



DISCUSSION GUIDE

Project Holiness

Marriage as a Workshop
for Everyday Saints

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About the Book

Project Holiness: Marriage as a Workshop for Everyday Saints celebrates the holiness of the ordinary and the goodness of married discipleship. Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* reminds Catholics of the universal call to holiness. Each person—lay and ordained alike—shares this vocation to holiness, this call to sainthood. For most adult Catholics, it is within the context of vowed, married life that the joyful and challenging path to sainthood is traveled. Based on an extensive qualitative study of long-lasting Catholic marriages, Bridget Burke Ravizza and Julie Donovan Massey examine the virtues, values, and practices that ground flourishing marriages and lead married partners to holiness.

About the Authors



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The authors have presented on their research for *Project Holiness* at parishes, retreat centers, college campuses, and diocesan gatherings. If you would like to contact them about such opportunities, you can email them directly at:

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The authors would also enjoy hearing about your experiences with the text and discussion guide.

Discussion Guide

Introduction

“We need to talk.”

We don’t necessarily like to hear these words from our spouse or fiancé. In fact, hearing this phrase might fill us with anxiety. *Why? What happened? Is everything okay? Did I do something to upset you?*

Nevertheless, we begin this companion guide with that very phrase: *we need to talk*. We need to talk to one another about the joys and challenges of married partnership that lasts a lifetime. We need to talk to one another about the virtues—such as love, humility, mercy, and fidelity—that flourishing marriages require, and how we might build them up. We need to talk about how our faith impacts our married relationship, and how our married relationship impacts our faith. We need to talk about, foster, and celebrate the real and profound holiness that is experienced daily in married and family life.

Our book, *Project Holiness: Marriage as a Workshop for Everyday Saints*, grew out of face-to-face conversations with fifty couples who were willing to talk with us about their messy, but holy, lives, so that we could pass along their wisdom to you, the reader. These couples helped us to identify key virtues, values, and practices that lead both to flourishing marriages and to the holiness of married partners. This companion guide is meant to help you make the most of the book by providing you with questions for thought and discussion. Our hope is that it can help you deeply consider and apply the wisdom of these everyday saints—and the wisdom of the wider Catholic theological tradition—to your own lives.

The guide can be used by married couples on their own or in discussion groups, whether in homes or parishes. It can also be utilized by engaged couples, in formal or informal settings, who are preparing for their own marriage. No matter the stage of your relationship—whether you have been dating a few months or married forty years or more—we think reading this book and talking about it together will do you good. But don’t take our word for it. Dive in.

You may use the guide as you see fit. Questions are organized according to the chapter topics in *Project Holiness*. You might decide to read one chapter of the book, and then work through some or all of its corresponding questions (this could work well for a series of parish gatherings with engaged or married couples, for example). Or, you may read the whole book, and then work through the questions either sequentially or by skipping around, discussing the questions that most interest you.

In any case, we hope that you find this companion guide helpful. And, more importantly, we hope that you find *Project Holiness* meaningful and inspiring—and that it gets you talking!

1. We Are Not Meant to Be Alone

Authentic Friendship at the Heart of Marriage

1. What struck you most from the testimony of the married friends in this chapter? Is it helpful to you to think about authentic friendship at the heart of marriage?
2. The gospels praise those who are meek and humble, yet these virtues are often disparaged in American culture. (Consider this: if someone described you as meek, would you take it as a compliment?) The couples in this chapter illustrate that lasting married friendship *requires* humility. How do you experience humility in your married life? Do you agree that humility is necessary for a flourishing marriage?
3. Why is the virtue of humility so challenging? Can you think of a concrete example that required you to “check your ego” for the sake of your partner? How did that process make you feel? What was the result of your efforts?
4. Do you think there are limits to self-sacrifice? Why do the authors emphasize that equality and mutuality ought to be present in marriage in order for self-sacrifice to be lived in a healthy or life-giving way?
5. Ninety-eight percent of couples surveyed affirmed the importance of shared morals and values in the success of their marriage. Moreover, 98 percent of couples consider sharing a core set of faith beliefs important to their relationship (17). Why do you think these numbers are so high? How important are shared morals and values in your relationship? Can you identify certain shared morals and values that are of essential importance to you? How important are shared faith beliefs to your relationship?
6. Identify three qualities in your loved one that make him or her a good friend. In addition, identify three ways that your partner has helped you to grow as a person. In gratitude, share those examples.

