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1.

A Match Made in Heaven

AN OVERVIEW OF CATHOLIC MARRIAGE COMMITMENTS

“This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; This one shall be called ‘woman,’ for out of ‘her man’ this one has been taken.” That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body.

—Genesis 2:23–24

MY STORY

This year, Greg and I will celebrate a monumental wedding anniversary, our twenty-third year of marriage together. You won’t find the twenty-third anniversary on most lists of milestones, nor are there many personalized greeting cards wishing couples congratulations upon twenty-three years of wedded bliss. Those are reserved for the big numbers like ten, twenty-five, or fifty.

In fact, your monumental anniversary year likely differs from mine, because you and your husband have walked your own path to sacramental marriage. Let me explain to you why I plan to celebrate in a big way on number twenty-three. It has little to do with traditions, and a lot to do with the fact that I was nearly twenty-three years old the year that I joined my husband in lifelong partnership. In my mind, there is significance in the fact that this will be the year my marriage exceeds my single life—meaning, of course, that I’ve spent more time being one with

Greg than living on my own. Certainly, as I age, my memories of our life together far exceed those that existed before our wedding.

When we married, the notion of “I” and “me” was set to the side in favor of “we” and “us.” We are a team. Although my humanity sometimes keeps me from thinking as much, my marital vows oblige me to think of Greg as an extension of myself, and thus selfish decisions need to be set aside.

And so you’ll find me celebrating number twenty-three this year, rejoicing in the fact that I’ve been Mrs. Hendey for longer than I was ever Miss Bartholomy, and that my husband’s love, companionship, and continual support have given me a life more beautiful than any I ever imagined.

LESSONS I’VE LEARNED

1. SERVE EACH OTHER.

We have our husbands to thank for helping us to earn the most important job title most of us will ever hold—mom. So it feels fitting to begin a book about nurturing ourselves as Catholic moms by looking at the human relationship that is most central to our happiness and success at being mothers.

For most of us, the march toward motherhood began with an exchange of vows and the grace of a sacrament. Whether you married a fellow Catholic, or someone who is of another faith (like my husband at the time of our wedding), as a Catholic who married in the Church, you promised to lovingly accept children from God and to raise them in the Catholic Church.

Before I jump into my thoughts on how we, as Catholic moms, can nurture ourselves through our vocation to marriage, I want to share a few words with those moms who may be reading this book and are not married. I want you to know that I respect the tremendous work you do every day to serve your family. I want to applaud your courage for standing up to your responsibilities in countless ways. I want to give you affirmation for your decision to choose life for your children and to take the challenging steps of raising them in our faith, on your own. I

do my best to share some further thoughts for you in chapter 6, *You're Never Alone*.

When we marry, notions of self are set by the wayside as we begin our families. Whether parenthood is years away or just around the corner, life as a wife prepares us for the total giving of self that will occur once our babies are born.

In my early married life, I remember chafing a bit at having to bend my agenda, goals, and desires to meet the needs of a husband who, as a medical student, led a crazy lifestyle. It took me years to recognize that I should alter my schedule to better lovingly serve my spouse. In an age when we are taught to be strong, independent women, that phrase, "serve my spouse," may sound old-fashioned. But through the years, I've found great joy in accepting the fact that the little things I do out of love for my husband can be signs of my love not only for him, but for my God who gave me a vocation to marriage and to motherhood. I have also grown to more readily recognize the countless ways that Greg bends his desires and will to serve me. Truly marriage is about serving each other day in and day out.

2. KEEP CHRIST AT THE CENTER.

Watching my parents through a partnership that has lasted nearly fifty years has taught me many things about marriage. The first, and always the foremost, is to keep Christ at the center of my marriage.

For many years, I struggled with this concept. Greg was not Catholic when we married, and although he was incredibly supportive of my faith life and the raising of our children in the Church, I fell short in the lofty goal of making our marriage a triune partnership between Greg, God, and me. I was confounded by the fact that we weren't one of those seemingly perfect couples I saw seated around me every Sunday at Mass. Although Greg regularly came with us to church, my disappointment that he didn't share my Catholic faith traditions hurt my heart deeply.

"Look at Mrs. ____ (fill in your own blank)," I'd think to myself each Sunday in Mass. "There's her husband, Mr. ____ , all dressed up in his suit and tie. He's even a Knight of Columbus! She's really lucky. Why can't Greg be the kind of husband who gathers our family for the Rosary each night like Mr. ____ does?"

