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SUCCESSFUL

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H. J. O'CONNELL, C.S.S.R.

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**THE SECRET OF
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MARRIAGE**

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Too many marriages break up—too many are unhappy because they lack the essential foundation of successful marriage described in this booklet.

THE SECRET OF SUCCESSFUL MARRIAGE

H. J. O'CONNELL, C.SS.R.

Father Michael O'Toole wiped the last crumbs of the wedding breakfast from his lips, pushed back his chair from the table, and looked over the family group before him with an air of contentment.

There beside him, radiant in her white bridal gown, was little Rosie Allen. He had known Rosie ever since she was born. His hands had poured the waters of Baptism upon her head. He had given her First Communion and taught her catechism in the school. "And now," he thought to himself, "Rosie is a big girl, on her wedding day. Well, thank God, she has gotten a good man for herself! Tim Conlon is steady and true, and I know he will be good to her. God grant them both happiness!"

Margaret Brady, Rosie's aunt, said from across the table: "It was a beautiful service, Father. I had tears in my eyes the whole time. I could hear every word you said, and, you know, those words impressed me as they have never done before."

"That's right," answered Father O'Toole. "The words of the instruction before marriage contain the whole secret of a successful married life. But I'm afraid that most young men and women never even hear them on their wedding day. What was it that I said to you, Rosie?"

Rosie blushed and stammered out, "Oh, Father, I was so nervous that I didn't hear a thing."

"And you, Tim?"

"Father, I was worried so much about which finger to put the ring on that I didn't hear the words either," Tim admitted with a rueful smile.

"It's a pity, children," said Father, "for these words have hidden in them the whole treasure of the happiness that all of

us wish for you today. Let me tell them to you again, now that you are more in a mood to listen. I have said them so often that I know them by heart. The part that I'm talking about is this:

“It is most fitting that you rest the security of your wedded life upon the great principle of self-sacrifice. And so you begin your married life by the voluntary and complete surrender of your individual lives in the interest of that deeper and wider life that you are to have in common. Henceforth you will belong entirely to each other; you will be one in mind, one in heart, and one in affection. And whatever sacrifices you may hereafter be required to make to preserve this common life, always make them generously.

“Sacrifice is usually difficult and irksome. Only love can make it easy and perfect love can make it a joy. We are willing to give in proportion as we love. And when love is perfect the sacrifice is complete . . . no greater blessing can come to married life than pure conjugal love, loyal and true to the end.

“May, then, this love with which you join your hands and hearts today, never fail but grow deeper and stronger as the years go on. And if true love and the unselfish spirit of perfect sacrifice guide your every action, you can expect the greatest measure of earthly happiness that may be allotted to man in this vale of tears.”

“In these few short words, Rosie and Tim, you will find the secret of successful marriage. I point them out to you, introducing a serious note into this joyful gathering, because I want you to be happy in the years to come. We priests, as the years go by, see so much of the other side of married life. One of the saddest experiences of the priesthood is to see a couple, whom we married with love in their hearts and joy on their faces, come back some years later bitter and scornful, looking for a separation or a civil divorce, wanting to break up that union which they promised before God’s altar would last until death.

“There are too many marriages, even Catholic marriages, breaking up today.

And there is too much unhappiness even in many which endure. This results chiefly from the lack of understanding of the bed-rock foundation on which every successful marriage must be built. This foundation is *mutual unselfish love*.

NATURE OF LOVE

“We can love another person, as you know, in two ways: either with a *selfish* or an *unselfish* love. When we love another person for what he can give to us by way of pleasure, convenience, or material advantages, our love is selfish. The reason for the break-up and unhappiness of so many marriages today is that the man and woman enter them only with this selfish viewpoint. Each is looking only to self, to what they can get out of the marriage, and not to what they can give to the other. The man looks at the woman only as an attractive object that can satisfy his passion, keep his house in an orderly fashion, and put his meals on the table when he wants them. The woman all too often sees the man as one who can

provide her with security and material advantages.

“Inevitably, marriages entered into with such selfish love cannot endure. After the romantic interlude of the honeymoon, the man begins to find other women more attractive than his wife. The woman becomes dissatisfied with what her husband can provide, and if the opportunity presents itself, is quite willing to take off with another mate who can give her more of what she expects. Marriages entered into for selfish reasons are built on sand. They cannot endure through the storms and floods, the sorrows and sacrifices, which are a part of every married life.

“We can love another person, on the other hand,” continued Father O’Toole, “for their own sake, for what we can give to them. This unselfish love between human beings when mutual, we call friendship. Friendship is a beautiful experience of which only unselfish hearts are capable. The most intimate and enduring friendship of all should be that between husband and wife.

“Did you ever think about it in that way, Tom?” he said to Rosie’s uncle, who was sitting on the other side of the table.

“No, I can’t say I ever realized that before; but I can see that what you say is true. However, I always thought that the love a man had for his wife was something different from that which he had for his friends.”

