



A Project of Love

Getting Started

by Kathy Coffey

Overview

This flexible resource is designed to help couples reflect on practical aspects of Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *The Joy of Love (Amoris Laetitia)*. Pope Francis presents marriage as a life-long common project of putting another person's happiness ahead of one's own. This requires intentional work and play!

Formats

This resource can be used in a number of different formats, including:

- **A full-day retreat.** For this case, you would use most or all of the exercises as part of a parish or school group retreat.
- **A series of shorter, retreat-like events.** For example, you could offer one or more morning, afternoon, or evening events, perhaps on consecutive weeks. These sessions could be anywhere from 90 minutes to a few hours.
- **Parent sessions.** This would be an excellent resource for parents to work through while their children are in religious education classes. Invite both members of each couple to come, and lead it as you would a retreat. Work on a single exercise per session.
- **At-home retreat.** We have also formatted the material so it can be sent home and a couple can lead themselves through it.
- **Marriage preparation.** Use portions of this resource to supplement your marriage preparation program.

Read the instructions in the specific documents for more information about these formats. We have provided a single file for the at-home retreat format, which is self-directed and includes the handout content. For the other formats, we have provided a separate leader guide and handouts document, to make duplication less difficult.

The Art of Accompaniment

Pope Francis has been very clear that our role as pastoral leaders is not to judge people, but to accompany them in their journeys of faith. While the Church preaches an ideal for marriage and family life, we also know that that ideal cannot always be met. Our job is to welcome everyone into community and help them follow God's call for them. We encourage you to invite everyone into this process, whether they are married in the Church or not, whether they are Catholic or not, and whatever configuration their family takes.

The Joy of Love

Since this resource is based on *The Joy of Love*, it would be helpful for leaders to read the document, although that is not a requirement. The content of this resource is based particularly on chapters four through six. Chapter eight is also a very important chapter for leaders, explaining how Pope Francis wants us to accompany individuals and couples through difficult situations.

You can find additional resources for learning about the document, such as an introductory video, Powerpoint presentation, and a group reading guide at ThePastoralCenter.com.

Sending It Home

If you choose to send this resource home with couples for them to complete there, be sure to give each couple two copies so they can each complete the exercises. We also encourage you to have a brief gathering (perhaps right after Mass or while parents' children are in class) to introduce the resource and walk them through it. Doing this will make it much more likely that couples will follow through and use it.

Thank You!

We greatly appreciate your ministry. Your willingness to reach out to couples and help them strengthen their relationships will make a big difference. We're honored to be able to work with and support leaders like you!

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A Project of Love

Parish Event Leader Guide

by Kathy Coffey

Advanced Planning



Scheduling

You could plan this event around a special time like Valentines Day. If you are at a large parish, you could schedule it along with a monthly celebration of anniversaries (e.g., all those in March, August, etc.) with a potluck dinner, desserts, or wine and cheese.

Getting the Word Out

Pope Francis is especially challenging us to reach out to those who may be on the margins of the church. Many couples may only attend Mass about once a month or a couple times a year, but we want to invite them to experiences like this one and remind them that they are welcome. Encourage your regular Mass attendees to invite their friends, sons and daughters, grandchildren, and other family members to attend your event(s). Also promote this with your parents and those who have celebrated weddings in your community.

Childcare

The availability of childcare can be the deciding factor for many couples on whether they will attend. Even though it can be difficult to arrange, make it available if at all possible. Many parishes ask their fraternal societies to provide a baby-sitting fund to allow the parents a bit of freedom if they can't afford to pay for the childcare themselves.

Environment

Ensure that it will be obvious to participants how to find the location of your event, with clear directions and signs. Remember that some participants may not know your site well.

Provide comfortable seating, perhaps at tables of 6-8 people. Make sure there is enough room for couples to spread out and have their own private discussions.

If possible, add plants, flowers, and/or candles to the environment to make it more welcoming. Background music will contribute to the relaxed tone.

Team members

Arrange in advance for several couples who are “seasoned veterans” with histories of healthy marriages to be the facilitators at each table. This won’t require high levels of skill or theological training, but a willingness to keep the discussion moving and intervene if anyone tries to monopolize the conversation. They may be asked to share some of their own responses to the discussion questions too, although they should be careful not to take the focus away from the other participants.

Handouts

You will need to print out handouts for the topics you will be covering. Each of the handouts is double-sided and can be found in the separate handouts document. Be aware that each couple will need two copies of each handout.

Challenges & Resource List

Be aware that some couples may be in the midst of financial distress, illness, a severe strain on their relationship, challenges with children, or elderly parents. This is not a session for therapy, so simply be grateful for their presence. Provide resources for private counseling if someone is in need of more help.