2. Erotic Love and Marriage

Making Love Twenty-Four Hours a Day

1. Lisa Landwehr argues that while sex in our society “is all around us all the time . . . the focus on healthy sexuality is not there. It’s all dirty” (25). Do you agree with her assessment? How does *erotic love* as described in this chapter differ from sex that is “dirty”?
2. Why does it sometimes feel uncomfortable to talk about sexuality and sex? Did you talk openly about these matters in your family of origin? Do you talk about these matters now? If not, why not? If we are sexual, embodied persons—created in God’s image and made for connection—how might we have meaningful conversation about how to best relate to one another? How do we create spaces for such conversation?
3. Reflect on the varied ways that you express affection as partners. Why are these meaningful to you? Couples in this chapter describe the little ways in which they reconnect—whether a squeeze of the hand, a goodnight kiss, or some other daily affirmation of their love. Are there daily or regular ways that you can deepen your connection to one another as embodied persons?
4. Jack Baker calls the soul mate model of marriage “bullshit” (35). Do you think there are positive aspects to the language of “soul mates”? If so, what are they? On the other hand, in what ways may the soul mate model of marriage be inadequate and/or problematic?
5. In this chapter we encounter examples of couples who never raised children, but see their call as married persons to bring life into the world (31). If you have not been parents, in what ways have you as a couple been a life-giving presence in the world?
6. If you have been parents, how does your faith help you understand that role? What have been the greatest joys of parenting for you? One woman in this chapter describes the responsibility of parents as working to help get their children to heaven. Do you share this perspective? How have the tasks of parenting impacted your relationship, including your sexual expressions of love? Finally, in what ways—other than parenting—have you as a couple been a life-giving presence in the world?

3. Love Transfigured

Experiencing Sacrament in Daily Living

1. Kevin Landwehr reflects on the abiding presence of his wife as a way he encounters God: “When you love somebody as much as I love Lisa, God just comes along” (47). In what ways has your spouse been present to you in good times and in bad? What does that tell you about the ways in which God stands by us in love?
2. In this chapter, we see how everyday rituals matter in the lives of couples and families (48–53). What are some rituals in your home? Are there rituals you read about in the chapter that you would like to incorporate into your life together? How might you adapt them to fit your life as a couple or the life of your family?
3. Some of the couples in the book share similar prayer styles, while others find that each person is nourished by different practices. How would you describe your experience with prayer as a couple? How do you make space for prayer—shared or each one’s preferred practices—in your life together? Can you think of concrete ways you might deepen your prayer life? Did you read about any prayer rituals you would like to try?
4. We read about the importance of coming together regularly at table (57–60). Particularly touching are the stories of grown children who, looking back, realized their appreciation for meals together—meals about which they often complained when they were young. What are your practices as a couple or family around meals? When you come together over a meal, how can you maximize the opportunity to be present to one another?
5. In light of the experience of the couples in their study, the authors suggest, “We do not *go* to church; we *live* as church, and at times we celebrate that within our wider community” (64). In what ways have you seen your home life as an experience of church? What can stop people from considering their daily life as a way in which they live as church?
6. Couples in this chapter pointed to the importance of a community that supported them, often by the example of others doing the hard work of marriage and family life. The life of their local parish became a source of support and nourishment. Who are the examples of marriage and family life you look up to? Who shows you that, while it may be hard work, a committed marriage is a possibility and a blessing? And how might you be an example to others in your parish community?