“It is, Tom, in some respects. Between husband and wife there is that special aspect of love which can exist only between man and woman, who are by nature complements of each other. This love is based on deep elemental drives that go down into the instinctive nature of man. But since man is an intelligent being and operates on a higher plane than the animals, this love should be elevated and made to possess all those qualities that we associate with the idea of friendship. In the Christian, moreover, love should reach an even higher plane. It should be sublimated to supernatural charity.

“The love of husband and wife toward each other is, then, a very special kind of

friendship, based on the deep instinctive drives of human nature, elevated to the higher level of human friendship, and then woven through and through with charity, which is the love of another person because of his relationship to God.”

“That’s a beautiful idea, Father,” said Mrs. O’Rourke from the end of the table.

“Yes, it is beautiful because it was conceived in the mind of God. God could have established some other means of carrying on the race. He could for example have created each human being Himself, as He did our first parents. But in order to make room in our life for human love, the love of husband and wife, of parents and child, God devised this institution of marriage.

THE TEST OF LOVE

“The test of true, unselfish love is the willingness to make sacrifices for the other. You will soon find out, Rosie and Tim, that marriage is give and take. As time goes on, inevitably conflicts of interests

will arise. That's only natural where you have two different people, with different backgrounds and interests. The man, for example, comes home at night, after being out all day, and he wants to sit in the easy-chair, smoking his pipe and reading the paper. The woman has been home during the day; and she wants to go out in the evening.

“So too, in the matter of money. The wife wants a new coat or a washing machine. The husband would like to buy an automobile or a tool set. Even in little things like who is to get up and shut the window on a cold night, or take out the dog for his evening walk, there can arise friction between husband and wife. Only where there is unselfishness, the willingness to make sacrifices for one another, can these points of conflict be gracefully resolved. Otherwise they lead to dissension, quarrels, and unhappiness.



SELFISH HUSBANDS

“Selfishness on the part of the man causes him to look upon himself as the lord and master of the house, just one short step below Almighty God. The selfish man wants everything arranged for his convenience and pleasure, without a thought of his partner in marriage. When his wishes are thwarted, he breaks out in ungovernable anger.

“In my experience as a priest, I have seen men so selfish that they would not even work to support their family. I have seen drunkards who let their desire for drink destroy their home and family, and make the life of their wives a hell on earth. I have seen men who spend most of their time outside the house, down at the corner tavern, playing golf, going to ball games, or playing cards to all hours of the night at the homes of their friends. These men never think of taking their wife out for an evening of relaxation. They expect her to be nothing more than a slave, a kitchen drudge, and see nothing wrong in their way of acting.

“I have seen selfish husbands who think that because they make the money that it all belongs to them. They spend this money on themselves as they see fit, doling out to the wife what is necessary for the household expenses as though they were doing her a favor, not even giving her an idea of the state of the family’s finances.

“Such selfish men never give to their wives any expression of affection, none of the signs of love of which a woman’s heart has so much need. Even in the most intimate relations in marriages, in the exercise of their marital rights, they are brutal, demanding, and without any consideration of their partner. These selfish men are almost impossible to live with. God help the woman who happens to marry one of them!”

“That’s right, Father. Give it to the men! They deserve it,” said Mrs. Corbett with a twinkle in her eye, as she glanced across at her husband.



SELFISH WIVES

“Oh, don’t think that the women can’t be selfish too,” said Father. “I have often thought that if I were married to some of them, I would be a hard-drinking man myself.

“Some women have been raised as spoiled little darlings, and they remain that way all their life. They were brought up to think that they can get anything they want just by asking for it, and when they do not get what they want, they whine and complain, or sulk and pout. Mind you, I’m not talking about the majority of our Catholic wives and mothers who are models of self-sacrifice; but only about a particular few.

“When things don’t go the way they want them to, they are always complaining about their ‘hard lot.’ They are very skillful at feigning various illnesses which make it impossible for them to do their work, and which gain for them a great deal of sympathy and attention from others. Some are so slothful that they leave

their house a shambles, the meals uncooked, and the children uncared for.

“In their selfish desire to escape responsibilities, they even refuse their role as women and deny their husbands the exercise of the marital rights which they contracted to give at the time of their marriage. To mask this refusal of duty they cleverly throw the burden of guilt upon the husband, discovering various real or imagined faults which they use as an excuse for refusing the marriage debt.

“When they do not reach the condition of wealth or social prestige at which their ambition aimed, women can become very bitter too, and by their biting, caustic, and prolonged criticism tear at the very roots of their husbands’ pride. And I will tell you one thing, ladies, from my long experience as a priest, that you cannot destroy a man’s pride, and at the same time retain his love.

“In both partners, this selfishness can manifest itself in the form of jealousy, a very destructive thing. It gives rise also

to irritability, bickering, and quarreling. Little by little a pattern of hostility is set up between husband and wife that soon drives all peace and joy from the home.”