We have compiled a list of marriage resources to distribute at the end of the “Marriage Challenges” topic, but we strongly encourage you to compile an additional list of local resources to give out at the same time. These will provide the couples with resources if they uncover problems that are beyond the scope of this session. Your list should include references to marriage and family therapists, crisis support, etc. Your parish office may already have such a list, or be able to direct you to Catholic Charities or other counseling agencies that can offer help in these areas.

Sample Schedule: Full Day Retreat

Here is a sample schedule for a retreat that includes all portions of this resource. You can use the blank column to fill in your own times.

Sample Time	Actual Time	Duration	Activity
8:45am		15 min	Refreshments & Hospitality
9:00am		15 min	Welcome, Introduction, and Ice Breakers
9:15am		20 min	The Way of Love (Opening Prayer & Discussions)
9:35am		60 min	Topic: A Project of Love
10:35am		10 min	Break
10:45am		60 min	Topic: Time Together
11:45am		60 min	Lunch
12:45am		60 min	Topic: Rituals & Celebrations
1:45pm		60 min	Topic: Marriage Challenges
2:45pm		15 min	Break
3:00pm		60 min	Topic: Praying as a Couple
4:00pm		10 min	Closing / Sending Forth
4:10pm		--	End

Sample Schedule: Shorter Retreat Session (90-120 min.)

Here is a sample schedule for a shorter session that incorporates two main topics. You could also adapt it to use a single topic, and/or use this same format with different topics over a period of weeks.

Sample Time	Actual Time	Duration	Activity
6:45pm		15 min	Refreshments & Hospitality
7:00pm		15 min	Welcome, Introduction, and Ice Breakers
7:15pm		10 min	The Way of Love (Opening Prayer & Discussions)
7:25pm		45 min	Topic #1 (e.g. "A Project of Love")
8:10am		45 min	Topic #2 (e.g. "Time Together")
8:55pm		5 min	Closing / Sending Forth
9:00pm		--	End

Sample Schedule: Parent Session (about 45-60 min)

Sample Time	Actual Time	Duration	Activity
9:00am		5 min	Welcome & Introduction
9:05am		45 min	Single topic (e.g. "A Project of Love")
9:50am		5 min	Closing / Sending Forth
9:55am		--	End

Welcome & Introduction



Leader's Talking Points

Welcome everyone to the event and briefly cover housekeeping details, such as:

- Any information specific to the site, including the location of restrooms
- Schedule
- Handouts
- Introduction of your leaders

Continue with these talking points:

- We are grateful for your presence today. Each of you has made an act of courage by coming. While all people carry baggage from the past, everyone present has taken a bold step beyond that, in an effort to reinvigorate their marriage.
- Each topic we cover will begin with a leader's talk, which will lead into a handout for personal reflection and discussion with your partner. As time allows, this may be followed by group discussion at your tables. You are not required to share if you are not comfortable doing so.
- While reflecting on your relationships may bring up larger issues, this event is not a therapy session. We can help you find additional resources to help you go into more depth strengthening your marriage.
- This retreat will draw from two main sources: Pope Francis' letter *The Joy of Love* and your own experience as a married couple. Pope Francis expresses an ideal; you will give life and flesh to his words. Because he speaks to the universal church, you will adapt his thoughts to your own particular situation.



Ice Breakers

Invite the couples to introduce themselves, one spouse saying something that he or she admires in the other. For example, "This is my husband Ken. He makes the best chili in Texas." Or "This is my wife, Marissa. I admire the way she stays calm with me and the children when things are going crazy."

If you have the time or desire for more ice breakers, ask:

- Describe the most loving marriage you've ever observed.
- What brought you here today?

The Way of Love



Leader's Talking Points

Using the following (or similar) words, lead the group in opening prayer. Note that the prayer and handout incorporate a Bible translation into contemporary, conversational English. It would be helpful to have Bibles available for participants who want to compare to the standard translation.

God of all compassion, we thank you for this time together. As we gather together, we hope this time will help us appreciate and improve our marriages. Our time is short, but we ask for your grace to fill it with blessing. Help us to understand more fully your way of love.

Love never gives up.
Love cares more for others than for self.
Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.
Love doesn't strut,
Doesn't have a swelled head,
Doesn't force itself on others,
Isn't always "me first,"
Doesn't fly off the handle,
Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,
Doesn't revel when others grovel,
Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
Puts up with anything,
Trusts God always,
Always looks for the best,
Never looks back,
But keeps going to the end.

1 Corinthians 13:4-7, *The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition*

Gracious God, help us live our lives centered in this self-giving love.

