

“This rich and readable volume not only describes some contemporary unnamed saints but offers a model for others who could give flesh to those who make up what the scriptures call ‘The Great Cloud of Witnesses.’ Highly recommended.”

Lawrence S. Cunningham  
The University of Notre Dame

“In *Project Holiness*, the experience of marriage is narrated by couples who are in the trenches, striving to respond to the universal call to holiness. Their candid and often poignant sharing of friendship and sexuality, service and hospitality, suffering and fidelity will enrich the marriage of those who read this well-researched and wise book.”

Robert F. Morneau  
Pastor of Resurrection Parish  
Auxiliary Bishop Emeritus of Green Bay

“The Second Vatican Council testified that every Christian, without exception, is called to holiness of life. In *Project Holiness*, Bridget Burke Ravizza and Julie Donovan Massey illustrate beautifully how spouses grow in holiness not outside of their marriage but in the real, often messy, but always abundantly hopeful and richly graced dynamics of married life. What makes this book special is that it offers a theology of marriage rooted in the narratives and experiences of married persons. What makes it a blessing is that it reveals there are saints all around us, wives and husbands who radiate the love, goodness, compassion, justice, and joy of God to one another, to their families and faith communities, and to the world. *Project Holiness* is a gift not only to married couples, but also to those who minister to them, to church leaders who teach about marriage, and to anyone preparing for marriage.”

Paul J. Wadell  
Professor of Theology & Religious Studies  
St. Norbert College

“*Project Holiness* honors the experiences and wisdom of married couples and brings their voices to center of theological reflection on marriage. The result is a rich and engaging vision of discipleship as it is lived in a ‘workshop’ of friendship, fidelity, and forgiveness. *Project Holiness* should be required reading for bishops and anyone involved in the pastoral care of married couples and families. It is a model of deep listening that is open to being challenged and transformed by those everyday saints who are preaching the gospel of the family in our midst.”

Mary M. Doyle Roche  
Associate Professor, College of the Holy Cross  
Author of *Schools of Solidarity: Families and Catholic Social Teaching*



# **Project Holiness**

**Marriage as a Workshop for Everyday Saints**

Real Wisdom from Real Married Couples

*Bridget Burke Ravizza*

*Julie Donovan Massey*



**LITURGICAL PRESS**

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To my mom and dad, Barbara and Tom Burke, whose fidelity to one another is an inspiration and whose joy in one another is a delight.

To my in-laws, Mike and Dodie Ravizza, who first taught John how to love and who have extended their love to include me.

To Anne Marie Mongoven, OP, who encouraged my vocation as theologian and teacher.

To Clare, who makes me laugh and makes me proud.

To John, who had the courage (and, let's face it, good sense) to marry me, which is the greatest blessing of my life.

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JDM



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## Preface

“There are many stories when you’re as old as we are,” the woman we were interviewing noted. “And that’s what I’m sure you are looking for . . . because God teaches through stories. God taught in the Bible through parables and [is] teaching us through our own story.”

As researchers, we agreed wholeheartedly with her assertion. Belief in the wisdom to be found in real-life stories motivated us to write a book about Catholic marriage that is grounded in the experience of real couples, highlighting the virtues, values, and practices that make Catholic marriages successful and that foster each spouse’s ability to live out the call to holiness. We were aware of insightful, theological works on Catholic marriage, many of which we draw on and feel indebted to, but we wanted to write a book that began in story, and honored lived experience from preface to conclusion. We entered into our research believing in the insight our subjects would possess.

A man in our very first focus group shared our conviction about the power of story: “If I were to write a document on marriage, I would go to the [morning] Mass, and I’d tell the stories I know. I’d talk about [couples in the parish] and in my own life. And you can’t tell the story until you’ve seen all the chapters. I’d tell the story of my parents . . . when you see parents who once fought viciously, and one parent is now [struggling with dementia] and the other is taking care of her with patience that you never saw when you were a kid, you understand what marriage is. And it’s in the documents, but the stories make it real.”

It is our belief that as we highlight virtues, values, and practices needed for married holiness, the stories of the couples we met will “make it real” for you as reader as they surely did for us. In this preface we will share a bit more of the story of how we came to write this book, introductory notes on our methodology, and a glimpse of what lies ahead.

### **Hearing from Saints: *You Must Tell the Story!***

Bridget, an associate professor of theology and religious studies, traces the origin of this project to the 2011 meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America in San Jose, California. During that conference, she attended a

panel entitled “Scripting the Saints,” composed of authors and theologians who write about the communion of saints.<sup>1</sup> During the question-and-answer period, one of the panelists, Professor Lawrence Cunningham of the University of Notre Dame, said that he has repeatedly suggested to his graduate students that a fascinating project would be to travel around the country in order to talk to “ordinary saints”—men and women who are identified by others in their parish communities as particularly holy. He argued that the church could learn a great deal about holiness and discipleship by hearing these saints tell their stories. Cunningham’s point is well-taken; while we often think of saints as supernatural heroes who lived in another place and time, it is also true that many of us readily could point to persons in our own church communities about whom we would say, “Oh, she’s a saint!” These ordinary saints are a valuable and largely untapped resource in theological thinking.<sup>2</sup>

Inspired by Cunningham’s comment, Bridget knew that she wanted to actively seek out Catholic married couples who are identified as particularly holy, or saintly, by others in their church communities. She was determined to listen to their stories and glean their wisdom about married life and holiness in order to pass that wisdom along to others. And she knew just with whom she wanted to embark on this journey: her friend and colleague, Julie.

Julie, a lay minister who has worked in church and academic settings, also has an interest in Catholic marriage and family life and in thinking about everyday holiness, concerns she dates back to graduate school. At the time Julie was completing her final semester’s coursework in an MDiv program at Loyola University Chicago, she and her newly married husband were delighted to learn they were expecting their first child. As the pregnancy progressed, she began to share this exciting news with her circle of friends. Word that Julie was pregnant quickly spread around Loyola’s Institute for Pastoral Studies. She became accustomed to fellow students, faculty, and staff sharing a word of congratulations. But Julie was caught off guard when she was stopped one day by a much-respected professor of church history for what appeared an urgent matter. The professor was a married woman, the mother of two children, and an exceptional teacher with a stunning intellect. She first congratulated Julie on the pregnancy and then said, “You must tell the story of how our everyday lives are holy. The only stories that get told in our tradition are of a holiness that is distant from the ways most of us live.” Julie’s recollection is that in the moment she responded with great eloquence, saying something along the lines of, “Umm . . . okay.” But the professor’s imploring has stayed with her and continues to whisper like a calling that will not be forgotten.

Though convinced as researchers that ordinary holiness both could and should be explored, we found that this concept was not always easy for our subjects to engage. That we are not often invited to see the holiness present in the messiness of family life is supported by one man who emailed us in response to the invitation for him and his wife to be interviewed for this book: “[My wife] and I think that you sent this request to the wrong mailbox! If you are looking for models of holiness, you might need to try the other couples named. If you want stories of just two ordinary people striving to do the best they can to make marriage work—fairly well on some days, not so well on others—we would be happy to be interviewed.”

