

Fifteen Minutes with Fr. de Chivré:



The Grace of Marriage



To speak to you of grace in the heart of two spouses is to show you that marriage takes its starting point in a love which is decided and proven. It explains why so many marriages are a disaster: as they walked out of the church, many couples were not decided and so have not proven themselves, since in order to prove you have to be decided.

Love begins in the very roots of human nature. Marriage proves that it is destined to become the pre-eminent reason for the home as well as the continuity of that home. Someone coined the lovely expression which I find to be so true: *love is always a beginning that begins again*. This is what gives love its character at once so untranslatable and inexhaustible. Love

is not something acquired once and for all, stabilized in a kind of engraving that we sit back and admire: “Souvenir of our engagement; Souvenir of our marriage,” an engraving that never changes. Nothing compromises two spouses like a love that does not change. This may scandalize you: if you want to love each other more and more, love has to change, but getting better and better. Love is an existence that is nourished in order to discover what was not yet a part of the love you swore to each other, just as one discovers, in the roots of a tree that one has planted, as it slowly grows, the leaves, the flowers, the scents one did not expect to receive.

You see that the range of discoveries stretches out indefinitely and in apparent contradiction with your notions at the beginning. “I didn’t know you were like that when I married you.” You must not be afraid to speak of the dangers inscribed in these contradictions, nor of the disenchantment or the diminution of the first feelings toward each other which now prove insufficient, because grace is telling you that you have to give more.

God very clearly carves away at two spouses exactly the way He carves away at a priest who, on the morning of his ordination, espoused the strictly supernatural life and who did not suspect for a moment all that God would send him in the way of exigencies of fidelity to that life; and the more he is faithful to it, the more he realizes that he was not mistaken.

Such is the law of love: to be threatened in its duration by the unexpected exercise of manifestations which are provoked by the evolution of the home. The problem consists in this: is their conscience prepared for that evolution? I mention, for example, at random: the birth of children, age, professional situations, unexpected crises, deaths in the family. Love manifests itself in situations beyond the easy beginnings, and that is fortunate. It manifests itself through positions which at first seem impossible to maintain and which the tempter knows how to twist to make them look unendurable: “Obviously you never really knew him, or her”; “Obviously this is not what you thought it would be”; “Obviously the circumstances which have just arisen prove that your wife, prove that your husband, is far inferior to what you expected.”

The fact is that the tempter—and never forget it—the tempter is *counterlove*. He is the missionary of hate and separation. He is a very patient missionary; he knows very well what he is undertaking for the benefit of his nefarious influence over the children, if he manages to whisper the two spouses into opposition, even subtle opposition.

It is the degree of your love that makes you a target for counterlove. And it is a struggle, it is a combat, and at the same time it is beauty. For it is in

this struggle that you will be recompensed for the “*I do*” you pronounced on your wedding day.

When he attains the parents, the tempter demolishes in advance the supernatural balance of the children’s future. It is for this reason that I want to insist on the quality of your intimate sanctification which will, without your even intending, guarantee the balance and peace of your children. And the tempter receives his salary of division between the spouses in the human, social disasters which he knows will disconcert both the husband and the wife to the point of making them become *counterlove*, like him.

And we are all trapped in a strange alternative of resemblance: God creates man in His image and His likeness; and, by sin, Satan fashioned man in his image and his likeness. We have to choose. We are all caught up in a resemblance, and it is that resemblance which will determine your quality as a Christian and at the same time your quality as a husband or a wife.

I have to make you understand that two spouses always have a heart that cries out, after having had a heart that sings. For, after having sung, they realize that something more is lacking, something better. So they groan, they sigh, they complain. But they still have a heart, and I have to tell them, gently, without wounding them, that the grace which knew how to make them sing on their wedding day will know very well, like a good doctor, how to draw near to them again when it hears them cry out and only leave them when it has retaught them how to listen to hope. We always have to remain positive in the midst of these catastrophes—and, sometimes, God permits them as the occasion for us to emerge into an extraordinary love.

It is vital that husband and wife learn never to judge a situation by the sole testimony of their aching heart. The fact that it is aching means that it has lost or does not contain the reserves of the first songs of affection which you perhaps murmured to each other. There is something that has been lost: What do you have to do? You have to teach you heart to rediscover those reserves by consulting the great doctor of painful situations: cool-headedness. Dig out the little health that is left, languishing deep in the heart of each one of you, in order to breathe into each one of you the knowledge of life, the sense of remedies, grace: that is, the very angle from which the God of love looks at those calvaries which are the most repugnant to any love that remains merely emotional.

