

## **Amour et Verite Weekend, 25-27 February 1994, Pennant Hills, Sydney.**

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### **Session 1 Conversion and the Couple 25 February 1994**

We are to open our hearts and to expect a lot. God loves us individually and as couples in a very unique way. It is He who has called us to live as a couple. Each couple has a 'look' that is all their own. The Word of God tells us that Marriage is very good and blessed. It is the will of God therefore that we live as a couple. He wants our happiness – we can be sure of that. In the beginning, we felt that it (marriage) was a big thing that we were entering into. A true vocation - a call from God to each unique couple. A call to live in a certain way – to multiply and fill the earth. A call to nurture the first cell of society, the family. A call to take part in the evangelisation of the world through family. Often we think of Marriage as ordinary. To God it is very important and very great. The Sacrament is a special gift from the Holy Spirit to live this vocation, to live it in the grace of charity.

In the Sacrament of Marriage, God commits Himself together with us, even if we were not aware of it at that time. God commits himself to help us with all our details of life, not just spiritual things. God knows all our difficulties and trials, and His help is there for them.

#### Conversion within Marriage

The first point of conversion is to change our outlook, especially from negative to positive. Don't just look at the problems, but look at the blessings. It is easy to see the faults in each other, and we forget to see the goodness and virtue in each other. We do not realise that the negativity condemns and boxes the other person and closes our heart and places a distance and separation between us. The positive outlook must be sincere. It must be a less selective and more truthful outlook. An outlook of love. To find this way, we will decide to open our hearts to one another, to make a bigger place for each other in our hearts. Aim to search every day and to share a positive point, an act, a word, a response, an attention that you have seen in the other.

The second point of conversion. What could be of pleasure for your spouse? What would make them happy, knowing their likes and dislikes, with no strings attached. Do not forget these small attentions for each other, and keep it always fresh. It is a decision that must be made. A decision to open your heart to your spouse. The littlest things may have big consequences.

The third point of conversion. What is there in me that needs to be converted? We do not realise that we ask so much of each other, we 'expect' so much. In me there are things that will need to be changed as well. With the same positive outlook, seek that which is not adding to each other, and fix it even if it is very small. For example, make an effort to have breakfast together. Greet each other when you come home, prior to doing tasks like opening mail. What really counts is not the action but the way it opens our hearts towards each other. If we cannot find something to change, ask your partner. Conversion is very concrete, it comes gradually day by day, in our lives and not just in our heads. It is a true gift for our partner.

#### Forgiveness.

Our good intentions sometimes do not bring the other happiness, and we wound each other. We are not able to solve this, the only way is forgiveness. The Lord knows how we are. He encourages us in the Our Father. It is not easy to ask for forgiveness. The first time is the hardest, the more we do it, the easier it gets. There must be a start. Ask early for forgiveness, do not wait too long. And if you are asked for forgiveness, you must answer, 'Yes I do, Yes I forgive you'. There must be no qualifications, no 'I'll forgive you if....' Forgiveness only makes sense if we are able to seek and receive forgiveness from God. Going regularly to the Sacrament of Reconciliation is very important.

The points of conversion must be helped, as it were 'buttressed'. With reading the Word of God and acting upon it. With prayer. Seek the wisdom of putting the Word into practice. Prayer needs to be at a time that is well established, set aside only for God, not 'sandwiched'. With the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Penance.

Set aside a special time every week for your marriage, to perfect it. It is critical to have this time to celebrate our marriage, to be happy together. Something with a 'holiday flavour', a time to not think about the troubles of the day. Perhaps an evening, a lunch, a walk in the evening. It is for each couple to discover what is best for them. We can involve the children in it. To let them see their parents love each other (and will be left alone). No rules, no guidelines. Each will find what suits them. It is a source of joy. God Himself wants to see us happy and to see our happiness proclaimed to others. It must be a decision, scheduled and planned for and jealously guarded. We are on the way of conversion and we are not perfect yet. What is important is to get started and to persevere. God wants to give to us His happiness, His joy, which is not of the world.

## **Session 2      Communication      26<sup>th</sup> February 1994**

The first condition for good communication is love and truth.

We need to eliminate false ideas about one another or about what is love. After a few years of marriage – we find our partner is not necessarily what we thought they were. There is some disappointment perhaps.