Happily, they *were* interviewed, and our conversation elicited much more evidence of holiness than they gave themselves credit for. This was a common exchange early in our interviews: one or more persons would laugh, betraying a bit of discomfort, and suggest maybe we had gotten their name by mistake. We would assure them, remind them that their name had come to us from someone in their parish who saw them as exemplars of married holiness, and invite them to see that naming as affirmation and blessing. To help you understand how we got their names, let us share a bit about our research process.

### **Our Methodology<sup>3</sup>**

This study is grounded in a qualitative research process that enabled us to listen deeply to the lived experience of married persons actively engaged in their Catholic parishes. We began by identifying two midwestern dioceses that afforded some diversity of setting and population. Within these dioceses we identified twenty partner parishes, each of which had a staff person (sometimes the pastor, but most often a pastoral associate or parish administrator) who agreed to assist us in this research by connecting us with parish members. Not every parish to which we reached out responded or agreed to help. Without the help of those who did, our research would have come to a screeching halt.

With the partner parishes identified, we developed a survey and asked the parish staff member to distribute it to five couples (ten people) who had been married eight years or more, are active in their parish, and whose marriages appeared to be successful and flourishing. Some staff members approached a sixth couple, so in the end, 210 surveys were distributed, and 168 were returned to us. These surveys provided us with statistical data and commentary, both of which shaped the topics we explored with couples we

interviewed. The surveys also asked respondents to share names of couples in their parishes they see as models of holiness. That became the pool of names from which we invited people to meet with us for interviews.

We had the privilege of meeting with fifty couples. To engage these couples, we conducted twenty-four interviews: twelve ninety-minute interviews with a single couple and twelve two-hour-long focus groups made up of no more than four couples. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the reader will meet these couples throughout the text. Those we interviewed impressed us with their insight and vulnerability, and the courage they had in not whitewashing their lived experience, but in telling us the truth of their struggles to live out everyday holiness in marriage and family life. To borrow a term from another qualitative researcher, we found our subjects to be nothing short of brilliant, and hope we allow their brilliance to shine through the pages of this text.<sup>4</sup>

While we did not agree with the theological viewpoint of every person we interviewed, we nonetheless respected the variety of experiences and perspectives expressed by the couples. They became our conversation partners as writers, as we trust they will become yours; we envision this text as a conversation partner for anyone who wishes to understand, or attempt to live out, holiness in marriage.

### **About the Names: *Why Don't You Just Use Our Real Names?***

As might be expected, the subject names contained throughout this text are pseudonyms. Well into the research process, we were meeting with a focus group that included a member with a good deal of writing experience. Before we had the participants sign consent forms, we were going through our usual commentary about not using real names or identifying information when he asked, "Why don't you just use our real names?" We laughed, and Julie said, "Because we have already met with thirty people, and we told all of them we would not use their real names; too late to turn back now!"

In promising anonymity, we attempted to create an interview environment in which couples could speak most freely, without concern of being identified. We also made a deliberate choice not to use composite characters. So the reader will encounter names, lots of names. And if you see a particular name in one chapter and it appears again in a later chapter, it is the same person, the same couple's story. We do not expect the reader to keep all of the couples straight, or to recall exactly what has been said in earlier chapters. If there is a detail you need to know to contextualize a particular

comment, we provide it. We chose not to use composite characters in order to honor the depth and distinction of the couples we met, painting as true to real-life pictures of our participants as possible. In doing so, we hope we have offered the full texture of their voices while still protecting their privacy. The subjects you meet in the following pages are not characters. They are real people—only the names are fake!

### **What Lies Ahead: *A Map for the Reader***

The text is built around six major themes. While there are many significant virtues, values, and practices in play for successful marriages that foster holiness, these six emerged as the central categories that shape the lives of our subjects. In the text, we treat each theme in turn, and then offer some concluding thoughts and information.

Chapter 1 looks at the place of friendship in marriage, exploring what a deep theological understanding of friendship entails and how that understanding is lived out in the context of marriage. Chapter 2 explores topics of sexuality, including consideration of the diverse ways in which marriages are generative as well as explicit consideration of parenting in marriage. Chapter 3 reflects on the place of ritual in marriage and family life and explores an understanding of marriage as sacrament that reveals the presence of God. Chapter 4 examines the ways that Christian marriage moves us to live out of an ethic of hospitality and service. Chapter 5 grapples with the experience of suffering that is inevitable in every marriage and explores the ways couples navigate suffering in light of faith. Chapter 6 attends to the nature of fidelity and how couples frame and honor their understanding of faithful commitment to one another. The conclusion offers our final perspective on what we heard and implications drawn for both married couples and the wider community of the church. Finally, an appendix is included that expounds on our research method; describes the attributes of our survey sample, with some comparative data from wider populations; and provides detailed data from the survey.

It would be artificial to suggest that the various themes of the text exist in a neat or linear way. In lived experience, these themes overlap regularly and sometimes poignantly. We hope it helps you as reader to see the map of what lies ahead, to know that a topic that may receive a light touch in one place is treated more fully in another. May your journey through these pages be an experience of gift and grace as our journey with the couples we met—on paper and in person—surely was!



## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, we thank the couples that participated in our research, whose experiences are the heart of this book. Your willingness to honestly share your stories and open your lives to us moved us deeply and filled us with gratitude. Thank you for your trust and for the many moments of laughter, vulnerability, and wisdom that made our conversations with you both joy and gift. We hope this book honors your goodness.

Thank you to the behind-the-scenes heroes, our parish contacts, who distributed written surveys, helped us contact couples, set up meeting spaces for interviews, and warmly welcomed us to your parishes. Your hospitality—that included unlocking buildings on evenings and weekends, tracking down extension cords, and providing coffee and snacks—was remarkable, and your assistance essential. We are indebted.

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drafts of the manuscript and offering thoughtful feedback and encouragement; in particular, thanks for engaging the text with your heads *and* hearts.

Finally, thanks to our spouses and families for being patient with us through the years-long process of research and writing, and for pitching in to make things work at our respective homes while we pursued this project. To our daughters who at one point (jokingly, we hope) commiserated that they had “lost their moms” to the book: the book is done, girls. We’re all yours. Be careful what you wish for.

# We Are Not Meant to Be Alone

## Authentic Friendship at the Heart of Marriage

“Find a friend.” Jerry Simms calls it the “greatest piece of wisdom” he can offer on marriage. Jerry married his own “best friend,” Lisa, fourteen years ago. They agree that their close friendship, established long before their wedding, is both at the heart of their marriage and essential to its success. When asked to describe their friendship, Lisa looked at Jerry and said, “When something really good happens or something really bad happens, you’re the first person I want to tell about it.” These friends enjoy spending time together and sharing the ins-and-outs of daily life. Jerry described the comfort and security that comes with a mutual knowing, accepting, and appreciating of “all of the little things” about each other. He looked at his wife: “I know what you like. I know what you don’t like. I know your fears and am able to anticipate that and maybe help deal with it.” Friendship—marked by deep intimacy, attentiveness, and delight in the other—is what Jerry and Lisa consider the bedrock of their marriage, the foundation upon which they raise their three sons.