You have to realize that your power for loving develops alongside your existence, in parallel with existence itself, which is to say that it ages, and this aging is meant, under the influence of grace, to manifest the youth of God. The state of grace is a beginning of eternity. The manner of considering one’s sufferings of soul and heart, the manner of considering them in prayer or adoration in the

simplicity of a confession, is already to return to the youth of God; it is to rediscover your resemblance to God and to lose your resemblance to the devil.

What does grace come to do in the heart of a man, in the heart of a woman, united indefectibly the one to the other? Satan wants to damn them indefectibly and God, by the sacrament of marriage, wants to save you indefectibly.

I know the case of a young, good-hearted man, married for years to an absolute witch of a wife. His parents, his friends, were continually telling him: "Why don't you just separate; it's unlivable." He always gave the only answer our grandfathers and grandmothers knew how to give: "I have received the sacrament of marriage to hold on until the end. And it is in holding on until the end that I will find happiness." And he found it. He had earned it with that particular sense of honor proper to a Christian: "I have the Faith; I believe in the fecundity of the Faith in a sincere conscience; it is out of the question for me to give up. I do not judge the situation of a Christian marriage in the light of merely human reasons, or commercial, or worldly, or family reasons; I judge it in the light of grace." You see that grace steps in to remind the spouses of this indefectible character of a situation which was freely willed, letting it open out more and more into the most beautiful of all things, for there is nothing more beautiful than a fidelity that has cost dearly.

I am trying to bring you out of that horrible diminution of the mind which reduces everything to questions of volume, measurement, immediacy, temporality, because it has lost the sense of *being* and is always preoccupied with the sense of *having*. That is what gets us every time: it is the "ME, thinking," who has taken the place of the "GOD willing." What will save the world, or the world will be lost, is the philosophy of God in human nature. The nature of beauty is precisely to be threatened. All beauty is threatened: in museums, the beauty of paintings is threatened by humidity, by profanation, by theft, fire. And it is the beautiful role of beauty to be threatened so that we become keenly aware that the threat will provoke a spontaneous reaction: before a work of art which is about to go up in flames, to rescue it.

Grace works that way when there are crises in a marriage, and there have to be in order for you to understand that the beauty which is threatened in your heart, in what is most precious, is in fact threatened so that you might have the quality of stepping beyond what you have by rescuing it; by rushing in as a man rushes into a burning building, however he can, with whatever he can grab, to preserve a thing of beauty. For when beauty disappears, the whole world suffers. We are all sick to death of beings and of things for lack of beauty. Beauty is disinterested existence. The law of

love is to dare to fashion the beauty of a home by disinterestedness.

You see how the fact of loving each other necessarily distances you from all interested calculation, from all immediate obsession with the easy solution. Grace nourishes in your heart the sense of beauty, a beauty engaged by you to adorn your existence with all that it emanates in the way of quality, sentiment of admiration, comfort and joy. It is the treasure of a marriage. I would like to see your marriages participate more and more in sacramental beauty. Just as the work of a master is the treasure of the museum: they watch over it and the slightest little scratch cries out for the help of restoration. Above all things, rescue beauty.

This is the activity which God asks of you, alongside each other, in making you realize that in the beginning of your marriage, everything appeared to you to be charming, and it was true. Everything appeared to you to be charming, because it was new, original, unexpected. Necessarily, along came the laws of existence, and the course of events, the banality of the day to day. But what is the law of grace? It is to communicate to you the eternal youth of God. Its role is always to make things new: to turn monotony into difference; to turn routine into enthusiasm; to turn impatience into a smile; to turn suffering into you supporting one another. The law of grace is to forbid love to grow old. A marriage that is raised up like that opens out into an indefectible beauty expressing something of God. Grace should not be something alongside your marriage. You have to accord it a respectful compenetration, free and human, not pretentious or sanctimonious, but a supernaturalized life. For the role of grace is to restore for you your qualities of expression.

What rescues love? It is when the man and the woman, finding themselves before each other, discover in each other an expression which they had not found there the day before; when they always see appearing a new life, a new existence, a new attitude, a new kindness, a new grandeur, a new courtesy. Then are they aware that, with this spiritualized attitude of love, they are always in the youth of their state.