The first false idea – the 'ideal' image. The wife dreams of a strong, protective, affectionate etc husband. The husband dreams of a smiling, gentle, available wife. For example, perhaps he dreams of a wife always at home, when he has a wife with a good job, he struggles bit by bit to let go of this dream. If we do not face these things, we will always want to change each other, or be disappointed that they are not corresponding to our dream. For example, the way they respond to illness and accidents.

Another false idea is 'my husband has to be like me', that we love because the other resembles us. This is not enough for happiness.

Another false idea. 'I am attracted only to the qualities that my husband has and that I do not' For example, tidy vs untidy, different spending patterns.

Another false idea is the search for the 'soul-mate', someone who understands deeply what is inside me. Sometimes we have this expectation.

Another false idea is the dream to be only one person with the spouse, and so to kill the uniqueness of the individuals. The differences are special.

Many confuse feelings and love. Love is not a feeling. Feelings come and go and change in intensity. Love stays. Love is a decision, a commitment made in freedom and responsibility. We are to love each other for himself or herself, not for that which they give to us, comfort, affection, companionship etc.

The second condition for communication is to recognise that the other is different from ourselves.

If these differences are not recognised and accepted, they will become sources of suffering. We must realise that we are different. Male and female are created different by God. Both are made in the image of God, of the same nature, equal but different. Marriage is not going it alone, we need one another.

There are given similarities, the body, our senses, our emotions, our intellect, our spiritual life, our wills. We must take account of all these levels in our relationship with each other. The reason and will must be supreme over emotions. The will must be supreme over facts, reason, thoughts and ideas. We have freedom in our hearts to decide, this is the gift of free will. Other similarities include our constitution, levels of activity and stamina.

The differences between man and woman are lived out in each couple differently.

They each have different ways of giving and receiving. For example, men and women do not react the same way to pregnancy news, when choosing a house to live in, one will see the outlook and the floor, the other will see the size, expense and location. In general, the man reacts in a more logical and rational way, while the woman uses her feelings more, and the woman may be more aware of what is happening around her.

For example, the couple may have had a tiff in the morning, hours later the husband may not understand the cool reception he gets, he has completely forgotten what happened that morning.

A woman's body is more vulnerable, her cycles, times of pregnancy and menopause all influence her moods, and the poor husband may not always understand. God did not make a mistake in this matter.

We cannot say that it is the man who looks most like God, or the woman, because we do it together. Together we image God best and equally. The differences are there from God to compliment, not to divide or separate. The conflict we experience at times in our differences comes from the effect of original sin.

The third condition for communication is to accept the other as he or she is, and to accept oneself.

My spouse is different from me. He is unique and original in all his being. God loves him as he is and has given him many gifts (even if I do not see them all). For example, he can be impatient, yet he serves, he is a good musician and a good handyman. If we practice a positive outlook, we notice that our spouse does not just have weaknesses, but qualities that we can keep discovering. Each person has gifts and talents yet to be discovered and developed. In developing them we discover who we are and what our vocation is. List perhaps 5 qualities of your spouse.

To be able to accept the uniqueness of each other freely, we must not compare them with the spouses of others, we must not judge them. Our spouses can change with God's grace. 'Never' is never a true option. Forget any sadness about what he or she is, put it behind you. Even after many years together, there is still much to discover within the other. There is no reason for staleness. If we decide to open our hearts to each other, we will discover even more. We must also accept ourselves. If we are to love our neighbours as we love ourselves, this is critical.

Communication allows us to come into communion with one another. It is not very easy. It cannot be shortened. It is not only talking. It is to exchange something of ourselves, something deep of ourselves, to open our hearts to each other. Do we stop and listen, is our heart turned toward the other? Are we present to each other? Are we available to each other? It is not always easy. We will not succeed unless we decide to do so. Confidence and trust help us to communicate. Trust depends so much upon forgiveness. It is hard to pray when there is hurt within and between us. Without forgiveness trust fades, with forgiveness trust grows.

The fourth condition for communication is to listen.

To listen is a complimentary attitude to trust. For example, you are reading the newspaper and your wife returns. Imagine putting down the newspaper to listen. It will do her good, and give her trust in you, and help her to express herself. She will feel herself loved and important to you.