Jerry and Lisa Simms are far from unique—again and again, we heard the language of friendship used to describe what partners appreciate about their spouse and what they celebrate within their marriage. Bill McCarthy, who has raised three children with his wife of twenty-six years, Katie, said that the best thing about marriage “is waking up with my best friend and going to bed and giving her a hug and kiss and thanking the Lord that I have her another day. There are frequent times I sit at work with all the pressures and struggles and I think to myself, *at the end of the day, when I go home, I’m going to be with my best friend again.* And to me, that’s what keeps me going each and every day.” Katie nodded, adding, “The longer we are married, the more I realize that he is my best friend. As the kids got older, it was easier for us as a couple to find that there was actually an identity to us as a couple that was not just two parents with three kids.”

She recalled a recent trip that required three hours alone in the car together followed by a weekend in close quarters. Rather than dreading the car ride and thinking, “Dang, I have to spend the whole weekend with my husband,” Katie “couldn’t wait.” She explained a certain ease about their togetherness as they traveled, even when they were not talking. The ease that Katie describes typifies what well-known Christian scholar and writer, C. S. Lewis, calls affection [*storge*]. This love of affection, “besides being a love itself, can enter into other loves [*eros*, *philia*, and *caritas*] and color them all through.”<sup>1</sup> Lewis believes “there is . . . a particular charm, both in friendship and in *eros*, about those moments when appreciative love lies, as it were, curled up asleep, and the mere ease and ordinariness of the relationship (free as solitude, yet neither is alone) wraps us around. No need to talk. No need to make love. No needs at all except perhaps to stir the fire.”<sup>2</sup>

Lewis’s imagery is powerful. Spouses are wrapped in the “ordinariness of the relationship,” taking great comfort in the presence of their old friend with whom they can fully relax. Katie’s comments reflect an appreciation for the “charm” of the love that she shares with Jerry: “Easily he’s my best friend. It’s nice just being the two of us. I *like* being with him!”

Delight in the other is a great gift of friendship. This truth surfaced repeatedly in our interviews. For example, Beth Johnson, mother of seven young children, spoke enthusiastically about her husband: “What brings me joy is that Joe is really my best friend and has been since we’ve been dating. It makes me happy that I love him and respect him so much and that I can go to bed next to him, and I just want to be around him all the time. When we have free time, we try to plan things together. It makes me happy in life to be with someone who I want to be around, and who brings me up.” She looked at Joe and said, “You think I am happy, but you help make me happy, you respect what I do.”<sup>3</sup> Turning back to us, she said, “I respect him and his job . . . He’s my best friend, and it makes me happy to be around someone who is that uplifting and good.”

In Beth’s words, one hears admiration and gratitude for her friend who is good, who uplifts her and brings her joy. Similarly, Margaret Murphy—after twenty-six years of marriage—is struck by how much she enjoys her husband Matt’s company: “We laugh together. We’ll wake up in the middle of the night laughing together just about something stupid, or some joke someone told us; it’s like all of a sudden, we’ll both wake up and just start roaring or something.” She laughed. “We both really have fun together. It can be at home, or we like a lot of the same things. We have similar interests. That brings me a lot of joy, just the companionship.”

Couples noted that whether it is participating in shared interests, such as riding bikes or camping, or assisting each other with daily household tasks, such as washing the dishes: life is much more fun (or at least, when washing dishes, not so bad) with a friend.

The language of friendship is central to the way many couples in our study described their successful marriages. They used the words “friends” and “companions”: friends—respecting, renewing, and supporting one another; companions—laughing, enjoying, and appreciating one another. Beyond the *frequency* of the language of friendship in the interviews, however, we recognize a *depth* to the way that friendship is described, as seen in the brief testimony above. In this chapter, we will examine friendship from a theological perspective. We will discuss the distinctiveness of Christian friendship, illustrated by the testimony of these couples.

### **Why We Need Friendship: Oh, the Pain Is Gone**

The Christian tradition asserts that human beings are naturally social. In other words, God created us to live in communion, both with God and other people. This natural, God-given, sociality is reflected in the two creation stories in the Book of Genesis. In the creation account that appears first,<sup>4</sup> God simultaneously creates male and female in God’s image and together names them *adam*.<sup>5</sup> In the second creation story, God creates the first human being (*adam*), but sees that the creature is lonely and in need of a partner. God declares: “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen 2:18). The animals cannot cure the creature’s loneliness; the human needs a companion who is his equal, “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23). So God puts the human to sleep and creates male and female: two companions who unite to become “one flesh” (Gen 2:24).

We were reminded of this creation story when Thomas O’Brien told us about meeting Mary his wife of forty-two years, after spending thirty-nine years as a bachelor. “I went around most of my life doing all right, I was happy, I was contented, I thought I was doing a good job, with this kind of pain in my stomach, until I met Mary. *I never really knew what loneliness was until I met Mary.* I realized, [after meeting her] ‘Oh the pain is gone!’ I was free from this kind of lingering loneliness. That was a terrific gift for me, from her.” Tom beautifully speaks of the gift he found in his partnership with Mary, a gift that freed him from a “lingering loneliness” that he tellingly describes as “pain.” All of us who are made in God’s image, like Tom, are made for communion.

Let us reflect for a moment here on the meaning of this core Christian anthropological claim: that is, human beings are made in God’s image. Theologian Paul Wadell speaks simply but insightfully of the claim’s implications when he writes: “human beings are created *from intimacy* and *for intimacy*.”<sup>6</sup> He explains: “We are living, breathing images of a Trinitarian God whose very life is the fullness and perfection of intimacy. Born from this love, we are called to mirror in our lives the intimacy, friendship, and community we see perfectly displayed in God. *God is intimacy*. God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is a perfect communion of love.”<sup>7</sup> Because we are created in God’s image, and because the very nature of God is loving communion, we will only flourish—that is, we will only live up to our potential as human beings—in intimate partnership with one another. We need friendship.

In *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life*, Wadell notes that “the moral importance of friendship and community is often overlooked.”<sup>8</sup> While we surely enjoy and celebrate our friendships, we sometimes do not adequately appreciate the connection between having authentic friends and being a good person. Yet, philosophers such as Aristotle thought extensively about this connection, arguing that “a life of goodness and happiness depends on certain kinds of friendships.”<sup>9</sup> If we are to live up to our potential as human beings, if we are to become virtuous, Aristotle insisted, we need good friends.