Amen.



Handout

Distribute the handout for the couples to reflect on and then discuss together.

A Project of Love



Leader's Talking Points

Use the following talking points based on #217-240.

- **After the honeymoon.** Our society places tremendous emphasis on the wedding itself, and astronomical sums of money are spent on it. But the pope underlines that this is only the beginning. One hazard is putting the other partner on a pedestal at the beginning. If disillusionment then sets in, each discovers that neither one is perfect. Beyond the infatuation phase, marriages can turn into competitions, criticisms, and self-justification.
- **A common project.** But Pope Francis underlines that love is more than a feeling; it is a shared commitment to creative action. Mature love is an ongoing process, a dynamic, creative, life-long project. "Each spouse is God's means of helping the other to mature." Francis compares love to craftsmanship—and it can take a long time to skillfully craft the perfect brew, artwork, song or book!
- **Seeing the best in each other.** Since we are all flawed, spouses must focus on the other's good side. Imperfection isn't the problem; the problem is pretending we're perfect. Love always sees beneath the surface, to the other's potential and the image of God there.
- **Wanting the best for each other.** Love is centered in self-giving and generosity, not selfishness and control. Domination and competition destroy love. Being intimate with another person calls us to respect that person's freedom, not try to control every step. Spouses must learn to let the little things go, focus on what is most important, the interplay of give and take, and putting another's happiness before their own.
- **Grounded in hope.** Pope Francis uses the charming phrase that "Young love needs to keep dancing towards the future with immense hope." He says hope can keep us from getting stuck in arguments and conflicts. It leads to a broader perspective, and towards living fully in the present.



Handout

Distribute the handout for the couples to reflect on and then discuss together.



Small Group Discussion (Optional)

Did anything in your couples' discussion surprise you? Puzzle you? Intrigue you? Is there anything you want to pursue further at home?

Time Together



Leader's Talking Points

- “But I don’t have time!” Sound familiar? It’s almost as pervasive as “I don’t have money!” Lack of time together is a huge problem for most people (#224).
- Yet if a couple doesn’t take time together, their relationship can run into problems. Too many other distractions can draw them away from each other.
- No one can add hours to the day, but everyone can prioritize how they spend the time they have. This may mean giving up something we once spent many hours on (sports, television, shopping, hobbies), in order to give that time to the relationship instead. But look on it as an investment in the bank of the relationship, which will bear many dividends both now and in years to come.
- Francis says, “Love needs time and space; everything else is secondary.” He encourages the following practices, so that we don’t fall into the trap of being in the same room as the other person, but not even aware he or she is there. Would that have happened when a couple was newly in love?



Handout

Distribute the handout for the couples to reflect on and then discuss together.



Small Group Discussion (Optional)

How do you find a balance between time with your spouse and with others who legitimately need your time—e.g., your children, friends, other family members?

What creative ways have you found to carve out time together? (e.g., a regular “date night,” a morning walk, a weekend away from the children, a business trip extended so the spouse can come too, a special Sunday to leave the pressures of home behind and explore the city or neighborhood)

Rituals & Celebrations



Leader's Talking Points

- If life gets too boring, marriage is just one more tedious obligation, routine becomes monotonous, and each day seems exactly like the one before. Or as Francis says, “We need ... moments of cherishing God’s gifts and renewing our zest for life. As long as we can celebrate, we are able to rekindle our love, to free it from monotony and to color our daily routine with hope.”
- Francis also recommends “shared daily rituals.” (226) What are some daily rituals any of you have that you have found enjoyable in your marriage so far? (*Pause here to solicit responses.*) Here are some very simple rituals you may already do or want to consider building in:
 - notes left on each other’s pillow, on the refrigerator, in the lunch, in a briefcase, or in a suitcase when traveling
 - a good morning and good night hug and kiss
 - a back rub after work
 - knowing each other’s favorite flower, beverage or dessert, and providing it as a surprise
 - getting the newest release from the spouse’s favorite author or musician
 - making a meal (breakfast in bed?) when the other doesn’t expect it
 - taking care of the children to give the spouse a weekend afternoon “off.”



Handout

Distribute the handout for the couples to reflect on and then discuss together.



Small Group Discussion (Optional)

Did anything in your couples’ discussion surprise you? Puzzle you? Intrigue you? Is there anything you want to pursue further at home?

Marriage Challenges



Leader's Talking Points

- Pope Francis states that a crisis needn't necessarily weaken a marriage; in fact, it can strengthen one. Indeed, each crisis brings something to teach. "Each crisis becomes an apprenticeship in growing closer together." Couples who have weathered several crises hone their skills; they know how to work together to resolve another problem. Thus each major hurdle can become a new "yes." Francis compares the process to a wine aging and becoming better at each step along the way. Rather than denying or downplaying the problem or assigning blame, the healthiest approach is asking, "What can we learn from this?"