It wasn't until I came to peace with Greg's own spiritual journey and began to pray deeply for my husband that I would say I really put Christ

at the center of our relationship. Prior to that, I let disappointment, envy, and shortsightedness stand in Christ's spot in our relationship.

Maybe you're fortunate, and you are equally yoked in your faith life with your spouse. But for many of the Catholic moms I've spoken with, this is not the case. We may be much more traditional, regular, or communicative in our practice of Catholicism than our spouses, or in some cases much less. And we, as wives and as mothers, lay a lot of blame and judgment on our spouses and ultimately on ourselves for the fact that our husbands don't compare spiritually with men we know. "If only I were a better person, a better Catholic," I would think to myself for many years, "then Greg would want to be a part of the Church."

How very selfish of me to insert myself and my needs into the spiritual life of my husband, rather than seeing the situation for what it was—Greg's unique journey toward a God who loves him unconditionally. By the time Greg joined the Catholic Church through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), we had been married seventeen years. I wish I had spent the first fifteen years of that initiation process praying more fervently for my husband, *just as he was*, than judging myself and not truly appreciating the depth of his quiet, unassuming spirituality.

So yes, keeping Christ at the center of our marriage should include the raising of our children in the faith, the attendance of Mass, the familial celebration of sacraments together, and the nurturing of each other's spirituality. But equally as important, I believe this means treating our spouses as we would treat Christ should we have the occasion to find him physically sitting in our own homes. In Catholic marriage, through our loving service to our husbands, we have the unique opportunity to truly shower the love we hold in our hearts upon others just as Jesus called us to do. We have the gift every day of praying for our husbands, our partners in parenthood—not praying to fill in the gaps or shortcomings we think we see in them, but praying for them in their vocations and lifting them spiritually via our prayers.

Every day, as I live my life with Greg, I try to look to his example of Christian living through the many things he does to support Eric, Adam, and me. I pray for his soul, for our walk together toward the potential of an eternal life in God's presence, and in thanksgiving for my life partner—just as he is—and Christ's very obvious presence in our marriage. I've learned that sometimes that presence, that keeping Christ at the

center, looks different in my marriage than it does in anyone else's, and that acceptance is a true and deeply rooted grace to me.

3. NURTURE YOUR MARRIAGE ABOVE EXTENDED FAMILY.

In Genesis 2:24 we read, "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body." Many of us heard these words proclaimed during the Liturgy of the Word at our weddings. I've always felt that they are a prophetic reminder to us that our wedding vows and our marital relationship should come first in our hearts.

Struggles with extended family are so prevalent that they have become a cliché in our society. Even after more than twenty years of marriage, I still do little things to seek the approval of my mother-in-law, hoping that she will see me as a worthy mate for her son. My approval-seeking ways are fine if kept in moderation, but should really never become a roadblock between the woman who loves my husband as much as I do and me.

Keeping family relationships in their proper perspective is one of the most important ways we as Catholic moms can nurture our marriages, and ultimately ourselves. Many things that happen within a marriage are best kept within the confines of our homes, rather than being aired in public, even within our families of origin. As close as I am to my mother and my sisters, my relationship with Greg should always come first and foremost.

This is also an important thing to remember when extended family situations arise that may place a strain on our marriages, and ultimately upon us as women. When in doubt, cling to your husband and become one with him. If this means having to take a pass on a nephew's Little League game or Thanksgiving dinner rounds to three houses (none of which are your own), do so for the sake of your spirit and for your relationship with your soul mate and life partner.

One of the best presents our parents ever gave Greg and me as we launched our lives together was their permission to begin our own independent family life. We love spending time with both sides of our family, but have never succumbed to doing so out of guilt. Early on, speak with each other and with your families about your desire to create your own family traditions and work together to make these your greatest priority.

If family commitments call you to attend functions outside your home, communicate with each other and lift up each other rather than heading into attack mode or bearing resentment. Be lovingly honest with your extended families about your goal to live your marriage as your top priority. Extended family members, who love you, should respect your efforts as long as you include them graciously in your married and family life with love and open communication.

4. PLAY TOGETHER.

One of the things that struck me with force when we had Eric was that my fun time with my husband greatly decreased, and I know this happens almost universally for other moms. We get so wrapped up in the care, feeding, and education of our kids that we are likely to neglect spending time with our husbands. Our communication runs the risk of falling into staff-meeting mode with quick exchanges about who's going to handle everything that needs to happen in our busy lives. But having fun with our spouses is one of the greatest gifts we can give our children, as it models for them the true joy of a vocation to the married life.

