

The Serious Business of Marriage

Ask These Questions When You're Choosing a Spouse

By Stephen Gabriel

My wife and I recently celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary. And as any married person with a few years under his belt can attest, this “partnership of the whole of life” is indeed a serious business. True, much joy and happiness can be found in a good marriage – but it comes at a price. Indeed, a happy marriage requires considerable effort and no small amount of grace. It all begins during that courtship phase when we choose our future spouse.

With several of our children at (or rapidly approaching) marriageable age, I find myself regularly reminding my kids of some of the qualities they should look for in a prospective spouse. After all, someday one of the young men or women they bring home will be “the one.”

While successfully merging two lives together is no exact science, there are certain questions you should answer regarding any prospective spouse to increase the likelihood of picking a winner.

Question 1: Is this the man (woman) I want to be the father (mother) of my children?

Although your initial attraction to someone might be based on physical appearance or personality, it is virtue that gives a relationship staying power. This is particularly important when selecting the person who will have such a profound influence on your children. After all, the parents’ most important job is teaching their children to be virtuous. They are handicapped to the extent that they themselves lack virtues. I am not suggesting that you should be seeking perfection in a prospective mate. We all have defects and will continue to have defects until the day we die. However, our virtues ought to outnumber our vices.

The key question you must ask is – Does this person really know how to love? And I’m not talking about sweet words and smooth moves. I’m talking about expressing love through a willingness to give of oneself, to sacrifice. This is vital because a successful marriage will only occur if the husband and wife are willing to sacrifice for each other and for the good of the family. We teach our children to love through example.

So, it’s important to observe carefully how the person you are dating loves the people in his or her life. How does he treat his friends and family? Is she generous with her time? Does he go out of his way to help the people close to him? Or is he mainly concerned with his own comfort and convenience?

Question 2: Will this person be helpful or a hindrance in passing my Catholic faith on to our children?

This is a critical question that must be explored carefully and honestly. It should be very clear that we do not pass the faith on to our children by merely sending them to Catholic schools or CCD classes. We pass the faith on to our children through example. If the good example is there, the Catholic schools or CCD classes can be helpful in reinforcing the lessons we teach at home. But if the example is not there, our children will probably not be disposed to making the faith their own regardless of the type of education they receive. Catholic example is paramount!

The ideal situation is for both husband and wife to be practicing Catholics with a deep faith. If one of the parents is not Catholic or is a lapsed or lukewarm Catholic, this simply sends a mixed and confusing signal to the children. Don't think for a minute that they won't see the difference.

Whenever one of my kids begins to entertain the idea of attending a college in the Deep South, I always cringe and express my fear that if they go to school in South Carolina or Georgia, they'll probably wind up marrying a Baptist. After the predictable, "Oh Dad!" I usually explain that, of course, that wouldn't be the end of the world, but it would be better for their children if they married a virtuous Catholic than a virtuous Baptist.

This is not to say that any non-Catholic ought to be immediately disqualified as a future mate. There are far too many examples of good mixed marriages to eliminate all non-Catholics from contention. I'm certainly grateful that my mother had the good sense to marry my then-Protestant father over 50 years ago. The most crucial traits to look for are virtues. In many cases the virtuous spouse will be drawn to the faith by the example of the Catholic spouse and the grace that comes to anyone who seeks the truth with a sincere heart.

Question 3: Are my prospective spouse and I in agreement on the important aspects of family life and sexuality?

Don't assume that he or she will come around to your position after the wedding. This could be a devastating mistake. Make sure your future mate accepts the Church's teaching on birth control and the proper use of natural family planning. If he or she is not open to accepting the children God sends you in spite of the difficulties they may bring, there is a problem that must be

Matrimony

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.

— Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1601

resolved *before* the wedding. This does not mean that he or she must be anxious to set new records in the procreation category of the Guinness Book of Records. But, there should be an openness to God's will, knowing that Our Lord will not ask for more than we can give. I have to admit, if anyone had told me on my wedding day that my wife and I would have eight kids, I'd have told him that he was nuts! In spite of periodic difficulties and struggle, things have worked out better than I could have possibly

imagined. What we have given up in material possessions, we have gained in happiness and the joy of each of our children.

It is also important to discuss certain critical family-structure issues. The most important and controversial issue may be the career track of the wife once children arrive – that is, will she be a stay-at-home mom or will she pursue a career outside the home? This issue should be discussed and agreed upon well before the marriage engagement. Of course, both the man and woman need to be flexible, with the overriding criteria being the well-being of the family. Make sure you both agree on a vision for the family, keeping in mind that adjustments may need to be made over the years as circumstances change.

After discerning your marriage vocation, choosing your spouse is the most important decision you make. It seems that there is no choice but to engage your heart in the process. However, if you are determined to engage your head as well, you will increase the likelihood of having a successful marriage and a happy family life.

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