

## **HEALTHY COMMUNICATION IN A SACRAMENTAL MARRIAGE** **by Joseph D. White, Ph.D. and Trey Cashion, M.T.S.**

“Lack of communication” is often identified by couples seeking marital therapy as a primary source of trouble in the relationship. And indeed, the word “communication” is so close to the word “communion” that it implies intimacy and unity. But what does “good communication” mean? Let’s look at the two patterns God gives us for marriage. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “The Christian family is a communion of persons, a sign and image of the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit” (2205). In our communion with one another in marriage, then, we become a visible sign of the communion of the Trinity.

In addition to the image of the Trinity, Scripture gives us another image of the relationship between husband and wife. In chapter 5 of his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul compares the relationship of husbands and wives to the relationship between Christ and his Church. Husbands and wives are called to a relationship of mutual self-sacrifice. They are called to give up pride so they can give themselves completely as gift to one another. St. Paul writes, “He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body” (vs. 28-30). We see this image again in the book of Revelation, where Christ is portrayed as a bridegroom, and the Church is called his bride. The end of time is pictured as a marriage, a full communion, between Christ and the Church. Catholic marriage, then, is a visible sign of Jesus’ relationship with his Church.

The three persons of the Trinity are distinct, and they have different roles, yet they share a common purpose and intimate union – so intimate that we speak of “One God.” One might say that there is “perfect communication” between the persons of the Trinity. When Jesus lived on the earth, he gave us some important clues about how this relationship worked. First, Jesus was the example of perfect love. If one were to summarize his life in one word, “love” would be the obvious choice. Everything Jesus did, he did as love itself. True love is an act of self-gift. Jesus gave his whole self to others, without holding back. That included the times he spoke with God the Father. In the Gospels, we see Jesus experience a variety of emotions, from sadness at the death of his friend Lazarus (John 11:35), to anger at the thieves who set up shop in the temple (Matthew 21:13), to joy at God’s grace at work in the minds and hearts of the simple (Luke 10:21), to almost overwhelming anxiety just before his death

(Mark 14:33-36). He openly shared even difficult feelings with God the Father (we see a clear example of this in the prayer in the garden on the night before he died), but he always spoke words of love, even when he was troubled. So, **our communication with one another should be honest and straightforward, but always spoken in love.**

In Acts Chapter 2, we read about the day of Pentecost. Jesus has ascended to Heaven, but he has promised to send the Holy Spirit to guide his disciples in accomplishing his work. The Holy Spirit comes and appears as flames of fire over the heads of the disciples. A large crowd is assembled, including people from various places who speak diverse languages. However, everyone hears the disciples’ message in his or her own language. Similarly, Jesus speaks in the language of those he is teaching by using metaphors, relating great truths to fishing and farming. In the Old Testament, we see God the Father communicating with the people of Israel through great signs that inspire faith in difficult times. Clearly, God expresses himself in ways that make it possible for us to hear and understand. In the marital relationship, when we express ourselves to one another, **we need to remember that the point is not just to “get our say,” but also to be understood by our spouse.**

Jesus clearly prioritizes his relationship with God the Father. He took time out of busy days to go to a quiet place and pray. Multitudes of people were seeking healing; important lessons were being taught. Still, Jesus interrupted this important work to maintain his unity with the Father, which was the source of his knowledge, compassion, and power. Taking time out to be together and share with one another is also essential in a married relationship. This is true even if it means interrupting important things like an important project for work or spending time with the children. **Communication must be a priority.**

Throughout the Scriptures, it is apparent that God, the Trinity, has a plan for humankind. The one God reveals Himself as three persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, acting in concert. In the Old Testament, we see promises that the Messiah, the Son of God, will come one day to save his people. Jesus promises his disciples that after his return to Heaven, the Holy Spirit will come to strengthen and guide them. Clearly, the persons of God are on the same page. They know their overall goals. Although God assumes different roles as he reveals himself in three persons, God’s unity of purpose, his one plan

for humankind, is achieved. The unity of purpose of all three persons of the Trinity is seen explicitly in the account of Jesus' baptism, in which the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove and God the Father makes it known that Jesus is his son (Matthew 3:16-17). **Where good communication exists, there is trust and collaboration.**

The love in a married relationship is exemplified in the total gift of one's self to another. This is a two-way gift, so the result is that two people become one. It's this self-giving love that we see in our other model of marriage, the relationship between Christ and the Church. The Church is called to make Christ's will her own. So it's no longer "what I want," but "what Jesus wants." But when we give of ourselves, we get so much more in return. Jesus, although he is God, humbled himself and gave his life for us, and gives himself completely to us today through the gift of the Eucharist, which we believe is Jesus himself under the signs of bread and wine. Through the Eucharist we share in his divine nature and the intimacy of his life. It is the sacrament of Jesus' "self-sacrifice" that nourishes the self-giving of husband and wife. We are fed by Christ in the Eucharist, and we are made more able to become like Christ to one another.

**Healthy communication in a married relationship is about self-giving love.** It's no longer about "what I want." There is no need for one party to be concerned about protecting his or her rights if the other party has given himself completely as gift. There is trust that what is "good for us" is naturally "best for me." And communication based on this idea looks different.

When couples speak of "problems communicating," they often mean problems expressing difficult feelings, such as anger or anxiety, or problems talking things through when there is a disagreement. *Self-centered* expression is all about "what you need to do to please me." There is no vulnerability, no gift of self, and no consideration of what the other person might be feeling. By contrast, in *self-giving* expression, I am trusting you enough to show how I feel, I'm not blaming you, because I know you have another perspective, and I'm looking for ways that I can help, ways I can support you in working things out. Even many "self-giving" statements begin with the word "I." Some even make specific requests of the other. When spoken in love, expressions of need are still self-giving because they involve some self-disclosure, some vulnerability towards the other person. Stating one's needs clearly and lovingly to another means, "I trust you to care for me."

It's important to remember that when you're married, you are on a journey together towards

greater union with God. Even if you disagree, **you're always on the same team!** Because in a marriage two people have become one, if your objective in a marital conflict is to "crush the opponent," you will end up "crushing" yourself and the relationship! Instead of trying to achieve victory over the other, the focus needs to be on finding a way to work together. That's the only way to win in a marriage. Working together means finding out about the needs of the other, and communicating your own needs in a way the other person can hear and understand. Is it easier for the other person to hear and understand you when you're using self-centered expression, or self-giving expression? The answer is obvious. When people use self-centered expression, we become defensive. The other person's focus on their own rights and preferences leads us to do the same. Instead of listening, we begin to think of ways to get *our* point across. By contrast, self-giving expression involves working to understand the needs and feelings of the other, and sending our messages in the way in which they will be best understood. For example, some people like to hear the words, "I love you" quite a bit. Others feel they can show their love best with action. It's best to do some of both, and to express your love in the way your spouse indicates he/she needs to hear it.

**Communication is also about listening to the other.** When someone is expressing disagreement or displeasure, we are tempted to put up walls, to defend ourselves with excuses, rationalizations, or insults against the other. This is self-centered listening, and it is not compatible with a relationship of self-giving love. The latter requires openness to the other's point of view and attention to his or her needs.

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