

CATHOLIC & NEWLY MARRIED

5 CHALLENGES AND 5 OPPORTUNITIES

Kathy and Steve Beirne

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PUBLICATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Here is what we have learned from our marriage and those of the many others we have had the privilege to observe, support, guide, bless, and celebrate.

Our first years of marriage remain in our minds like a merging of two streams coming down to form a river – a lot of turbulence while the waters intermingled. We entered with two very different sets of skills and expectations. Kathy came from a family that put a lot of emphasis on competition. Her family played cards and board games, argued at the table about sports and politics and religion, and assumed they would compete in school for good grades. Steve's family strove for different goals. They were expected to be polite to one another, to know all the finer points of etiquette, to be genial, quick witted, and hard working.

While these two family systems weren't mutually exclusive, they did create some interesting (and some painful) things for us to negotiate.

When Kathy would argue a point, Steve would back off but be offended by her tone of voice. When we would have a difference in our relationship, Steve would assume if he didn't pursue the topic it was over, while Kathy felt that there should be some agreed-upon settlement or conclusion. Kathy expected Steve to be interested in, and up on, political topics. And Steve actually expected Kathy to know which fork to use at formal dinners!

These many years later, some of the things that went on then make us laugh and some make us cringe. But the

bottom line is that we worked through them to have the caring, happy, egalitarian marriage that we wake up to each day. That doesn't mean we don't still have differences, but we know how to negotiate those differences. As Steve said recently, the risk to each of us is much less. We are "happily married," which we're sure is your goal as well. Each of us believes it would take a volcano to disrupt what we have spent a lifetime building.

We also have spent a good part of our lives helping other couples work to build solid foundations for their marriages. We see ourselves as cheerleaders, urging couples to keep working at loving each other, understanding each other, forgiving each other, and forging the lifelong friendship every couple we ever knew was looking for when they got married.

For us, our Catholic faith has been a major part of the fabric of our marriage. Each of us was raised in a Catholic home and attended Catholic schools, but once again we discovered our faith was different in ways that might have looked on the surface to be the same. Kathy's home was one that encouraged discussion of questions about faith and doctrine. They had many books and magazines available. They were familiar with major Catholic authors. Steve's family had a more devotional approach to their Catholic faith. He grew up saying the rosary, attending parish devotions like Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and the Stations of the Cross, and had many religious statues in his home.

Despite different styles or approaches to our shared religious tradition, however, we both see the world through the lens of our faith, and this has a profound effect on all our marital decisions, from how to raise our kids to where to go

on vacation. Catholicism is for us now an adult faith that challenges and inspires us to work to deepen and strengthen our relationship and to contribute in a meaningful way to making our world a better place, a little more like the Kingdom of God that Jesus envisioned for all people, including our children and our children's children.

An important fact we have come to realize as we have worked with different couples is that *every* "Catholic" marriage is an "interfaith marriage" in religious terms, no matter



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whether it is between two Catholics, a Catholic and a Christian of another denomination, a Catholic and a non-Christian believer of another faith, or a Catholic and a person of no professed religion. Each person in a marriage has, almost by definition, different religious experiences, backgrounds, views, and practices when they enter marriage. One of the sets of challenges *and* opportunities we present here is to learn to respect those differences, seek common ground where possible, and practice mutual respect always.

There are a limitless number of challenges and opportunities that face a couple when they start a marriage, and there are all kinds of marriages that result from the choices a couple makes from the options presented to them. This little book outlines five challenges and five opportunities we know you will have as you start to build your own marriage. We would like to be *your* cheerleaders, encouraging you to do the hard but fulfilling work of building a great marriage.

May God bless you both.
Kathy and Steve Beirne
Portland, Maine

FIRST CHALLENGE

Learning to speak the same language is a lot harder than it seems.

Just because you're new to marriage doesn't mean you're new to your relationship. You may have been together for several years before you tied the knot. But making the public commitment that is the heart of marriage can sometimes change the way you communicate with one another. There's something about that "til death do us part" that creates a different tone to discussions.