Do you desire to listen to the Lord? How can we say so if we do not first learn to listen to our husband or wife? Talking is not just about high ideas, but also the ordinary things of the day, the details of our day. It is not an inquisition! Take a relaxed attitude together. You can listen by asking questions, too. And give answers, always give answers, or ask for time to answer. Give an answer to even the simplest of questions. Give each other a chance to understand our working lives, that which our spouse may appreciate, for example work and colleagues, children and spiritual life. We can communicate about our spiritual life, we can pray together, we can share together what God is doing with each other. It is critical to pray together as a couple, to turn to God together in faith. You must start. God loves us as a couple, and desires that we pray together.

We can pray in thanksgiving for the many good things we have been given. We can pray for our children, such prayer is always fruitful. If we ask, God gives the answers and the wisdom we need. Do not hesitate to take your concerns together to God.

### **Session 3    26/2/1994    The Sacrament of Marriage**

The Bible starts with a marriage and it ends with one. Adam and Eve, God-the Lamb and the Church-the Bride. There are many marriage stories throughout the Bible, for example, Jesus began his public life at the wedding feast at Cana. Marriage is an image often used to help us understand God's love for us. God's love is our model in marriage. It is both a mystery and a reality. Marriage cannot be only understood from a human point of view. We do not talk enough about the Good News that marriage is. In our time, high expectations are made of marriage. Marriage is a natural reality. Man and woman, brought together to help one another, yet sexually different.

Marriage reflects a small facet of the love of God. Man and woman are personally linked to God. They are always a mystery towards one another, there is always something new to discover. This is the reality of marriage, to give and to receive. Marriage is the union of two persons on the way to perfection. We marry 'to love', not in order to 'be loved'. This is a profound spiritual decision. Maturity is required at the time of marriage, to be able to make and to live out this decision. Marriage is intended to put in common our bodies, our home, our money, both the positives and the negatives. Marriage is the gift of the totality of our person to the other, which implies stability. There is a difference between giving a gift and 'renting' an object. Marriage is a permanent gift of one to the other. We are called to be only one heart and one soul. The Church teaches us the importance of fidelity, that it is inscribed within marriage itself.

The goal of marriage is to form a community of love and life. We can be fearful of losing the freedom entailed in this gift of ourselves, but since it is God's call that brings us to marriage, then we can find the fullness of our aspirations and desires in the marriage. If we accept the other to be different to ourselves, then each one can exist and become more and more themselves, and also more and more husband and wife. Before original sin, man and woman were naturally open to give and to receive, everything was naturally ordered toward God and toward life; there was not this orientation towards death that we live with after original sin. The salvation won for us through the Passion and Death of Jesus has restored the grace of marriage, through Him, all things can now be reoriented towards love and towards life. Marriage now becomes a supernatural reality. Jesus reintroduces the grace of God to human nature. Everything that we do is penetrated by this love of God, all our daily life, and the sacrament of marriage. Jesus has transformed our human nature, not suppressed it. Our sexual life is a good thing that God wants for the building up of the couple.

We can live in His joy by avoiding two possible mistakes. The first is seeking pleasure solely for yourself, or to consider it a secondary thing with no importance. The second is to see it as only a biological need or necessity. The first effect of the Sacrament, is to create and to found the link between the man and the woman. It makes the link strong between us, which previously was fragile. The purpose of the sacrament is to enable us to love each other as Jesus loves us. It transfigures our natural love, and gives it the strength and the capacity to love and accept our spouse and then children.

God never imposes His gifts. We must accept the Sacrament and use this gift every day, as often as we need it. It was not only for the first day, but for each day. We can count on this grace, it is a result of God's commitment towards us. It is a particular help to forgive each other when necessary. The 'yes' of our marriage is also a 'yes' to God, allowing him to enter our hearts. The more we let Him in, the more He will give. The Sacrament is a healing of the relationships of love and a gift. It allows us to love one another with the same love of Jesus. This is the mystery of the love of Jesus and the Church and we enter into this mystery as we are. Even if our lives are difficult, there are always small signs of the presence of God. Our positive outlook helps us to discover these signs. The Sacrament is given by the spouses, the priest is the witness, standing in place of the whole Church. This priestly witness was only needed after the Council of Trent. The effect of the Sacrament is only limited by our wishes and desires. This Sacrament transforms the 'water' into the 'wine', goodness into greatness, joy into celebration, into much more than we can expect, into abundance. It is the only Sacrament which is not received individually. It is the only Sacrament for family and for society. The Sacrament enters into great fruitfulness, because we cannot separate love from life.