It is not a day-dream. It remains indispensable to conserve a precise and living awareness that all of this implicates situations that have been freely willed. Grace pushes toward the fidelity of your "*I do*," but the liberty of each one assumes the responsibility for chiseling that "*I do*" deeper and deeper, not with fatality but with application. After that, whatever may be the nature of the difficult moments in a marriage, the function of grace is always to make the spouses consider that difficulty as a real fact whose composition must, above all, never be fled in order supposedly to "resolve the

problem.” Three quarters of all modern problems, in marriage or outside marriage, never cease to become more complex, to grow more serious, to be nourished, because each one is determined to deny the painful composition of the problem. So they grab at any possible solution. They treat problems as though they were fleeing a temptation. On the contrary, grace asks us very specifically not to flee the composition of a marriage difficulty, because it is precisely the composition that we have to understand. Grace is like God: it looks evil and good straight in the face. It is in the nature of grace to triumph over the tempting character of cowardice by introducing the problem of the divine point of view, whose role is to transfigure the situation, not by making it disappear but by elevating it. The time it needs to bear the weight on your shoulders—the time it needs, all the way to the end. After that, the reconstruction begins.

Grace gives a new meaning, whose job is to “add.” God is always positive and real. God is not abstract; He is astonishingly concrete. He always seeks to give you an opportunity to add unexpected beauty to a beauty bathed in tears. Think of all the crystal we could manufacture with our tears, all the jewels which He puts us in a position to forge. Unexpected beauty, because up until now we had never been pushed to manufacture happiness out of the material unhappiness of difficulty, the psychological unhappiness of a personality conflict, the social unhappiness of an unexpected trial, the intimate unhappiness of a secret temptation. The “painting” catches fire, to set off your rescue mechanism, thanks to the permanence of an understanding of the beauty of your home: manufacture the beautiful gesture of preservation of your heart, the beautiful gesture of peacemaking on the ruins of ill-humor; the beautiful gesture of comfort before the faltering of a passing weariness. In photography, the negatives condition the positives: if there were no negatives, there would be no positives. With God, the method is identical. He began with the positive of your engagement but then, since He dreams of something magnificent for you, He continues with the positive of indefectible fidelity—a fidelity certain of constructing the inappreciable beauty of the solidity of the home out of the series of accidental negatives. It employs them in a way that makes you want to draw out the positives, before the tabernacle, on your knees with your rosary, with the sacraments, with grace. Why is everyone leaving their post of combat? Because no one wants to be present before the tabernacle, to draw the positive from an attitude.

Then your hearts acquire a form of reasoning identical to God’s: not to deny the negative but to deny it the right not to produce the positive. You never have the right, in a difficulty between spouses,

to announce that the difficulty cannot produce a positive. In doing so you would betray love; you would betray your “*I do*”; you would betray your initial trust; you would prove that you did not know how to love.

It is only when the obstacle appears that the runner winds himself up with all the force of his muscles to jump over it. And in jumping over it he becomes aware that he had been preparing his muscles for years and years. He is happy: he did not run away; he jumped. When you have conquered a difficulty, you give rise to admiration: “I do not want to leave you.” And the two spouses rediscover each other. In this “performance” of love, the spouses rediscover each other, reunited, welded again to one another by the victory. This goes beyond the joys of their engagement. You must not deny your difficult moments the right to prepare a triumph: you do not refuse wintertime the right to prepare the charms of spring. A life, a love, are always a succession of trials, which is the source of love’s inexhaustible vitality. With God, everything always ends in a better *reality* and in the indefectible.

What is the job of the grace of marriage? The grace of marriage is responsible, in each one of you, for making you understand that the *inexhaustible* conditions your happiness and that, in every occurrence, its goal is to reveal to you the virtuous *inexhaustible* of a situation, even the most painful. Its goal is to show you that it is useless to go seeking happiness, without ever finding it, in the variable, in the new pasted onto the old, in the ephemeral replacing the permanent, as though three or four copies of a masterpiece could replace the renovation of the masterpiece itself, watched over with love.

Certain couples imagine that they need to spend their time pasting the situation back together with make-believe, and it breaks again the week after. You have to weld back together even the broken pieces with grace, which is *inexhaustible*. The reason you have to keep re-welding is that the quality of your love depends on the degree of moral energy it uses to carve out its features, more and more accentuated, more and more expressive. You can tell, as life goes by, the couples who are forging themselves to be more and more unshakable: you admire them, you envy them. You have to have the sincerity to admit that this expression, which is the reward of patience, of strength, and of perseverance, is incompatible with the modern variability of sentiments. A divorced couple is forever deprived of valid expression: you want to find happiness, you want to find a “valid” expression, whereas you have profaned forever your primary capacities of expression. Rather than seeking, in the first difficulty, how to make it express what it contains, you go on to ask a second difficulty to express for you what it does not contain. We are so used to

what is false, we no longer know what depth of profanation of love is contained in divorce. We no longer know what it means to love. Love becomes for us a question of corporeal juxtaposition, that is all. A divorced couple is incapable of participating in the plenitude of love. Affection includes intellectual and moral reserves just as important as the reserves of sentiment. And that is the role of grace: preservation of those reserves.