Christian thinkers like Thomas Aquinas agreed that we need friendship in order to be good, that being in a community of friends is essential to human flourishing. But Aquinas “radically reenvisioned” Aristotle’s account of the centrality of friendship in the moral life “by suggesting that human beings are made not only for friendship with one another, but also for friendship with God—what he called charity or *caritas*. Our most exquisite happiness, Aquinas insisted, comes from all of us *together* seeking and enjoying a life of intimate friendship with God.”<sup>10</sup> Not only then do our friends help us to be better persons, but they make us holy, bringing us closer to God. One thoughtful interviewee captured this strikingly as it relates to the married life: “Not only *our* marriage, but marriage in general, calls one to go beyond oneself—from self to other—and that journey, that direction, that momentum is what ultimately ends in God.”

### **Becoming Holy through Married Friendship**

But how exactly *does* married friendship make us holy? The testimony of couples in our study indicates that friendship in marriage brings partners

closer to God in various ways, four of which we highlight here: it inspires virtue by example; it teaches self-transcendence and responsibility for the other; it leads to personal flourishing through support and challenge; and it strengthens partners to live out their faith commitments.

*Inspiring by Example: He Is a Role Model*

When children are moving through their school-aged years, it is not uncommon for parents to worry about the kinds of people their children befriend. On occasion, they might even gently suggest that their children end a friendship or find a new set of friends. Why? Because we know from experience that friends are highly influential in shaping one's character, for good or for ill. Aristotle argues that we *become* good by spending time with good people.<sup>11</sup> Good friends make us better; they rub off on us, so to speak. We admire the good qualities of our friends; we want to become like them (sometimes while fighting off the urge to ask them to stop making us look bad!). Simply put, "it is often in the company of our friends that we are reminded of the kind of person we want to become and the ideals and values that are important to us."<sup>12</sup>

For example, Anne Marie Donlan cried when telling us how her husband, Jim, makes her a better person. "Because he is such a good person. I don't want to let him down. . . . He is a role model for me to be a better parent because of his parenting and his care and concern for his family—not just us, but his extended family as well." Since Jim is "really good about calling his parents," it prompts Anne Marie to do the same. Moreover, his devotion to Anne Marie inspires her to be as devoted to him. "I see how hard he works . . . to be a good husband to me so I want to be that [same kind of spouse] to him." The example that Jim sets motivates Anne Marie to offer "constant prayer" in which she asks God: "How can I be a better mother? How can I be a better wife? How can I be a better friend?"

Carol Landry likewise uses the language of "role modeling" when extolling the good qualities of her husband of thirty-four years, Pat. Carol said, "Pat models attributes that aren't my strengths, like patience. If we're in a situation where I am just climbing the walls, Pat can be very levelheaded which makes me think (a) I should be doing that and (b) it can be done." Another woman noted that her husband is much better than she at saying sorry and forgiving, which "challenges [her] to be better at that," while she is more apt to be generous with their goods, which has caused her husband to more actively practice generosity.

After fifty-two years of marriage, Phil Rullo praises the virtues of his wife, Jane. “I like very much her patience and her capacity for forgiveness. . . . She has always been very respectful of who I am and what I do. I appreciate her great capacity to love. She’s a very giving person, and *I try to reciprocate* that love because she is so generous with it.”

Like Anne Marie and Carol above, Phil explicitly recognizes how his wife models particular virtues—in this case: patience, forgiveness, respect, love, and generosity—that, in turn, shape him and call him to be more virtuous. “Our marriage has made me a better person by helping me become a more patient person and an understanding person, and a great deal of that is a result of the kind of modeling that Jane does. I see her at work with others and interacting with others. I see the patience and understanding that she exhibits, and that certainly has helped me.” Jane has been an *excellent* teacher for Phil in every sense of the word. Her goodness has helped to make him good.

In our conversations with couples, we heard many speak about being inspired by the characteristics and behaviors of their partners to become better spouses, and more fundamentally, better *people*. These few examples illustrate how spouses draw goodness out of one another by practicing virtues themselves.

### *Seeking the Good of the Other: Leave Your Ego at the Doorstep*

Friendship calls us to be self-transcendent. It “draws us out of ourselves and challenges us to be attentive not to our own immediate interests and needs but to the interests and needs of another.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, day after day, friendship in marriage requires us to overcome self-centeredness and move toward other-centeredness. High school sweethearts Jim Donlan and his wife, Anne Marie, have been married twenty-nine years. Jim emphasized the self-transcendence prompted by his marriage:

We’re not meant to live by ourselves. I don’t think it’s an accident that it’s in the Book of Genesis that we weren’t alone for very long. And that makes you a better person because when you are completely alone, everything you do is completely centered on you. And so when I got married to Anne Marie, it wasn’t me anymore. And boy, when we had kids, I looked through the nursery window and there was that little fat pink thing lying there and oh my God! Now it’s not even just the two of us. . . . I really don’t think you can live up to the potential of how really good you can be by yourself. I

just really don't think you can. It's taking care of somebody, loving somebody, raising somebody, burying somebody; I mean every step along the way."

Jim recognizes and highlights the important connection between becoming responsible to others—meeting the daily needs of his wife and children over the long haul—and growth in goodness. If one is faithful to a friend "every step of the way," one is inevitably challenged to grow ever more patient, more loyal, more kind, more generous, and so on.

Wadell points out that "seeking the good of the other steadily and routinely" is far from easy. If we happen to be married, or have long-lasting friendships, this is not news to us. In fact, seeking the good of the other consistently is "a high moral achievement, not the least because there are stubborn tendencies in all of us to put ourselves first."<sup>14</sup> Lasting friendship therefore requires *humility*, an attitude and corresponding behavior that displace oneself as the absolute center of concern. Humility is the virtue that counters "stubborn tendencies" toward self-centeredness and the cultural messages of radical individualism that reinforce them, but it must be nurtured.

For decades now, Pete and Sally Mahon have recited the Prayer of St. Francis together daily. They included the prayer in their wedding Mass and decided to make daily recitation of it a part of their married life. They described lying in bed at night, asking the other, "Did we say our prayer yet?" They have made the prayer their own, and it, in turn, has made something of them—specifically, it teaches them to be humble. Sally explains that the prayer "takes you out of yourself. . . . it is not so much 'to be consoled as to console.'" Sally also spoke of the special meaning that the Sermon on the Mount, and in particular the Beatitudes, have for her: "There is so much about humility. There has to be humility if you commit yourself to another human being. We are difficult beings but . . . there is so much in there about forgiveness and being humble and not always being right. I definitely have a bigger issue with being stubborn and being right, but it's [the Sermon on the Mount] that calls me to [be otherwise]—and I know I am much happier when I don't have to be right, or I [try to be] humble or meek."

In the same vein, Jane Rullo beautifully describes how her fifty-two-year marriage has demanded humility, and how practicing humility has benefited both her and her husband:

Prior to my marriage, I probably had been a little selfish. I had been an only child. When you get married, you realize in many ways you are responsible for that other human being. Not that you become

their parent—I don’t mean that. But they become that most important person in your life. That you are no longer the most important person and that you took that vow because you loved them in a way that you loved no other human being. And thus, you really want that person to become the best that they could become. And I think that’s what marriage has done. It has made me want another human being to become the very best they can become and I worked very hard on that. And I learned that things don’t always go your way. I always used to think I was right all the time. And I learned I was not right all the time and that you had to give a little and, in turn, that other person gave a little. It was both people working together to make each other better.