Marriage is a Sacrament of communion and of service. The more we are attracted to God, the more we will give life. Our love is called to grow more and more, and to develop even in times of crisis, even in times of normality, even in times of growth and success. Difficulties and sufferings are opportunities to fortify love. Love is a source of life, and life is a source of love. We are not the authors of life, we are the servants of life. Life does not belong to us, we serve it, we are in wonder of it, we receive life. In contemplating the life of the Trinity within us, we notice that when the Father gives life, He gives it in great abundance, with a generosity without counting or limit. At Cana, He gave an abundance of wine; in the miracle of the multiplication of the bread, also He gave in abundance.

To give life, is also to mirror the attitude of the Son of God. He says 'yes' and receives the love of God the Father. We say 'yes' to our spouse and to the children given to us. This 'yes' we say also to the events in our lives. Whatever our state of life, we can give life, we can be life-giving. The first way is to give life to our spouse, when we say 'I love you', you exist for me, I desire that you may live to the full, when we forgive ourselves and each other, we give life.

When we give life to children, we give it day after day so that they may become children of God, adults and independent. We give life, too, in our missionary work, giving to the world the love that we live. We cannot refuse to give it. Marriage is an image of the life of the Trinity, Man, Woman and Children. We can found our life on this mystery, reality and faith. The plan of God for His children, is in marriage.

One of the main points of our vocation is to welcome children and to help them to grow. Our children are a gift from God – not our property. Even if we have an important role – it is God who gives the life. It is characteristic of love, it is characteristic of God, to GIVE. There are many ways to be fruitful, not just by having children, but by giving love, and by living and serving others as best we can.

We participate in the work of God through children. Our role and mission does not stop after birth, or after our children enter into adulthood. God has a particular will and mission for every child. We are His helpers. It is His will for us to do this. We are parents forever; our behaviour changes toward them over time, but the role and mission remain.

Each of our children is unique. One child does not replace another. Try to treat them as distinct individuals. Do not compare them. Each one is unique. Make an effort to use their first names (not ‘hey you, kids, all of you...’). It is important to spend time with each one separately and regularly, not quantity of time, but quality of presence and love. For example, meals, shopping trips, conversations, use them as opportunities to seek what their desire is from us, what satisfies their needs to feel themselves loved by us most. Our children are not all perfect, some are really difficult, or hard to understand. Look at them all in a positive way (similar to the positive outlook that we take with our spouse), with an outlook of hope. Many things are beautiful in them. Find out what it is that they do well. It is easy to find fault. Sometimes we box them in their problem, (always a liar, hungry, lazy etc). Do not box them in that negative expression. There are many qualities in our children which have not yet been developed, we need to thank and to bless God for that.

Be truthful. Don’t try to find things to praise that do not exist. We are seeking an outlook of truth and of hope. When problems crop up, tell yourselves that God has not finished with them yet, there is still time for change and for growth. Don’t give up on them. God is very patient, and very powerful.

Let us talk about the spiritual life of our children. It starts very early. We can be sure that it exists. We must help them develop their spiritual life. First, pray a lot for them and with them, even if still very young. Adapt to each stage the prayer that we make with them. As they grow up they will learn of personal prayer. Each home should have a small area for prayer with an icon or crucifix to remind them of the presence of God.

Introduce them to the Sacraments. At about 6 or 7 years old the desire to confess and to go to Holy Communion becomes apparent. In this area we must take time to listen to them, and to the difficulties that they find in the world which makes it hard to be a Christian. The witness of our lives is critical. (p.s. there has been a recent study, 2002, showing that the spiritual practice of the father in determining if the children keep the faith in adulthood is THE most decisive factor, outweighing the influence of the mother many times over.) You can invite them to the Sacraments, eg Reconciliation.

In order to help the spiritual lives of our children grow, we must 1) educate their conscience, and 2) educate their freedom. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is a simply marvellous help in doing this. In the depth of conscience, we discover a law placed there by God, like a compass. When our conscience is clear, we can see God’s law clearly.

Of course, a compass can be wrong if it is placed near magnets. We must learn to detect the magnets that can disturb the correct working of our conscience. We must help our conscience discover what is good and what is not. At an early age, a child can recognise this. Our role is in helping them discover what opens and what closes the heart to love. When still little we teach them to mend and make presents and to not always want things for themselves first. We teach them the joy of giving. To know the difference between right and wrong, and to teach them not to lie, because when they lie they lose the trust of their parents. Trust is restored by forgiving them.