I'm not saying that you need to plan elaborate date nights every week with your spouse—those are great, but life's realities mean that a date may be more likely to happen only once a year. Rather, what I'm saying is that we should aim to turn the times that we *do* have together into moments of fun and happiness. Some of my fondest memories of my parents from my childhood involve them just goofing around together while my mom worked in the kitchen. Kisses were stolen, tickles were traded, and a dance even broke out some evenings, all played out before five sets of watchful eyes. My parents taught me that marriage was fun, not by taking extravagant trips or heading to huge social occasions, but simply by their genuine love of each other's company.

Look for occasions to laugh and to smile with your husband. Learn to love a few of his passions and share yours with him as well. Suck it up and watch a football game on a Sunday afternoon, just to be together. Attack household duties with an eye toward making them fun—even if that means dancing in the kitchen while you load the dishes.

Date nights can be a great way to nurture yourself and your marriage, but don't think you have to spend a lot of money to have a wonderful evening. Set the table at home, and prepare a special feast for the two of you, complete with candlelight. Hold hands and talk, or just rest

comfortably in each other's company. Remember why you fell in love with your husband and the things about you that drew him to you.

5. BE GENEROUS WITH UNSPOKEN SIGNS OF LOVE.

I've learned in my marriage to look for nonverbal signs of love from my husband. The truth is that sometimes, if I'm being truly attentive, these unspoken signs of love can touch me even more deeply than the regular "I love you" phrase we share with each other. When I rush out to my car to find a freshly filled gas tank, I never cease to smile because my husband knows that filling up my car is one of the biggest ways he can show his love for me.

Another nonverbal sign of love is the vacuum cleaner I hear running upstairs most Saturday mornings. Since I hate to vacuum, Greg's attention to this particular weekly chore is a constant reminder of how blessed I am to be married to this man. The truth is, we never sat down and had a division-of-labor conversation where we decided he would vacuum and I would sweep—he just started doing it one week because he knew how much I dislike it.

Because Greg is so generous with his love for me in so many little ways, I try to look for ways of my own to show my commitment to him. I am by nature a messy person. It's not really that I'm a slob—I just get so busy with so many different things at once that I tend to leave things scattered a bit. But because I married a neat freak, I make special efforts to keep things organized in the areas where my husband would be driven crazy by my stacks of stuff. I guess you can't really call a clean kitchen counter a renewal of wedding vows, but in our case it is definitely an unspoken sign of how much I love my husband that I often try to rush to clear things up a bit when I know that he is on his way home. Call me old-fashioned, but I want his return at the end of the day to be as warm and welcoming as I can make it—I'm not donning pearls and fresh mascara or laying out his slippers, but the least I can do is try to help him arrive home to a welcoming environment.

Your nonverbal signs of love for your spouse will be completely different than mine, as they should be. Perhaps what I am trying to say here is that I believe in the importance of both spoken and unspoken love affirmations. I believe in hugs goodbye and "I love you!" at the end of every phone call. But I also believe in a fresh cup of coffee sweetly

delivered with a smile or a trash can taken to the curb so that he gets a week off from doing that particular chore.

Study your spouse and look for your own special ways of showing your love for him, both in spoken words and in small acts of love. In lovingly serving each other in large and little ways, we nurture our marriages and our souls.

6. GET HELP WHEN YOU'RE "BROKEN."

Marriages come in all shapes and sizes. Many of them encounter rough patches that feel like spiritual and emotional droughts. In the same way that we may sometimes feel a void in our relationship with God, we can encounter moments of physical and emotional separation from our spouses. When these moments occur, it is important for our families and ourselves as women and moms that we reach out for needed support and counseling. If you face difficulty in your marriage, there are many resources that can support and encourage you in finding help.

The Church: Call your parish and make an appointment to speak with your pastor or other trusted member of the pastoral staff. Do not try to have this conversation randomly after Mass on Sunday, but rather schedule a time to receive his or her pastoral counsel. He or she will likely have local resources to recommend that will help you to receive the services you need. Your pastor or another member of his staff should be able to minister to you spiritually and can help you remain close to the sacraments.