For example, it may be you find yourself acting more like your mother or father in conversations now that you're married. Patterns that you grew up hearing have a powerful effect on you, and may emerge now that you are in similar roles to those of your parents. Many people have this experience. Old "tapes" in their heads spring up and they say things they heard at home a million times in their childhood, even when they swore "I'll never be like that."

Sometimes making the decision to marry has been concurrent with other changes in your life. You've decided to buy a house, for example, or decided to start a family. So new stresses or new expectations have changed the game.

Maybe you have recently become aware of a certain kind of body language from your partner that speaks to you of resistance to your ideas. Maybe he or she turns away as you talk, or rolls his or her eyes. Body language can be a hard thing to deal with, because it's largely an interpretation and



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therefore easily denied: “I did not smirk!” or “I shrugged my shoulders because I didn’t care, not because I disagreed.” We all do this, and often unconsciously, but it does interfere with a couple’s effort to talk honestly and openly and effectively with each other. Learn to tell the other person what you are “hearing” him or her say, even if it is non-verbally.

You may already be aware that one of you is more of an introvert and one more of an extrovert. That means one of you needs time to process information while the other needs to talk out an idea in order to know how you feel about something. We know several couples who have felt the frustration of having these different ways of processing information and making decisions. There is no one right way to handle this personality difference, but it is very important to understand and honor the preferences of your spouse in how to deal with things.

Gender differences, too, may become more apparent after you are married for a while. Traditionally women are much more comfortable with conversations about feelings

– studies show they even have a much larger vocabulary of feeling words! So it is not uncommon for a man to feel disadvantaged in a dialogue that involves how each person is feeling. Men on the other hand, assume their wife knows how they feel and are often surprised to find she does not. While you were dating it may have been easier to walk away from these differences in communication styles, but now there may be less psychic space within which to maneuver.

So how do you face the challenges of learning to speak the same language? Here are some suggestions.

- Ask yourself what you hope to get out of a particular discussion. Do you hope to win? Do you want to avoid a disagreement or, at the least, avoid blame? Do you just want to get it over with and return to what you were doing? Or do you want to discuss an issue, resolve it one way or the other, either by compromise or by one side or the other “giving in.” (By the way, “giving in” is not a bad thing, especially on unimportant issues. In fact, we believe both sides in a marriage should feel that their partner gives in more than half the time—that is, neither “wins” all the time and that their spouse is the more generous one.)
- “Peace at any price” makes for a quieter household, but not necessarily a more harmonious one. Some issues are not meant for “giving in,” they need to be talked through, thought about, talked through again. Sometimes you will get emotional, even angry. Still, a decision has to be made that both husband and wife can live with, sometimes for the rest of their marriage (such as questions about having and raising chil-

dren). Couples are not always at their best in these uncomfortable conversations. Trying to keep a goal in mind helps to tailor a disagreement in a specific direction. The fact is that there are always problems that need to be talked out and solved for the good of a marriage, but it's important not to make them a contest that one side wins and the other side loses.

- One specific suggestion we have is to consider learning about the Meyers Briggs Temperament Inventory. It's a tool that may allow you to understand each other's preferences for taking in and sharing information. A couple we know said that knowing each other's personality strengths allowed them to divide up responsibilities in their decision-making. She is better at gathering information, for example, and he is better about making decisions based on that input. This knowledge of how they both operate has made for a smoother path in their marriage.
- "Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift" (Ephesians 4:29). Check out the Scriptures for places where they speak about having a respectful, loving, reciprocal style. All conversations are essentially spiritual in nature, because they engage the spirit, not just the mind. Some couples have a more volatile style and often have more "spirited" disagreements. That's okay, as long as you don't cross a line and say things you can't take back easily.

- Here are some Rules for Fighting Fair:
 - › We will find a time to talk when there is any difficulty or hard feelings.
 - › If we are angry, we'll make that time only after we have cooled down.
 - › We agree never to strike out at one another, either by calling names or using physical force.
 - › We will treat all eruptions of anger as something that needs to be solved by the two of us for the sake of our marriage.
 - › We will not use the words "always" or "never" when disagreeing.
 - › We will not bring up past behaviors or blame our families of origin or try to get our children on our side against the other.
 - › We will not use the silent treatment, make accusations, attempt to talk over our partner, or embarrass each other in front of our children or others.



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