In fact each of our actions is lived out either in the truth or in the absence of truth. There is a truth for everything. As parents we have to be coherent and consistent in what we do. We must be consistent in what we do and in what we say for them to do. There is always a right way of answering, for example, ‘tell her I am busy, but I will call her back’ compared to ‘tell her I am not at home’. Be vigilant on all these points, if we do this, we will create a climate of truth and righteousness which will save the family many problems.

A word of truth should always be a word of love. Love and truth cannot be separated. Truth without love hurts and hardens. Love without truth weakens and degrades. True freedom depends upon the truth by which we live. The promise of Jesus is: 'The truth will set you free'. We are to educate the freedom of our children. We are to teach them to act freely eg, to choose well between schoolwork and friends. To help them evaluate their decisions, assist them in proposing the alternatives. Then they make the decision. Teenagers have a very great need for this type of help, as their age is a time of instability and of searching. We teach them to be free (free to choose the good and the beautiful) progressively by trusting them. If we trust them, we will help them acquire independence and confidence. To act freely, we give tasks to them according to their ability. We must use our authority too. (authority = growth power).

There is no education in freedom without authority. These two things, freedom and authority, must be in balance. Authority must be considered as a service, not as a power struggle. It is a service to help them to grow, which comes directly from God. Authority should be exercised in love. Tell the children the rules before, and the consequences, and promise to check up on them. Then if punishment happens, he or she will understand. Then our discipline is seen for what it is, and not just a response in anger at a situation that could have been foreseen.

Authority exercised in truth helps our children evaluate their actions, gives them security; gives them the limits that they need. Of course, they will test the existence of these limits, and how strong and useful they are. They need to find these limits. To not find limits disturbs them. Teenagers need to make their mark (or scratch) on rock, not on a soft cushion. A scratch on rock is formative, a scratch on a cushion is not. This authority is needed so that they may learn liberty. To exercise authority there must be the possibility of punishment, so as to make concrete the rule in the eyes and the mind of the children, and to help them make free choices on their own.

Clear rules are critical, which are associated with clear constant sanctions. Explain why before punishment. Avoid too many sanctions and too much hardness. Avoid especially telling but not doing, especially when it comes to punishment. Threats must be made good. Share the authority between the mother and the father, not only the father. If only one parent uses authority, it gives one 'fear' and the other 'weakness'.

After seeing how we can help our children to grow up, we can see that our mission does not stop us from being brothers and sisters to our children in Jesus Christ. In doing this we grow in a new link of parenthood, which may surprise us, it is a spiritual link. There are times when we need to forgive, and also seek forgiveness of our children, just as we need to forgive and seek forgiveness as a couple. At times the only way to solve the problems we face as a family, is to ask for forgiveness. Teach them while still very young to ask for forgiveness. They find it just as hard to do as we do. We should seek their forgiveness, too, at the appropriate times.

Family must have time to 'live' together. We need fun time, time to talk, to play, to enjoy each other, to play games etc, just for pleasure. It is so very important. God loves us to spend good relaxed time with our children.

It is within the family that we discover God and learn to pray. Thus we must pray together as a family. Such example will give them the example and the desire to follow. It is very important that the parents pray, and not just get the children to pray. It must be regular, if possible every day, to place ourselves under the light of God. Even a short prayer every day is better than longer irregular prayers. For teenagers it is not always obvious. We invite them to come, but continue to pray even if they do not arrive, so that they feel free to come or not to come.

Each couple and each family has a real vocation. It takes time to discover what God is proposing to us, His special call to serve, the world, the Church in some way. We are to build a civilization of love and truth, we are to build the kingdom of God in the world. To find the call takes time, but it is a source of great happiness. Don't rush it, let things happen gently, don't push one another. We are to witness that God, that Love is possible, to all around us, and in all our activities. If we desire to grow, do not stay alone on the journey. Join with others to pray and to serve. Lone Christians are in grave danger. We cannot live in Christ alone, we must live in His body, the Church. The call to all is to holiness, to sanctity. We receive this call in our Baptism. It is God Himself who makes us holy and transforms us. He does not do it without us. He respects our freedom. All we need do is say, 'Yes, Lord, come transform me, guide me and love me just as I am.'