Retrouvaille: *Retrouvaille* is a French word meaning "rediscovery," and the Retrouvaille program is designed to assist couples with marital problems, including those who are considering marriage separation or those who are already separated or divorced and want help. Catholic in origin, Retrouvaille operates around the country in local communities. To learn more about the Retrouvaille program in your area, call 800-470-2230 or visit www.helpourmarriage.org.

Catholic Charities: Across the United States, local Catholic Charities agencies are at work providing counseling and support services to strengthen and encourage families. Their counselors are available to assist with a variety of issues that may be affecting your marriage, including, but not limited to, addiction services, mental-health services, and

pregnancy and adoption services. To find your local Catholic Charities agency, visit www.catholiccharitiesusa.org.



Arwen's Story

For many people and in much of our cultural environment, love is about how two people make each other feel. In the seven years I've been married, I've found that concentrating solely on feelings is like eating frosting without the cake: you can enjoy it for a while, but eventually you're going to realize there's something missing underneath.

Romantic gestures are all about feelings, but it turns out that true love has to do with so much more than feelings. Ultimately, true love is sacrifice and self-gift and being willing to die for the ones you love, as Christ did. In our daily lives, where we can only hope for faint echoes of that love, true love is every single thing we do that brings us closer to perfection and to Christ—the one who loves best.

A happy side effect of that kind of loving is that it brings us closer to the ones for whom we are giving of ourselves, in a way that all the romantic gestures in the world could never do. In my years of marriage, the moments when I've loved my husband best have had nothing to do with gifts or poems or romantic dinners. I've nurtured our marriage most when I've found the grace to make sacrifices for him. Even the tiny ones he never knew about brought us closer together.

As for him, he never loves me better than he does when he takes the baby so that I can sleep in. Forget flowers; I'll take an extra hour of sleep any day! That's real romance.

Arwen Mosher loves her life as a chauffeur, cook, and calendar-juggler living in Michigan with her husband and their five children.



MOM'S HOMEWORK

- Recall your celebration of the Rite of Marriage in a special way by watching the video of your wedding or viewing pictures of that special day with your husband and children. Recall the readings and

songs you selected for your liturgy, and consider compiling a playlist of these to share with your husband and to enjoy yourself.

- Make a pilgrimage to the church where you were married, or “adopt” a special church and attend Mass there together annually to celebrate your anniversary.
- Look for three ways you might enjoy some play time with your husband. Take a walk together, watch his favorite sport together, tackle a small home project as a team, or simply sit quietly in each other’s company once a week.
- Look for a few nonverbal ways you can show your love for your spouse. Do these lovingly and without expecting his comment or appreciation. Offer them as a prayer for your marriage.
- Speak with your parents or find an older couple whose marriage you admire and invite them to dinner. Ask for their wisdom on what has worked and sustained them in marriage.
- Smile at your husband, hug him, enjoy his company, and let your children see your happiness with each other. Holy Cross Father Theodore M. Hesburgh, president emeritus of the University of Notre Dame, is credited with having once said, “The most important thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother.” I think Fr. Hesburgh’s words of wisdom apply to us moms as well!

WISDOM TO LIVE BY

No life is happy without mystery, and the greatest of all mysteries is love. Great are the joys in marriage, as there is the lifting of progressive veils, until one is brought into the blazing lights of the Presence of God.

—Venerable Fulton J. Sheen, *Three to Get Married*

THE CHURCH TEACHES

The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament.

—*Code of Canon Law*, 1055

TO PONDER

1. What are some small ways in which you and your spouse keep Christ at the center of your marriage?
2. Name a few nonverbal signs of your spouse's love for you. How do you show your love for him through your actions?
3. Do you have a marital support system or marriage mentors in your life? Does your parish or diocese provide support for married couples? If so, have you taken advantage of it, and how?
4. What are some memorable ways you and your spouse have celebrated your wedding anniversary?
5. When your children look at your marriage, what small and large lessons are they learning from you?

LET US PRAY

Loving Father, through your love I am bonded in holy matrimony with my husband. Please be a constant presence in our home and in our hearts, so that by caring for one another in the context of our daily lives, we may offer each other a glimmer of your unconditional love for each of us. Help me to support, to encourage, to embrace, and to serve my husband. Enable me to receive his loving compassion with enthusiasm, patience, and joy. Be with us in those moments when our marriage is filled with challenges. May our mutual affection be a model for our children and all those who interact with our family. Amen.