

The week before Holy Week, I accepted an invitation to speak to a couple of religion classes at Notre Dame High School. The topics that were being discussed were the two sacraments of service: Holy Orders and Marriage. So I gave my vocation talk on how I became a priest, and then I turned to the topic of marriage, and I was able to draw upon my 14 years of priesthood and the experience I have had of preparing couples for marriage—by now in the hundreds. I was also able to draw upon the knowledge and wisdom I have gained over the years in my work in the field of canon law, especially working with individuals who approach the Tribunal because their marriage has failed. I presented to the class a few nuggets of wisdom that are in no particular order, except that they should at least be aware of these things before they leave high school, and possibly start thinking about relationships in the future.

- First, God—not human beings—created marriage, and so if we are intent on a successful marriage, we do well to follow His way. His way is manifest through the Church, who, like a good mother, has certain house rules to safeguard the goodness of marriage. One of the precepts of the Church is that we follow the marriage laws of the Church. They may seem like hurdles or obstacles or inconveniences, but just like mothers' rules at home, there is always a good reason behind them, and most of the time, it is because of our older siblings' mistakes in the past.
- One of these rules is that marriage between Catholics, even if it's only one of the spouses that is Catholic, takes place in church. Beaches are nice. Gardens can be, too. But for the sacred rite of marriage, the most appropriate place for marriage before God and the Church is in the consecrated space. Therefore, Mother Church does not allow marriages usually to take place outside of church. Sacred things take place in sacred places. Receptions and wedding parties, however, can take place wherever you'd like after the wedding! I joked with the kids that I would even be happy to come and repeat the rite symbolically for you at whatever island resort you fly me to, just as long as you have done it in the right way beforehand. Of course all expenses must be paid. :-)
- When it comes to dating, the wisdom that I have garnered is to recommend no exclusive relationships until you are intent on getting married. Group dates with friends are probably going to be more conducive to getting to know a person of the opposite sex in the way that they interact with multiple people, and you don't run as much danger of giving your heart to someone to whom you are not ready to commit, or vice versa. Along with this, I recommend, once you are ready for marriage—and perhaps enter into an exclusive relationship—that you do not let that relationship go on for more than a year without a movement towards marriage, so as to not lead each other on without clear expectations. I recommend against prolonged engagements, especially when there is cohabitation. In a cohabitating situation, you are just being used or using another... even if you like it. "Playing house" will never satisfy the desire for committed relationship.
- Another note about cohabitation: most of the time, this involves the sin of fornication (yes, that's still a sin!), and even if you declare, "We live in separate rooms," I would say, "Good for you! It's still a near occasion of sin— and gives the appearance of sin— even if it's cheaper." Most people argue, from an economic point of view, to do the thing that, statistically speaking, sets your relationship up for failure. Cohabitation without the commitment of marriage puts immense pressure upon the relationship without the needed and necessary safeguard of sacred vows. Many people end up very hurt by this situation, and overlook red flags and warning signs, without a way to address them properly. Again, you can't put a price tag on virtue, and virtue is ordered toward your ultimate happiness. Martyrs did not die for the sanctity of marriage and for virginity, so that you could make the excuse that having one apartment is cheaper than living separately!
- Pregnancy may be caused by a lapse of judgment among young people, but it need not be compounded by further poor judgment. If a couple finds themselves expecting a baby, especially before they have even been engaged to marry, "doing the right thing" of getting married before the baby is born is more oftentimes "the wrong thing." Fortunately, in our pro-life society, we have at least an acceptance of children born outside of marriage, even if it's not the ideal. I recommend that people in this situation do not get married until at least one year after the baby's birth, to allow for one experience at a time, even if it's out of order. So often people try to rush and pretend to be married for the sake of children and find themselves divorced quickly with lots of interpersonal strife and pain. There are other ways to be responsible parents.
- Contraception is a lie. Sex is for marriage. It has two ends that cannot be separated: babies and bonding. By splitting these two ends, the couple lies to each other. The promises on the packaging do not tell the whole truth. There is no condom for the soul, and there is no pill to prevent one from being used by another. NFP is the only legitimate means for delaying pregnancy, and I've never heard of a couple being successful with the sacrifice this entails, outside the grace of the Sacrament of Marriage.
- The Three Rings of Marriage: If you've been to any wedding I have done, I usually bring out this pun to make a substantial point. The first ring is the *engagement ring*, when there are lots of fireworks and flowers. The *wedding ring* is more practical and is worn as a daily reminder of one's pledge of love and fidelity, given and received. But the third ring, the most unsung of the rings, though the most important of them all, is the *SuffeRing*, that one willingly and lovingly endures for his or her beloved. Most marriages fail because one spouse thinks that the other is meant to give them pleasure or they see the other as one who "completes me." Successful marriages that I have found are when both say, "This other is one worth sacrificing for." Know the difference between *infatuation*, which is *self-serving*, and *true love*, which is *other-serving*. If there is no chastity, it's probably not love.

This is my wisdom. Take it or leave it. But it's my job to share it.