For grace understands the mentality of God, who dared to love us even to the disfiguring of His human appearance in the most atrocious way on Calvary, to prove to us that, in the most atrocious upheavals of a home, there remains the perspective of Easter morning which awaits the recompense. If you have the patience to remain at your Good Friday, God will not deceive you.

We no longer have the intellectual strength to allow God that splendor of authority over us which is grace. On Calvary, God signed His book of love, He put His own initials of indefectibility upon the decision taken, signed with the blood shed without thought of return or regret. He signed it for Easter morning; He signed it for better or for worse. That is what love is.

When two spouses bind themselves to one another in this way, they can never again be unhappy: they teach one another admiration, they become irresistible in their common affirmation. For in all love there is valor: the valor which is not afraid to cry, to offer, to carry, to endure, as representing the initials of our intelligence signing the value of the promises given, by the value of positive and repeated fidelities, through the negative of the trials. Then the home is founded on solid rock. No one will get the better of it. Jesus has told us: the storms may blow; if it is built on sand, everything will crumble away. But if it is built on the rock, Jesus is there. He is the rock. The spouses who have reached that point may be separated by the events of life, but they are indefectibly united until death.


I still call to mind the touching scene of an old and dear couple walking home after Mass. Leaning like a child on the arm of her husband, the dear wife trotted softly along, melting in the manly but already aged presence of her faithful husband. Everyone turned to look at them, everyone envied them: they represented unity. They had spent their life living "as a threesome." Their love was not going to fade away; it was not going to break. It was so beautiful that no one said a word. You had the impression that three persons were there together. The unity obtained after years of victories over the character of each one of them, affection always dominating the difficulties. You could almost see them surrounded by an escort of years, strongly bound together and successful; human years, no doubt, but years of grace, surrounded by an escort of implored graces, pouring down at the moment they were needed, to maintain the indefectible promise of the first day; of years of liberty voluntarily hitched to the same plow; of years of hands joined together and the one for the other; of years of faith in God nourished by faith in one another. It was like the living testimony of successful

love. Whence came this singular beauty? It came from the depths of their nuptial blessing, welling constantly into their daily lives. When one thinks of the innumerable nuptial blessings that have been profaned, one thinks of the unhappiness of men overflowing with the pretension of being happy without grace. Love as a threesome—God with you.

I speak to you in this way because I draw near many homes, because I am aware of many trials, and because I encounter a great deal of happiness in all those who are married "as a threesome." The recompense of that spiritual life is manifest in the character of peace which accompanies the life of a home built in homage to that love.

And I conclude by showing you the advantage for your children, if you live your married life "as a threesome." Start with a principle: the most beautiful gift you can ever give your children in the home is an atmosphere of peace. For the physiology of the child is so fragile that, if it is perpetually exposed to being upset by psychological tornadoes, the child ends up suffering from the mental unbalance which we so deplore today. The child needs to draw near father and mother as one draws near an oasis of peace. Nothing can take the place of peace. The moment a child breathes an atmosphere of peace, he encounters opportunities for love of God: "My peace I leave with you."

You see your responsibility: to maintain, for your children, the peace which will engender trust, which will engender liberating confidences, and the need to remain in the home, and the joy of welcoming to the home friends chosen in function of the qualities they sense there. Without realizing it, we educate our children in the measure in which we allow grace to educate us. Exteriorism is a heresy nobody mentions. By it I mean the habit of seeking solutions from bookstores and doctors and psychologists. If only we would start by discovering within ourselves our treasure of love, which would be a treasure of peace. How many times would you hear God Himself say to you, in the secret of your conscience: "*Pax tibi*—Peace be with you" in recompense for your love.

The solution of your happiness is not external. It is first internal. When, temporally speaking, your happiness may seem to you to be compromised, you have to remember that, temporally speaking, you are invited to enter into the eternity of God to oppose to that temporal the eternity of love. I have tried to draw as near as possible to the secret of your heart to allow you to raise it to the level of the spiritual life. All love is growth, all growth is happiness. Your happiness is with God. 

Translated exclusively for Angelus Press from *Carnets Spirituels*, No.1, June 2004, pp.33-44. Fr. Bernard-Marie de Chivré, O.P. (say: Sheave-ray) was ordained in 1930. He was an ardent Thomist, student of Scripture, retreat master, and friend of Archbishop Lefebvre. He died in 1984.