After the couples have worked through the hand-out together, say:

- Some crises are so difficult or complex it takes professional help to resolve them. No one should be ashamed to ask for help; indeed, it's a sign of maturity to recognize when a situation has grown beyond our powers to handle it. No matter how difficult the crisis, it is usually easier and less expensive to get help earlier rather than later.
- Here's a list of resources we've compiled with the help of the parish office. Please know that if you are in a situation of needing more help for your marriage, you are in good company. Most married couples need outside help and support at various times in their marriage.

Provide each couple a copy, perhaps listing referrals under general headings such as: marriage counseling, health care, children with special needs, grief counseling, drug or alcohol addiction, financial problems, spiritual direction, issues around aging or retirement.



Handout

Distribute the handout for the couples to reflect on and then discuss together.



Small Group Discussion (Optional)

Did anything in your couples' discussion surprise you? Puzzle you? Intrigue you? Is there anything you want to pursue further at home?

Praying as a Couple



Leader's Talking Points

- Pope Francis strongly encourages couples to pray together. You may have never prayed together, except perhaps praying side-by-side if you attend Mass. But prayer is simply talking to God as we would to a close friend...
- We live in a noisy society, with constant music, traffic, chatter, etc. However, some believe that "God's first language is silence." One of the easiest forms of prayer is to begin or end the day with a few minutes of silence. During this time, you may want to think about what you're most grateful for or ask God for help in a specific arena. If this goes well, you may want to expand into silent meditation, which has numerous benefits for a frazzled psyche.
- What prayer practices have any of you tried that might be useful to others, even if they are not the standard ways we may be used to? *(Pause to solicit responses.)*



Handout

Since this is a retreat, give the couples an experience of shared prayer. Suggest they find a quiet, private space, perhaps using break-out rooms, the chapel, or the outdoors. Dismiss them from the large meeting room with two copies per couple of the following instructions.



Small Group Discussion (Optional)

How did that go for you? Is it something you could continue at home? Why or why not? What adaptations might you make? *They can then bring their responses back to the larger group.*

Handout: The Way of Love



Scripture Reading

This re-telling of the familiar “Love is patient” reading that is often read at weddings may give you some fresh perspective or insights on the way of love...

Love never gives up.

Love cares more for others than for self.

Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.

Love doesn't strut,
Doesn't have a swelled head,
Doesn't force itself on others,
Isn't always “me first,”

Doesn't fly off the handle,
Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,
Doesn't revel when others grovel,

Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
Puts up with anything,
Trusts God always,
Always looks for the best,

Never looks back,
But keeps going to the end.

1 Corinthians 13:4-7,
The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition

Feel free to compare this reading to a standard translation using your own Bible.



Examples of Love

Choose one or more lines from the reading that struck you most. Then give an example of seeing that quality in action. Ideally, give your spouse an example of when you saw him or her demonstrate one of these qualities. For instance:

- your spouse didn't "keep score," overlooking your screaming melt-down over taxes
- your brother didn't strut when he won a sports championship
- your mother "never gave up" while advocating with doctors for her sick child

Then, if you have time, discuss which of these are easiest for you and which are the biggest challenges

SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE

Handout: A Project of Love



Reflect on these questions individually and jot down some notes. Then discuss them as a couple.

After the honeymoon. Marriages can start with unrealistic expectations, but spouses are only human. *To what extent did you idealize each other at the beginning of your relationship? In what ways, if any, has that changed?*

A common project. Mature love is an ongoing process, a dynamic, creative, life-long project. *Has either of you ever thought of your relationship as being carefully crafted? If yes, say more about it. If no, do you find the comparison plausible?*

Seeing the best in each other. Love always sees beneath the surface, letting the little things go, focusing on what is most important, and putting another's happiness before one's own. *Give an example of a time you successfully negotiated a conflict.*



Wanting the best for each other. Love is centered in self-giving and generosity, not selfishness and control. *What ill effects of domination or competition have you seen in other relationships? In your own? Try to describe these without judgment or accusation, more as a situation you want to avoid in the future.*

Grounded in hope. Pope Francis says, “Young love needs to keep dancing towards the future with immense hope.” *How have you avoided becoming stagnant? Or how might you avoid it in future?*

Handout: Time Together



Loving Practices

Pope Francis suggests these practices as ways couples can focus their time together more fruitfully. Fill in this chart separately, then compare and discuss afterwards.

Place a check beside how frequently you follow these practices, and circle the ones you would like to focus on doing more often as a couple.