In their twenty-eight years of marriage, Jack and Gretchen Baker have endured the death of a child and raised two sons. Jack said the following: “How does a marriage get strong? How do you keep building it? I think it’s when you finally realize that it is not about you. It’s about them. Each of you starts focusing on the other—it’s about making *them* happy, pleasing *them*.” As did Jane Rullo, Jack stressed the importance of *mutually* seeking the good of the other, noting that “when you’re both doing that, it’s easy.”

We heard the same message from many other couples as well. One wife practices daily reflection on what will make her husband happy: “I want him to be happy; it’s not about what he can do for me.” What will make a person happy is *particular to that person* and depends on knowing that person intimately. As Jerry Simms noted above, he is better able to meet his wife’s needs because he knows the “little things” about her—her likes and dislikes, and her fears. Anne Marie Donlan regularly prays in order to know how to rightly love her husband in light of life’s changes and challenges: “I have to remind myself that just because that’s the way I would handle something, it’s not exactly what he needs.”

Attending to the needs and desires of one’s partner often looks like trying to see a situation from the other’s point of view, “compromising,” and “letting go of the need to be right all the time.” In light of this reality, theologian Richard Gaillardetz suggests that partners are converted within marriage on a daily basis through the “experience of being stretched by the otherness of one’s spouse.”<sup>15</sup> He concludes that this is “nothing less than God’s saving work in us.”<sup>16</sup>

In other words, learning to care for one’s spouse, who is radically other, changes one for the better, helping one move away from sin and selfishness and toward holiness and goodness. It is, simply, conversion through

friendship. Gaillardetz draws on a biblical term, *kenosis*, or self-emptying, to name what is demanded of married partners in this process of conversion. He writes: “Saint Paul used the term [*kenosis*] to describe what it was for Christ to abandon all divine prerogatives in order to enter fully into the experience of being human. For those who fulfill our baptismal call to follow Jesus in and through the sacrament of matrimony, *kenosis* is the call to a self-emptying or dying to our own needs, hopes, and expectations.”<sup>17</sup> *Kenosis* in marriage demands letting go of pride in order to compromise or put the other’s wants first (in large or small matters—from how to discipline a child to where to go out to eat). And it sometimes calls for significant self-sacrifice.<sup>18</sup>

Jane Rullo’s husband, Phil, suggested that self-sacrifice is one of the virtues necessary for a successful marriage, explaining that “you have to leave your ego at the doorstep when you get married, really. You have to have a friendship, [that requires] . . . losing your egocentricity and losing your selfishness and gaining a kind of selflessness. If there is anything important in marriage, it is putting selfishness aside, becoming selfless, and being willing to sacrifice for someone else.”<sup>19</sup>

Joe Johnson, whose wife praised him as her best friend, said: “What comes to mind for me is what Jesus says, that there is no greater act of love than to lay down one’s life for a friend. When you get over your own ego and selfishness and everything *you* want, you realize life is so much better when you’re giving of yourself.”

We want to emphasize that upholding self-sacrifice as an ideal in marriage can be problematic if *equality* and *justice* are not present. Catholic ethicist Margaret Farley argues that loving relationships (such as married relationships) ought to be characterized by justice, and she rightly warns that “[w]hen a disproportionate burden of sacrifice is laid on one person in a commitment-relationship, and when the person who bears it is the one with the least power, the duty of self-sacrifice is morally suspect.”<sup>20</sup> An emphasis on self-sacrifice for those who lack equality of power may be destructive of their flourishing rather than constructive of it. Theologian Herbert Anderson helpfully highlights the connection between self-sacrifice, justice, and mutuality in marriage:

Compromise [in marriage] is inevitable. No one can “have it all” if marriage is to be just. And no one does all the accommodating if the love is mutual. The deeper meaning of sacrifice is not about giving up our freedoms or our preferences but giving them over to a larger reality. That larger reality is a marriage of love **and** justice.

If both partners in a marriage are committed to a just relationship, then no one person will do all of the accommodating. . . . If both husband and wife are committed to forming a just marriage, then the willingness to set aside our needs for the needs of others becomes a positive expression of a common bond. Sacrifice deepens a marital bond as long as each person in a relationship is committed to justice. When one partner does all the accommodating or when the sacrifices are not evenly distributed over time, the marriage is not just.<sup>21</sup>

In our interviews, we heard couples both praise mutual self-sacrifice and express an awareness of the possibility of injustice when sacrifice is one-sided. For example, Sally Mahon noted her husband's tendency to habitually give way to her and insightfully said, "I need to be careful not to take advantage of his good nature."

We argue that self-sacrifice will be most fruitful in marriage when: equality is respected in the relationship; it is mutual (that is, expected of both partners); and both spouses have a well-developed sense of self. It is unjust for one person to consistently concede to the other's desires/needs/dreams at the expense of her or his own.

### *Supporting and Encouraging One Another: Go Ahead, Go Ahead*

Married friends build one another up through support and encouragement. In light of her own qualitative study of longtime married couples, psychologist Judith Wallerstein concluded that *providing emotional nurturance* is essential to a good marriage.<sup>22</sup> Married partners provide much-needed comfort and encouragement for one another as they move through their days together. When spouses face pressure at work and, if they have children, stress in the home as they balance childcare and day-to-day household tasks, it is easy to feel "not good enough," even overwhelmed. Married friends rely on one another for emotional replenishment and reinforcement—we saw this illustrated above, when Bill McCarthy expressed such relief in returning to his best friend at the end of a demanding day at work. In dealing with daily stresses, and especially when facing failures, big or small—for example, getting passed over for a raise; botching an important presentation to colleagues; screaming at the children when patience is lost—"men and women alike need a person they trust who reassures them, saying 'You did the best you could,' who alleviates their worry, saying confidently, 'You couldn't help it, so why blame yourself?' and who sends them back to battle with the message 'You can do it, really you can.'"<sup>23</sup>

Al and Christine Kozak, who are married twenty years and raising five children, spoke compellingly about the efforts that they make to build one another up. Al said, “Confidence would be a good word for me [to describe this]. Being able to confide in her, the encouragement, it goes both ways. Small example: she started a new business recently, and I did little things, whether send her a note, or bring some flowers before her first show, just to say, ‘Hey, you’re doing the right thing.’ And it goes back and forth . . . it could be a small note, or sending a text in the middle of the day, to help.” The couple emphasized the importance of boosting each other’s self-esteem in very concrete ways—whether it be through spoken words, gestures, or texts. “We encourage each other . . . it helps us be successful as a married couple.”

Al noted that mutual encouragement is particularly important in challenging times: “There will be times that we’re knocked down. We’re not always going to be the tallest guy on the platform. Something’s going to happen—maybe you didn’t get a job, or you didn’t get a promotion, or you didn’t make a sale. You try to get an article published if you’re a writer, like she’s done so many times—maybe it didn’t go as well, whatever it could be, but you have to have a strong self-esteem,” and so they work to support one another.