UNSELFISH LOVE

“That’s a pretty sad picture you draw, Father,” said Mr. Morrissey; “but we all know in too many cases it is a true one. How would you say a husband and wife should begin to develop this attitude of unselfishness which is so essential for a happy marriage?”

“It all starts in the mind and heart,” answered Father O’Toole. “Remember that our thoughts shape our words and actions. As the Lord said: ‘Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.’ We have to begin by training ourselves to think kindly of others, to see the person’s viewpoint, to be aware of his needs, and thoughtful of his feelings.

“We must especially be careful not to brood on our partner’s faults. If we do, we pile one thing upon another, and make

mountains out of mole-hills. On the day you were married, you thought that your wife was an angel in white, or your husband a knight in shining armor. However, before too long you found they were human beings with human faults. You must learn to accept these faults with patient love. Remember that while forgiveness is a necessary part of every Christian life, it has to apply above all to the relationship between husband and wife.

“It is inevitable when you live with another person day after day that at times your feelings will be hurt, and you will think that your rights are being trampled upon. But don't start feeling sorry for yourself. Self pity is the fertile field in which the weeds of unhappiness grow. Don't be too sensitive, too easily hurt. If you see a fault in your husband or wife that you consider serious, and which makes you unhappy, bide your time and bring it up to him or her in a kindly, prudent way. And be ready at the same time to accept correction for your own faults and failings.

“An unselfish heart will manifest itself likewise in kind and considerate speech. Words play a tremendous part in the making or unmaking of the happiness of a home. In place of quarreling and bitterness, there should be expressions of love. Show appreciation for the efforts and work of the other. If your wife cooks a good dinner, don't take it for granted; but tell her. If your husband fixes the kitchen sink, you will be a wise wife if you manifest your admiration of his accomplishment. In the presence of others, show pride in your married partner. Use the God given gift of speech to encourage the other in times of dejection, to console in sorrow. And, I might add, be cheerful. Keep a smile on your face and pleasant words on your lips. No one wants to live in a morgue.

“The unselfish love of husband and wife for each other does not restrict itself to words but shows itself in deeds, in a gladness in giving to the other, in joy in little services.

“The opportunity for these unselfish actions presents itself every day, indeed

every hour of married life. The wife is busy with cooking, mending, sweeping the floors, caring for the children, and all the other thousand-and-one duties of the day. These are to outward appearance routine, monotonous, unglamorous tasks; but in them she can find happiness if she performs them with unselfish love, if she makes them a manifestation of her love for her husband, her children, and her God.

“The man, on his side, takes himself off in the morning to earn the living for the family, often in difficult and unpleasant surroundings. He is beset by all the many problems of supporting, educating, and caring for a family that beset a man in this modern world. But again, in the very sacrifices that he makes, if they are motivated by love, he will find his joy.

“In this spirit of mutual love, husband and wife will try to provide entertainment and relaxation for one another, even at times at the sacrifice of their own comfort and rest. They will find happiness in com-

panionship, in doing things together, but without making the other person feel that he or she is tied down. Love will move them to ease one another's burdens, to give help in the time of need. The husband will provide the security and protection which is a woman's need; and the wife on her part will return that warmth and affection which is a woman's chief contribution to the happiness of her husband. Even the little acts of politeness and courtesy which are an accepted part of the relationship of men and women can do a great deal to make the home a pleasant place in which to live.

“One final and necessary means, I might add, to unselfish love is knowing yourself — knowing your own temperament, your own weakness, your own selfish leanings. For example, if a wife happens to be inclined by her temperament to moodiness, and knows that this is one of the weak points in her make-up, she can wage a constant battle against it. If she does not recognize it as a weakness,

she will give in to it constantly and make life miserable for her husband.

“Or if the husband is inclined by his temperament to try to domineer over others, unless he is conscious of this and strives against it, he will constantly be bossing his wife and family. It’s the same with all our faults. We have to face up to our shortcomings and conquer them. Selfishness is so much a part of our fallen nature that we must wage a relentless war against it in order to live at peace with others.”

Father O’Toole pushed himself back from the table and stood up. “I must be getting to be an old man,” he said, “to have been talking so long. But it all came from the fullness of my heart. I’m so anxious to see you young folks, Rosie and Tim, and all like you, find the happiness which God intends in your married life.

“As the last words on your wedding day of an old man who loves you very much, keep in mind what I have told you. The secret of successful marriage is

mutual unselfish love. In this, I'm only repeating the words of the Church of God: If true love and the unselfish spirit of perfect sacrifice guide your every action, you can expect the greatest measure of earthly happiness that may be allotted to man in this vale of tears. The rest is in the hands of God. Nor will God be wanting to your needs; He will pledge you the life-long support of His graces in the Holy Sacrament which you are now going to receive."



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