	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	RARELY
Talk things over	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Embrace leisurely	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Share plans	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Listen to one another	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Be attentive to each other's moods and presence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Appreciate one another	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Actively build a stronger relationship	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Share moments of meaningful silence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



Distractions

When the novelty of marriage wears off, some people turn away from each other to distractions such as the following. Place a check besides those that have been problems for you:

	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	RARELY
Taking refuge in electronic devices (e.g., computer, television, mobile phone, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Find other commitments (even noble ones)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spend longer hours at work, beyond what the job requires	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Seek another relationship	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Look for ways to flee what has become an uncomfortable closeness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Are you happy/unhappy with how you filled in the checkboxes? Are there any areas where a change is needed in your relationship?

Handout: Rituals & Celebrations



How can you make it a shared project to enjoy the year's progress, celebrating even in small ways when there's the slightest excuse?

How do you celebrate special events, and how might you want to celebrate them differently? Consider:

- birthdays
- anniversaries
- New Year's Day
- Valentine's Day
- Thanksgiving
- Christmas
- The first day of spring, summer, fall, winter
- Other significant events



Sometimes suggestions for rituals and celebrations seem implausible or impractical. If so, what would you recommend instead?

What ONE practice would you like to start when you get home, and continue this week?

Handout: Marriage Challenges



Stresses & Crises

This is a list of some crises that many couples face. Check those you are facing now or have faced previously. Use the blanks to add additional stresses.

Experiencing now	Experienced previously
---------------------	---------------------------

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Separation from family of origin |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Stresses with in-laws or other family members |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Serious differences in values, beliefs, priorities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Financial problems |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Childbirth, transition to infancy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Accident or injury |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Job Loss |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Serious illness or death within the immediate circle of family or friends |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Job pressures: overwork, underemployment, difficult boss, or co-workers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Natural disasters |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Emotional problems such as depression, severe anxiety, or anger |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Finding and/or financing a home |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Moving |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Work-related travel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Toddlers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Adolescents |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Attraction to another person |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Alcohol or drug abuse |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Aging |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Pornography addiction |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |



Support & Responses

After you have completed the list, discuss the following questions together:

- What support are you getting for the stresses you are experiencing now?
- What additional support do you need?
- What small changes can you make in your daily life to help?
- What support did you get for challenges in the past? How did you resolve them? What did you learn from them?

SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE

Handout: Praying as a Couple



Gratitude & Petition

Reflect separately for a few minutes on the following questions and jot down some thoughts:

For whom and what are you especially grateful?	For what do you need help, as individuals or as a couple?

Common Prayer

When you are done, join hands to pray together:

Gracious God, we come today to thank you for our marriage and ask you to fill it with compassion, forgiveness and strength.

Now pray in your own words, in gratitude for what you wrote down.

Now pray in your own words, for the areas where you need help.

Help us as we go forth today, to bring your good news into our world.

Amen.



Reflection

After praying, consider these questions:

Could you pray together on a regular basis at home? Why or why not? When could you build it into your schedule if even for a few minutes before getting out of bed in the morning, before falling asleep at night or while holding hands immediately before a meal? What adaptations might you make to best pray together?

SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE

Marriage Resources



This list is simply a starting point for finding the many individuals and organizations that can support you in your marriage and help you overcome whatever challenges you face. We encourage you to seek out whatever support you need. The following organizations are all referenced by the U.S. Bishops' web pages on marriage.

Ongoing Marriage Support

- **Marriage Encounter** • WWME.org • A weekend experience for marriage enrichment.
- **For Your Marriage** • ForYourMarriage.org • Resources for married couples.

Counseling and Therapy

Couples do not have to be in crisis to take advantage of counseling and therapy services. Some wise couples see it as relationship “maintenance” that keeps them on track.

- **National Registry of Marriage Friendly Therapists** • MarriageFriendlyTherapists.com • A list of experienced therapists.

General Resources for Marriage Challenges

- **Retrouvaille** • Retrouvaille.org • A program to help couples heal and renew their marriages.
- **The Third Option** • TheThirdOption.com • A free ongoing group program for marriages, including education and peer support. Both partners are not required to attend.



Specific Crises

Domestic Violence, Abuse, and Anger Management

- **National Domestic Violence Hotline** • TheHotline.org • 1-800-799-7233 • Free, confidential, 24/7 phone service answering questions about abuse.
- **Compassion Workshops** • CompassionPower.com • Educational programs for individuals and families that deal with the detection, treatment and prevention of abuse.

Infidelity

- **Beyond Affairs Network** • BeyondAffairs.com • A support group for people recovering from the devastating experience of a spouse's affair.