Christine emphasized the importance of intimate knowledge of your spouse in order to meet his or her needs in this regard. “You have to know your spouse, when [he or she] could be at a low, and [he or she] needs a little bit more encouragement or motivation or a little boost of confidence, for whatever reason, because everyone needs that. And you have to be aware of that and you have to be able to say, ‘Hey, you did a good job on this.’”

Wallerstein explains that “[s]elf-esteem is not a single idea; rather, it is like a tripod whose three legs are feeling loved, feeling virtuous, and feeling competent. If all three are strong, they support high self-esteem and self-confidence.”<sup>24</sup> This tripod of self-esteem “is challenged every day of our lives. We give ourselves new grades with each important experience.”<sup>25</sup>

Depending on what happens at work or at home, we might feel successful and competent, or we might feel inadequate and like a failure. Our spouse plays an important role, helping us to see ourselves more clearly by reminding us of our gifts and abilities, by reminding us that we are competent, good, and loved. In the words of Al and Christine: “Hey, you’re doing the right thing,” and “Hey, you’re good at this.” Or maybe most importantly, “Hey, no matter what, at the end of the day, you are loved.”

Donna Erikson described the support that she received from Tim her husband of thirty-two years when her business venture failed, which was a devastating loss: “I said [to Tim], ‘You can’t fix this, I’ve got to work on it.

Just love me through it, that's all I ask. Just be there and love me through it.' And he did."

Knowing that our spouse loves us and believes in us allows us to take risks that we may not otherwise seize, a powerful gift of friendship.<sup>26</sup> Kathleen and Jeremy Cotter's story is full of risk-taking. They were married in a traditional peacekeeping church and raised their children in an intentional community, sharing goods and values with others, becoming a kind of extended family. It was a wonderful experience in many ways, but at some point, Kathleen and Jeremy became restless. Kathleen began looking for something different spiritually. In her searching, she wandered into a Catholic church. Here is how she describes her journey:

I was basically feeling spiritually crawling-through-the-desert-thirsty, needing depth in my faith walk, really desperately needing depth and reading [Henri] Nouwen and [Thomas] Merton and stuff. And I had always been intrigued by Catholicism, since way back my family is actually Irish Catholic but, through a long series of stories, wasn't by the time I came along. So I always wanted to see what was going on in that big church up here [in the parish they eventually joined]. So one day . . . I came in and came to Mass . . . and it answered so much for me . . . I found the depth I was looking for.

In terms of our marriage, *this is what is really critical*: Jeremy was cool with that. I mean, this was a big deal. We'd been living in this intentional community and to do something this much outside the box was like, woo!, [even though] we were both ready to be leaving anyway, we knew that was probably going to happen, but I just did it first. I really did feel completely supported in figuring this out. Go ahead! Go ahead! And that was fabulous, absolutely fabulous, to have not just support but *faith* in my mind and my spirit, to know that I was not just crazy, you know? It's a big deal. And eventually he came too.

What is striking here is the support that Jeremy offered to Kathleen in her search—go ahead! go ahead!—that allowed her to take a real risk, a risk that they both knew might result—and in fact *did* result—in a radical change for their whole family. Jeremy offered “faith in [her] mind and [her] spirit” that gave Kathleen the courage to explore what would best quench her thirst and bring her closer to God. As noted, eventually both Kathleen and Jeremy joined the Catholic parish into which she “wandered” and converted to Catholicism. They found a community that enriches them, but only because Jeremy encouraged Kathleen to take a chance. Kathleen

said, “The whole thing about marriage, our marriage, but also marriage more broadly, is that it’s a safe place to take risks. We are able to take risks together, for example, leaving the intentional community . . . and actually at one point in our lives, we both quit our jobs, when we had two kids in college. And we both knew this was the right thing to do, and somehow we could just do that.”

A similar story was told by a man who, after becoming inspired by a talk at church about using one’s gifts for God and other people, went home and told his wife that he would like to quit his job. “She said, ‘Are you sure?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ That’s all she said. She smiled and just accepted it. It’s a great wife that will let you go with what you think you want to do.” His wife added, “He didn’t tell you the whole thing. The whole thing is that he said he wanted to do work for God and we both knew we would live on less than half his salary . . . and I said, ‘yes.’” Incidentally, the couple was raising eight children together.

In these cases—changing church affiliation, quitting jobs—spouses supported their partner in following what seemed to be a call from God to live more fully and deeply. Kathleen said, “[W]e weren’t playing it safe. And I think our marriage has made it easier. I don’t know what I would have done by myself, but, you know, the tendency might have been to play it safe a little more. That is directly related to getting closer to God. You can’t do that stuff without it bringing you closer to God.”

Clearly, mutual encouragement between these married friends opened up a space for risk-tasking, allowing the partners to more freely and fully engage in the world. Safety lies in the fact that, if the risk does not turn out well, blame and shame need not take over; rather, partners can move on with life together, loving one another through it, as Donna and Tim Erikson did when her business failed.

We are not suggesting, of course, that it is good to support every whim expressed by one’s spouse, but rather that it is good to assist one’s partner in discernment, helping him or her see oneself and one’s goals more clearly, and support the other’s deepest desires. Prudence—or, practical decision-making—is crucial, and prudence demands discernment. Repeatedly, we heard from spouses about how helpful it is to honestly discuss their anxieties, hopes, and desires together, thereby discerning *in partnership and in a continuing way*: who they are, what is important to them, and where they are going in light of their commitments. In this process, we see friends learn about themselves, see themselves ever more clearly in and through their spouse, and find the courage to follow their vocations.

*Challenging One Another: I Prefer to Call It Caringly Direct*

Supporting and encouraging one another—building each other up—is one important way that spouses help each other move toward their potential. Yet, spouses do not only serve as conversation partners, encouragers, and cheerleaders, rightfully reminding their partners of their many gifts and talents. Sometimes the work of intimacy involves revealing to one’s spouse the ways he or she needs to grow, which may be met with resistance. After all, we love to hear the many good things that our spouses see and admire in us, but comments about our negative tendencies and behaviors are not as welcome. Nevertheless, “because all of us have only limited knowledge of ourselves, and sometimes the little we do know is tainted by self-deception,” we need friends to see ourselves more clearly, “including aspects of ourselves we might prefer not to know.”<sup>27</sup>

Since we are all imperfect, many spouses talked about “choosing battles” and “overlooking” the weaknesses in their partners in the day-to-day grind of married life, which is healthy and realistic. It is readily apparent that nitpicking and tearing down one’s spouse for every offense or flaw is harmful and destructive of relationship. Thus, a marriage must be marked by a generosity of spirit in order to flourish. On the other hand, when necessary, spouses are obligated to point out negative behavior and flaws in their partner that rightly should change. After all, true friends are committed to helping one another live up to their potential. This commitment is captured beautifully in a phrase that we heard repeatedly: “Our job is to get each other to heaven.”