4. “Jesus Showed Us How to Live”

Serving and Welcoming Neighbors

1. What did you learn about the virtue of mercy from this chapter? In particular, what does it mean to say that mercy is “the fundamental attribute of God” (67)? And why are Christians called to practice mercy?
2. This chapter is filled with examples of couples who were committed to service and hospitality in a variety of ways. What examples of service and hospitality most struck you? Can you think of inspirational models of mercy in your own life? Share their stories.
3. Can you recall a meaningful experience of hospitality in your own life—either extending it or receiving it? What did hospitality *require*? How did hospitality *feel*? What did hospitality *do*?
4. How is your parish community good at hospitality? On the other hand, are there ways in which your parish community may grow in hospitality—might there be persons who are made to feel unwelcome? If so, are there ways in which you might take responsibility for that growth? (Apply these questions to other communities of which you are a member—such as friendship groups or work, local, and national communities. Who are the “strangers” most in need of welcome?)
5. Steve Miller reflects on his son’s need for extra caring at a particularly difficult moment in life. Steve shares the story using the language of “preferential option for the poor” (69). Is this a concept with which you were already familiar? Who might need your preferential care at this time? How might you demonstrate your concern for the poor? Perhaps you want to affirm a commitment you have already made, or consider new opportunities.

5. Inescapable Pain

Encountering Suffering in Family Life

1. In this chapter we meet couples who endured difficult suffering, whether in the form of financial hardship, illness and death, or family tragedy (87–91). In varied ways, the couples have come to some understanding of what the hardship meant for them. When you have experienced significant hardship, how have you understood what it meant? Have you seen particular ways in which God appeared absent or present at these times?
2. While the authors clearly do not assert that “everything happens for a reason” or suggest that suffering is a good in itself, they do recognize that many of the couples in their study found their way through suffering to an experience of new life. Does this resonate with your experience? What may distinguish the times when suffering is experienced only as hardship from the times when one encounters suffering that is transformed into something new, healing, or life-giving?
3. What do you think of Lisa Landwehr’s description of the grief she and her husband, Kevin, experienced when their son took his life (95)? In what ways do you and your spouse typically move through times of grief? How have you learned to recognize what each of you needs at those times? In what practical ways have you supported each other at times of grieving?
4. At the end of this chapter we learn about the important role of communities of support when couples or families experience suffering. Susan Wisniewski recalls feeling as though her family was “being carried” in the midst of the illness and death of their young daughter (98). Matthew Murphy was clearly moved when he described crying over the meatloaf left on the family doorstep during his daughter’s illness (99). These stories and others show the importance of a wider network of support during times of difficulty. To whom can you turn when you experience suffering? In what ways have your family, friends, and parish community offered you a network of support when you are meeting life’s challenges, be they large or small? Is there someone in your family or community who is suffering right now? What concrete gesture of care might you make to offer comfort?
5. Throughout this chapter, humor and lightheartedness make what might seem like a surprising number of appearances. How do you see the place of humor in times of difficulty?

6. “Nobody’s Leaving”

The Power and Path of Fidelity

1. Frank and Kelly Brown talk in this chapter about the daily work of committing to their marriage covenant, “You kind of wake up in the morning and roll over and say, ‘I choose you.’ I mean again. No matter what” (104). What does it mean to commit to your marriage on a daily basis?
2. Do you think you communicate effectively in your relationship? More specifically, are you satisfied with the ways that you express anger, frustration, and concern? How have your ways of communicating (especially when angry or frustrated) changed over the course of your relationship? In what ways might your communication skills improve?
3. Why is forgiveness “a prerequisite” to successful marriage (115)? Do you find it easy to apologize and/or to accept forgiveness? If not, what seems to hold you back? Discuss concrete practices that might help foster forgiveness in your relationship.
4. How do you define fidelity? What would constitute infidelity in your marriage? In the course of their interviews, many spouses expressed how grateful they were for the fidelity of their partner. How would you describe what your partner’s fidelity means to you?
5. In what ways does the wider culture support fidelity? What cultural forces seem to work against fidelity? What are your thoughts on Margaret Farley’s “way of fidelity”? Identify the concrete things you do to defend and sustain the fidelity that you share.

Permission to duplicate the pages in this discussion guide is granted for use in discussion groups.

Project Holiness: Marriage as a Workshop for Everyday Saints may be ordered from Liturgical Press. Contact them at: www.litpress.org or 800-858-5450.

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