Addiction to Pornography

- **List of resources from For Your Marriage** • <http://goo.gl/6vPLg7> • A list of information and organizations.



A Project of Love

At-Home Retreat for Couples

by Kathy Coffey

Introduction



Welcome to this retreat experience based on Pope Francis' letter *The Joy of Love*. The retreat is organized into six main topics, which consist of learning points, exercises, and discussion questions. Each is two pages long.

Set aside some quiet time as a couple to work through one or more topics at a time. We encourage you to make an effort to make this time special, perhaps by lighting candles or sharing a glass of wine and/or dessert.

Reflecting on your relationship may bring up larger issues or motivate you to invest more in your marriage. The end of this document includes a list of resources to help you go into more depth strengthening your marriage.

This retreat will draw from two main sources: Pope Francis' letter and your own experience as a married couple. Pope Francis expresses an ideal; you will give life and flesh to his words. Because he speaks to the universal church, you will adapt his thoughts to your own particular situation.

Make sure you have two copies of this retreat, so that each partner can reflect on the questions and do the exercises separately before sharing their answers.

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SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE

The Way of Love



Opening Prayer

Using the following (or similar) words, say this opening prayer together (you may speak it aloud together or alternate reading each sentence. Note that the prayer incorporates a Bible translation into contemporary, conversational English. This re-telling of the familiar “Love is patient” reading that is often read at weddings may give you some fresh perspective or insights on the way of love. If you would like, compare it to a standard translation using a standard translation such as the New American Bible or New Revised Standard Version.

God of all compassion, we thank you for this time together. As we join together, we hope this time will help us appreciate and improve our marriage. Our time is short, but we ask for your grace to fill it with blessing. Help us to understand more fully your way of love.

Love never gives up.

Love cares more for others than for self.

Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.

**Love doesn't strut,
Doesn't have a swelled head,
Doesn't force itself on others,
Isn't always “me first,”**

**Doesn't fly off the handle,
Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,
Doesn't revel when others grovel,**

**Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
Puts up with anything,
Trusts God always,
Always looks for the best,**

**Never looks back,
But keeps going to the end.**

Gracious God, help us live our lives centered in this self-giving love.

Amen.

Reading from: 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, *The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition*,
TheMessageCatholic.com



Discussion: Examples of Love

Choose one or more lines from the reading that struck you most. Then give an example of seeing that quality in action. Ideally, give your spouse an example of when you saw him or her demonstrate one of these qualities. For instance:

- your spouse didn't "keep score," overlooking your screaming melt-down over taxes
- your brother didn't strut when he won a sports championship
- your mother "never gave up" while advocating with doctors for her sick child

Then, if you have time, discuss which of these are easiest for you and which are the biggest challenges

A Project of Love



Reflection Points

- **After the honeymoon.** Our society places tremendous emphasis on the wedding itself, and astronomical sums of money are spent on it. But the pope underlines that this is only the beginning. One hazard is putting the other partner on a pedestal at the beginning. If disillusionment then sets in, each discovers that neither one is perfect. Beyond the infatuation phase, marriages can turn into competitions, criticisms, and self-justification.
- **A common project.** But Pope Francis underlines that love is more than a feeling; it is a shared commitment to creative action. Mature love is an ongoing process, a dynamic, creative, life-long project. “Each spouse is God’s means of helping the other to mature.” Francis compares love to craftsmanship—and it can take a long time to skillfully craft the perfect brew, artwork, song or book!
- **Seeing the best in each other.** Since we are all flawed, spouses must focus on the other’s good side. Imperfection isn’t the problem; the problem is pretending we’re perfect. Love always sees beneath the surface, to the other’s potential and the image of God there.
- **Wanting the best for each other.** Love is centered in self-giving and generosity, not selfishness and control. Domination and competition destroy love. Being intimate with another person calls us to respect that person’s freedom, not try to control every step. Spouses must learn to let the little things go, focus on what is most important, the interplay of give and take, and putting another’s happiness before their own.
- **Grounded in hope.** Pope Francis uses the charming phrase that “Young love needs to keep dancing towards the future with immense hope.” He says hope can keep us from getting stuck in arguments and conflicts. It leads to a broader perspective, and towards living fully in the present.



Discussion: Examples of Love

Reflect on the following questions individually and jot down some notes on a separate sheet of paper. Then discuss them as a couple.