Jeff and Laura Rader—married thirty-four years, with three grown children and “lots of granddaughters”—discussed the sometimes tough work of friendship in their marriage. Jeff said, “She challenges me to grow and can be blunt with me sometimes—which is good.” Laura responded: “I prefer to call it caringly direct.” They laughed. She added: “Jeff makes me a better person because he points out things to me as well. Not as bluntly, but . . . [more laughter] he challenges me to grow in the virtues. I can only change myself so he can highlight those [areas of growth] for me. But I know that at the end of the day, or the end of the conversation, or the end of him pointing out my faults or an area I need to grow in, he is going to love me through it, so I have a comfort foundation that even when I’m not perfect he loves me and that’s good. That’s a blessing.”

Early in our conversation with the Raders, Laura stated that Jeff’s unconditional love for her is “the foundation of my life, and I think that’s the

foundation of our marriage.” In the extended quote above, Laura is quick to point out that their unconditional love for each other creates a safe space to point out certain weaknesses and opportunities for growth. They can offer and receive constructive criticism because they are confident that the other will “love [them] through it.”

It may be a small moment when a spouse calls the other out on inappropriate behavior that can nevertheless make a lasting impact. One man recalled that, early in his marriage, he was impatient with a store clerk who seemed new to the job and was fumbling as she served him. When the couple left the store, the wife immediately reprimanded her husband for his impatience and lack of compassion for the clerk. Through the years, when he has felt like expressing impatience, he remembers what his wife said about the store clerk and instead tries to be more understanding.

Relatedly, sometimes spouses help one another set boundaries in light of unhealthy tendencies. For example, one wife of an engineer identified her husband’s weakness as “wanting to work all the time,” so she reminds him of the importance of setting limits. Another man, whose tendency is to take on too many responsibilities, is grateful that his wife straightforwardly tells him, “You can’t take that on.” He appreciates that his wife brings balance to his life so that he does not overextend and “head straight toward burnout.”

In both of these cases, the spouse helped the partner see and avoid negative tendencies. One woman, who is about to celebrate twenty years of marriage with her spouse, said: “I love my husband because he knows me better than I know myself sometimes. He kind of keeps me in check and keeps me grounded. Sometimes all I need is a look or a phrase and then, I’m like, ‘okay, I got it.’” Those of us who have been married long enough are likely familiar with, and (ultimately) appreciative of, “the look” that keeps us in check, from the one who knows us better than we know ourselves.

Tom and Nancy Brady, who have been married for twenty-one years and are raising four children, spoke beautifully about how love—the love between spouses and the love of God—creates a safe space for them to acknowledge and deal with weakness. Nancy notes that sometimes when she is talking to her husband about daily struggles, she realizes her own “bad points” or “areas that [she] needs to work on to become a better person.” In this case, her husband is not pointing out these weaknesses directly; instead, she discovers them and can be honest about them in conversation with him. She believes that if she were not married, she would “sulk within herself” about these negative aspects of herself. But having her husband

to talk with her about it and gaining his perspective gives her a better understanding of who she is and what she needs to do to “trust in [her] faith” and deal with her faults.

Tom builds on Nancy’s reflections, explaining that the two of them hold each other accountable. “There is an accountability there. I don’t mean that in a business sense, but there is an obligation, or accountability to each other. I need her; she needs me; we need each other; we need the Lord. It’s an interdependence that in our world today may sound negative.” Tom thinks that honoring interdependence is countercultural insofar as our culture prizes radical independence, especially for men. Yet Tom “refuse[s] to play the macho game,” freely admitting: “I can’t do this alone. It’s humility. I need her and I need the Lord.” Nancy emphasizes that mutual dependence is important when one needs to confront one’s faults “barefaced”: “If you didn’t have that other person by your side and then have God with his arms wrapped around the two of you, you would never get through to the point where you could become a better person.”

### *Living Faith Together: Are You a Christian, Or Not?*

Thomas O’Brien has had a successful career that inadvertently put him in daily contact with people in need of resources. He was “getting calls from people who did not know what to do. Their welfare checks had been cut off or they were being sued by their landlords and kicked out of their houses. Over a period of time, [Thomas] was gathering lawyers and social workers and such agencies to put in touch with them.” Thomas recalled a time when he was complaining to his wife, Mary, about the burden of serving all these people, and Mary said, “Well, what do you expect? Are you a Christian, or not?” The questions posed by Mary reminded Thomas of his responsibility as a Christian to serve the needs of the poor and vulnerable, even when inconvenient. To refuse their pleas when Thomas was capable of responding to them would be to reject his own highest aspirations.

Good friends help us stay committed to what is most important to us, just as Mary did for Thomas. Wadell explains: “No matter how worthwhile a project or activity might be, if we are left to pursue it alone it is easy to grow discouraged and indifferent.”<sup>28</sup> For Christians, living out our baptisms and becoming closer to God ought to be the most important (though not always the easiest) project of our lives. It is a project we must embark on together, for we are baptized *into community*. It is important to remember that, in the Gospels, the disciples were sent out “two by two” in order to spread the good news with their words and their lives.

Couples who completed our written survey overwhelmingly confirm the importance of shared morals, values, and faith in the success of their marriage. Specifically, 98 percent of respondents consider shared morals/values to be important to their marriage.<sup>29</sup> In addition, 98 percent believe that sharing a core set of faith beliefs is important. These married partners recognize that when they live out shared faith and values *together*, they are stronger for it. In an interview, one husband confirmed the importance of the core faith beliefs shared with his wife, that—he explained to us—are rooted in the faith lives of their respective families of origin: “We have the same values, which is nice. Both of us sharing the same values makes life a lot easier. We have different ideas about some things, but in general, we’re both going in the same direction, you know, bringing our family along for the ride.”

Pete Mahon talked about the importance of a shared faith with his wife, Sally: “Before Sally, I dated a girl for a while, a really nice girl, but she wasn’t Catholic, and there was always that question mark. And sharing that same faith is a huge value to have because it is a tough enough world out there, [and tougher] if you don’t start from the same spot—now we may problem-solve differently, but at least we can start from that same spot—using a baseball analogy, from home plate. Since we were both blessed to have that same faith, that is a huge deal.”

His wife responded, “I would agree, but I don’t necessarily think you’d need to both be Catholic. I think that would be a good thing, but I also can see situations where there are two Catholic people . . . it’s all about how much your faith in God matters to you. If one of you had a pretty fervent faith and the other was like ‘Yeah, I was raised Catholic,’ but it didn’t matter much, then it’s not going to [be a shared priority]. But faith for both of us was a priority.”

Since faith is a priority for both Pete and Sally, they consider it the home plate for all of their endeavors—the source from which they go out into the world and to which they return, safely. Thus they actively nurture and deepen that faith, together and as individuals, by praying daily, trying to make it to daily Mass, attending yearly retreats, and participating in Scripture reflection and faith-sharing groups. These practices allow them to “keep checking in with God” and “keep them on their game.”

