?
3. **Do:** If you don’t have prayer as part of your nighttime routine, add it tonight. Consider the Ignatian “examen” in honor of Pope Francis’s Jesuit vocation.

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Day Four: Christ Gives Couples the Confidence to Say “Yes” Forever

Pope Francis:

“We must not allow ourselves to be conquered by a ‘throwaway culture.’ This fear of ‘forever’ is cured by entrusting oneself day by day to the Lord Jesus in a life that becomes a daily spiritual path of common growth, step by step.” (Valentine’s Day Address to Engaged Couples, February 14, 2014)

Breaking open the theme:

Many in our culture today think that it is not possible to love another person for the entirety of one’s life. Some protest that love “dies out” and say you

can move on and find another person. Pope Francis, however, says that the fear of lifelong commitment is resolved by relying on Christ. In the Our Father, we say, “Give us this day our daily bread”; for Christian couples, we must also ask, “Give us this day our daily *love*.” If a Christian couple entrusts their love to Christ, He will sustain and multiply it. “He has an infinite reserve!” the Pope said.

Reflection:

Juan and Louisa had been married for about fifteen years when Louisa decided that she just didn’t feel that “spark of love” any longer. She convinced herself that their marriage was doomed and it was about time to call it quits. As she came home from work that day and went to approach her husband about her decision, she found him praying by their bedside. He prayed, “Lord, I feel as if my wife doesn’t love me anymore. I just don’t know where to go from here . . . Please take control of our marriage and help us to love each other as we once did.” Immediately, her heart was moved as she realized that a “spark” would not save their marriage, but Christ could.

Put it into practice:

1. **Pray:** Pray a Rosary together—or just a decade—and focus on how Mary relied not on her own strength but on God’s.
2. **Reflect:** How can you rely on Christ in your love for your spouse?
3. **Do:** Write your spouse a note about how your feelings for him or her have deepened over time.

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Day Five: Three Pillars of the Spousal Relationship

Pope Francis:

“Faithfulness, perseverance, and fruitfulness are the three pillars of Christ’s love for His bride, the Church—three characteristics that are also at the heart of Christian marriage.” (Mass in Casa Santa Marta with Fifteen Married Couples, June 2, 2014, [paraphrased])

Breaking open the theme:

When constructing a building, a blueprint is essential. When getting married, a bride and groom find the “blueprint” for their marriage in Jesus Christ. Looking at Jesus, husbands and wives see the “pillars” of their marital home, as Pope Francis so aptly described. Christ’s love is faithful: he will never leave or forsake his beloved, the Church. Christ’s love perseveres: he told his disciples, “I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Mt 28:20). Christ’s love is fruitful: “Whoever remains in me . . . will bear much fruit” (Jn 15:5). Fidelity, perseverance, and fruitfulness are the “pillars” that hold up the marital home, making it a place of peace and joy for all its members.

Reflection:

Runners know all about perseverance. There's a moment in every run—maybe the ten-mile mark, maybe the one-lap mark—when the body protests, “No more!” and every pace is painful. But if you fight through the discomfort, on the other side is a second wind. Marriage, too, has moments where one more minute feels impossible. Veteran married couples advise to take a deep breath, say a prayer, seek help, but by all means, keep going! The best is yet to come.

Put it into practice:

1. **Pray:** Read Psalm 136 together with your spouse; “God’s love endures forever” (NAB).
2. **Reflect:** Think back on a time when the going got tough. How did you get through it? Maybe you’re in a tough time now; don’t be afraid to ask for help.
3. **Do:** Reach out to another married couple you know and invite them to a night of prayer and fellowship.

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Day Six: The Family as the Birthplace of Communication and Love

Pope Francis:

“In the family, we learn to embrace and support one another, to discern the meaning of facial expressions and moments of silence, to laugh and cry together . . . This greatly helps us to understand the meaning of communication as *recognizing and creating closeness*.” (World Communications Day 2015, January 23, 2015)

Breaking open the theme:

Communication skills are commonly taught in marriage preparation classes, and for good reason. Communication happens every day in a couple’s relationship. Good communication solidifies a relationship while bad communication leads to squabbles and misunderstandings. Pope Francis encourages married couples to see *communication* as a way of building *communion*: “creating closeness.” When done respectfully and with love, simple requests or planning the day’s activities can foster a sense of unity. Learning to listen well shows respect to the other person. Families have a unique role in modeling how patient, loving communication is possible.

Reflection:

John and Doreen knew something needed to be changed in the way they spoke to each other. After 22 years of marriage, subtle (or not-so-subtle) tones of disrespect and sarcasm had crept into their words. Both of them often felt hurt and misunderstood. But they wanted to improve their communication, and little by little learned to speak gently and respectfully to each other. It took practice, but they began to see how asking politely for small things and listening

attentively to the other person's story created a renewed sense of unity and closeness.

Put it into practice:

1. **Pray:** Prayer is a kind of communication, with God! Try praying out loud with your family, sharing with your loving Father the ups and downs of your day.
2. **Reflect:** What are your "triggers" for bad communication? For example, do you tend to communicate poorly when you are rushing out the door, or when you're tired? Talk about how you can better deal with those situations.
3. **Do:** Spend a half hour in heartfelt communication with your spouse: make eye contact, have no distractions, and be attentive. Take turns, and notice how pleasant it is to be heard.

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Day Seven: Take Forward the Meaning of Family

Pope Francis:

"Do not hide your faith, do not hide Jesus, but carry him into the world and offer the witness of your family life!" (Meeting with Families in the Philippines, January 16, 2015)

Breaking open the theme:

Did you know that families are called to be missionaries? For some families, that may mean moving around the world to share the Gospel with people who don't know Jesus. But for most families, being missionaries means living the Gospel in the midst of their daily family life: carrying Jesus "into the world," as Pope Francis says. Offer "the witness of your family life" in the carpool, at work, at soccer practice, or in the grocery store. Families are challenged not to be closed in on their own needs and concerns but to be open to others. A particular witness is being welcoming to people without families or with difficult family situations, for example widows, children of divorce, and single people. "Do not hide Jesus!" Pope Francis exhorts.

Reflection:

At first, Patty and Mike were intimidated by the idea of serving others. Service and evangelization weren't part of their childhood experiences, and they felt overwhelmed by the demands of their jobs and home life. But they were inspired by the example of another couple at their parish who found simple ways to reach out: calling an elderly widow to check in, making a meal for an ill parishioner, and so on. Patty and Mike started to brainstorm how their family could serve others. They started by inviting college students over

for dinner, and even that little act of hospitality made their whole family feel more alive.

Put it into practice:

1. **Pray:** Together, ask God to show you how your family can reach out to others right now, in whatever circumstances you are currently in.
2. **Reflect:** Talk about families you know who exemplify being missionaries to those around them. Do they give you any ideas?
3. **Do:** As a family, choose one way to serve others in the coming months. Keep it simple, and try to involve everyone.

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