After the honeymoon. Marriages can start with unrealistic expectations, but spouses are only human. *To what extent did you idealize each other at the beginning of your relationship? In what ways, if any, has that changed?*

A common project. Mature love is an ongoing process, a dynamic, creative, life-long project. *Has either of you ever thought of your relationship as being carefully crafted? If yes, say more about it. If no, do you find the comparison plausible?*

Seeing the best in each other. Love always sees beneath the surface, letting the little things go, focusing on what is most important, and putting another's happiness before one's own. *Give an example of a time you successfully negotiated a conflict.*

Wanting the best for each other. Love is centered in self-giving and generosity, not selfishness and control. *What ill effects of domination or competition have you seen in other relationships? In your own? Try to describe these without judgment or accusation, more as a situation you want to avoid in the future.*

Grounded in hope. Pope Francis says, "Young love needs to keep dancing towards the future with immense hope." *How have you avoided becoming stagnant? Or how might you avoid it in future?*

Time Together



Reflection Points

- “But I don’t have time!” Sound familiar? It’s almost as pervasive as “I don’t have money!” Lack of time together is a huge problem for most people (#224).
- Yet if a couple doesn’t take time together, their relationship can run into problems. Too many other distractions can draw them away from each other.
- No one can add hours to the day, but everyone can prioritize how they spend the time they have. This may mean giving up something we once spent many hours on (sports, television, shopping, hobbies), in order to give that time to the relationship instead. But look on it as an investment in the bank of the relationship, which will bear many dividends both now and in years to come.
- Francis says, “Love needs time and space; everything else is secondary.” He encourages the following practices, so that we don’t fall into the trap of being in the same room as the other person, but not even aware he or she is there. Would that have happened when a couple was newly in love?



Discussion: Loving Practices

Pope Francis suggests these practices as ways couples can focus their time together more fruitfully. Fill in this chart separately, then compare and discuss afterwards.

Place a check beside how frequently you follow these practices, and circle the ones you would like to focus on doing more often as a couple.

	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	RARELY
Talk things over	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Embrace leisurely	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Share plans	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Listen to one another	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Be attentive to each other's moods and presence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Appreciate one another	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Actively build a stronger relationship	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Share moments of meaningful silence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



Discussion: Distractions

When the novelty of marriage wears off, some people turn away from each other to distractions such as the following. Place a check besides those that have been problems for you:

	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	RARELY
Taking refuge in electronic devices (e.g., computer, television, mobile phone, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Find other commitments (even noble ones)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spend longer hours at work, beyond what the job requires	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Seek another relationship	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Look for ways to flee what has become an uncomfortable closeness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Are you happy/unhappy with how you filled in the checkboxes? Are there any areas where a change is needed in your relationship?

Rituals & Celebrations



Reflection Points

- If life gets too boring, marriage is just one more tedious obligation, routine becomes monotonous, and each day seems exactly like the one before. Or as Francis says, “We need ... moments of cherishing God’s gifts and renewing our zest for life. As long as we can celebrate, we are able to rekindle our love, to free it from monotony and to color our daily routine with hope.”
- Francis also recommends “shared daily rituals.” (226) What are some daily rituals any of you have that you have found enjoyable in your marriage so far? Here are some very simple rituals you may already do or want to consider building in:
 - notes left on each other’s pillow, on the refrigerator, in the lunch, in a briefcase, or in a suitcase when traveling
 - a good morning and good night hug and kiss
 - a back rub after work
 - knowing each other’s favorite flower, beverage or dessert, and providing it as a surprise
 - getting the newest release from the spouse’s favorite author or musician
 - making a meal (breakfast in bed?) when the other doesn’t expect it
 - taking care of the children to give the spouse a weekend afternoon “off.”



Discussion: Rituals & Celebrations

Reflect on the following questions individually and jot down some notes on a separate sheet of paper. Then discuss them as a couple.

How can you make it a shared project to enjoy the year’s progress, celebrating even in small ways when there’s the slightest excuse?

How do you celebrate special events, and how might you want to celebrate them differently?
Consider:

- birthdays
- anniversaries
- New Year's Day
- Valentine's Day
- Thanksgiving
- Christmas
- The first day of spring, summer, fall, winter
- Other significant events

Sometimes suggestions for rituals and celebrations seem implausible or impractical. If so, what would you recommend instead?

What ONE practice would you like to start when you get home, and continue this week?

Marriage Challenges



Reflection Points

- Pope Francis states that a crisis needn't necessarily weaken a marriage; in fact, it can strengthen one. Indeed, each crisis brings something to teach. "Each crisis becomes an apprenticeship in growing closer together." Couples who have weathered several crises hone their skills; they know how to work together to resolve another problem. Thus each major hurdle can become a new "yes." Francis compares the process to a wine aging and becoming better at each step along the way. Rather than denying or downplaying the problem or assigning blame, the healthiest approach is asking, "What can we learn from this?"
- Note that the end of this retreat includes a resource page that can provide in-depth help for some of the challenges explored in this section.



Discussion: Stresses & Crises

Reflect on the following questions individually and jot down some notes on a separate sheet of paper. Then discuss them as a couple.

This is a list of some crises that many couples face. Check those you are facing now or have faced previously. Use the blanks to add additional stresses.

Experiencing now	Experienced previously	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Separation from family of origin
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Stresses with in-laws or other family members
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Serious differences in values, beliefs, priorities
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Financial problems
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Childbirth, transition to infancy
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Accident or injury
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Job Loss
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Serious illness or death within the immediate circle of family or friends
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Job pressures: overwork, underemployment, difficult boss, or co-workers
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Natural disasters

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Emotional problems such as depression, severe anxiety, or anger |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Finding and/or financing a home |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Moving |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Work-related travel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Toddlers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Adolescents |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Attraction to another person |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Alcohol or drug abuse |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Aging |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Pornography addiction |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |

After you have completed the list, discuss the following questions together:

- What support are you getting for the stresses you are experiencing now?
- What additional support do you need?
- What small changes can you make in your daily life to help?

What support did you get for challenges in the past? How did you resolve them? What did you learn from them?

Praying as a Couple



Reflection Points

- Pope Francis strongly encourages couples to pray together. You may have never prayed together, except perhaps praying side-by-side if you attend Mass. But prayer is simply talking to God as we would to a close friend...
- We live in a noisy society, with constant music, traffic, chatter, etc. However, some believe that “God’s first language is silence.” One of the easiest forms of prayer is to begin or end the day with a few minutes of silence. During this time, you may want to think about what you’re most grateful for or ask God for help in a specific arena. If this goes well, you may want to expand into silent meditation, which has numerous benefits for a frazzled psyche.



Reflection: Gratitude & Petition

Reflect separately for a few minutes on the following questions and jot down some thoughts:

For whom and what are you especially grateful?	For what do you need help, as individuals or as a couple?



Common Prayer

When you are done, join hands to pray together:

Gracious God, we come today to thank you for our marriage and ask you to fill it with compassion, forgiveness and strength.

Now pray in your own words, in gratitude for what you wrote down.

Now pray in your own words, for the areas where you need help.

Help us as we go forth today, to bring your good news into our world.

Amen.



Discussion: Debriefing Prayer

After praying, consider these questions:

Could you pray together on a regular basis at home? Why or why not?

When could you build prayer into your schedule if even for a few minutes before getting out of bed in the morning, before falling asleep at night or while holding hands immediately before a meal?

What adaptations might you make to best pray together?

Additional Marriage Resources



This list is simply a starting point for finding the many individuals and organizations that can support you in your marriage and help you overcome whatever challenges you face. We encourage you to seek out whatever support you need. The following organizations are all referenced by the U.S. Bishops' web pages on marriage.

Some crises are so difficult or complex that it takes professional help to resolve them. No one should be ashamed to ask for help; indeed, it's a sign of maturity to recognize when a situation has grown beyond our powers to handle it. No matter how difficult the crisis, it is usually easier and less expensive to get help earlier rather than later.

Please know that if you are in a situation of needing more help for your marriage, you are in good company. Most married couples need outside help and support at various times in their marriage.

Ongoing Marriage Support

- **Marriage Encounter** • WWME.org • A weekend experience for marriage enrichment.
- **For Your Marriage** • ForYourMarriage.org • Resources for married couples.

Counseling and Therapy

Couples do not have to be in crisis to take advantage of counseling and therapy services. Some wise couples see it as relationship “maintenance” that keeps them on track.

- **National Registry of Marriage Friendly Therapists** • MarriageFriendlyTherapists.com • A list of experienced therapists.

General Resources for Marriage Challenges

- **Retrouvaille** • Retrouvaille.org • A program to help couples heal and renew their marriages.
- **The Third Option** • TheThirdOption.com • A free ongoing group program for marriages, including education and peer support. Both partners are not required to attend.

Specific Crises

Domestic Violence, Abuse, and Anger Management

- **National Domestic Violence Hotline** • TheHotline.org • 1-800-799-7233 • Free, confidential, 24/7 phone service answering questions about abuse.
- **Compassion Workshops** • CompassionPower.com • Educational programs for individuals and families that deal with the detection, treatment and prevention of abuse.

Infidelity

- **Beyond Affairs Network** • BeyondAffairs.com • A support group for people recovering from the devastating experience of a spouse's affair.

Addiction to Pornography

- **List of resources from For Your Marriage** • <http://goo.gl/6vPLg7> • A list of information and organizations.