Donna Erikson explained how partnership and mutual encouragement have functioned to strengthen the faith of each spouse in their married life:

We’ve done so many things together, you know, Marriage Encounter and all kinds of prayer groups and different things that we do together. Even our first reconciliation. When we were growing

up, we didn't make that, it wasn't in the church—or wasn't in our parish, which was pretty contemporary—so we were married seven years and we were in church and they had the opportunity to go [to reconciliation] face-to-face and we were going, "Should we?" and I am sure if I was in there by myself I wouldn't have, but when you have each other we [said], "Yeah, okay, let's do it." So we encourage each other. You know one goes on a retreat and you fill up the other one and then the other one does something, and we fill each other up. Right now we've been doing this Oremus<sup>30</sup> and it's been kind of cool because we read [part of the Bible] and then we can talk about, "What hit you in that Scripture, that piece? And, where were you at?" and it's just kind of fun to do that. We really do help each other get closer to God.

Notice the language that Donna uses here: the language of encouragement. She and her husband, Tim, genuinely *give one another courage* in their faith journey. The Latin root word of courage is *cor*, or "heart." Recall that Wadell notes how easy it is to become *discouraged*, that is, to lose heart, when pursuing the most important goals of our lives. For this reason, we need friends to give us courage, or enable us "to take heart."

Donna believes that she would have been too afraid to participate in the sacrament of reconciliation had Tim not been with her. They were bolstered by each other's presence in church that day—it made them brave enough to engage—and it is only one example of their pursuit together of activities that strengthen their faith. But even when one spouse pursues an activity as an individual, such as going on retreat, it functions to encourage and "fill up" the other, keeping the couple focused on what is most important to them.

Donna and Tim's experience was echoed by many who expressed profound gratitude for a spouse who strongly encouraged (and enabled) them to go on retreat, or perhaps to join and continue regularly meeting with a parish group, indicating that they "would never" have taken that step without some prodding from their partner.<sup>31</sup>

Matthew Murphy told us that he and his wife, Margaret, share a favorite biblical passage, which is "when Jesus unrolls the scroll and reads from Isaiah<sup>32</sup> and then puts it down and says, 'Today the scriptures are fulfilled in your presence.' And then they chase him to the top of the mountain and try to kill him right after that. But that's part of [it]." Matthew appreciates the "passion for justice" that is revealed in Jesus' words—about proclaiming good news to the poor, restoring sight to the blind, and setting the prisoners and oppressed free. Yet Matthew also highlighted the rejection

of Jesus by the crowds that followed his message, and said, “I don’t think I could even do or think of that [i.e., the kind of justice Jesus proclaimed and lived] without having a partner in that.” He looked at his wife. “You’re sometimes pushing me along in that, and sometimes just giving me the courage to speak up and take a stand on certain things. Not that I do a lot of that, but I would do a lot less, I think, if I weren’t married to Margaret.”

From the testimony we heard, it seems true that these married partners would “do a lot less” to live out their most cherished Christian ideals if they were not married; their shared faith commitments and the encouragement of their spouse to enact those values enables them to do more.

The way that Matthew speaks about Margaret pushing him to live out gospel values—to challenge an unjust status quo—points to the fact that friendships are “potentially subversive—acts of genuine protest and resistance—because they dare to break free from what is most corrupting and dehumanizing in a culture in order to begin something new.”<sup>33</sup> Above, it was suggested that Christian marriage is countercultural because it celebrates the inherently social nature of the person and our consequent interdependence, rather than touting radical individualism and independence.

Further, we noted the necessity of humility in marriage, of self-emptying service to the other, modeled after Jesus Christ. Humility and self-emptying service not only contrast cultural messages of individualism—with its “me-first” mentality—but also consumerism and materialism, that teach us to fill ourselves up with the latest gadgets and goods, even at the expense of others in our communities. Wadell names the narrative of consumerism and materialism and the narrative of individualism, “narratives of despair” because they have a dehumanizing effect on us. Rather than helping us live to our potential, they distort our full humanity.<sup>34</sup>

To this list of narratives of despair, he adds “the narrative of violence,” that he sees “at work in a culture that so prizes competition and rivalry that it teaches us that the only way we can secure our own identity is by dominating and oppressing somebody else.”<sup>35</sup>

Authentic friendship, then, is subversive because—together—friends can reject these narratives of despair and choose to live differently, in ways that are more truthful and hopeful. Friends can help free one another from the corrupting effects of these false narratives. We vividly saw *friendship as resistance* in the lives of the married couples to whom we spoke.

Bob and Jeanne Mitchell have made a commitment to live simply. They are “cautious” to resist “materialism and consumerism.” Jeanne said, “[Living simply and sharing what we have] are things we value strongly, and

value because we're called to those things—generosity and putting people ahead of things—and so we both value those and find those things difficult in different ways, and doing that together makes it more likely to get to the things we think are important.”

Bob and Jeanne are helping one another stay committed to what is most important to them. They are living intentionally in a countercultural way by rejecting narratives of despair and choosing instead to adhere to gospel values, that they acknowledge can be “difficult.” Jeanne’s language of prioritizing “people ahead of things” reminds us of Pope St. John Paul II’s call for Christians to emphasize *being* over *having* in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On Social Concern).<sup>36</sup>

Pope John Paul II condemns both economic underdevelopment and its counterpart, superdevelopment, “which consists in an excessive availability of every kind of material goods for the benefit of certain social groups” (SRS 28). The Pope charges that underdevelopment and superdevelopment are “equally inadmissible” because each is “contrary to what is good and to true happiness” (SRS 28). The danger specific to superdevelopment is that:

[It] easily makes people slaves of “possession” and of immediate gratification, with no other horizon than the multiplication or continual replacement of the things already owned with others still better. This is the so-called civilization of “consumption” or “consumerism,” which involves so much “throwing-away” and “waste.” An object already owned but now superseded by something better is discarded, with no thought of its possible lasting value in itself, nor of some other human being who is poorer. . . . All of us experience firsthand the sad effects of this blind submission to pure consumerism: in the first place a crass materialism, and at the same time a radical dissatisfaction, because one quickly learns—unless one is shielded from the flood of publicity and the ceaseless and tempting offers of products—that the more one possesses the more one wants, while deeper aspirations remain unsatisfied and perhaps even stifled (SRS 28).

The Pope explains that in a superdeveloped country like the United States, those who are privileged and steeped in the narratives of consumerism and materialism often confuse *having* with *being*. We begin to believe that our worth and happiness are tied to the excessive goods we accumulate (our fancy cars, clothes, and houses), often at the expense of those who lack even basic material goods. We forget that material goods are meant to be shared

and to serve the well-being of persons whose *real* happiness consists in virtuous living and right relationship with God and others. We are tricked by the narratives of despair so that our “deeper aspirations remain unsatisfied and perhaps even stifled.” Therefore, it is imperative that Christians *resist*, and as Jeanne rightly points out, “doing that together makes it more likely to get to the things we think are important.”

Frank and Kelly Brown both served in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps (JVC) after college and have adopted the “four cornerstones” of the JVC as the foundation of their marriage: simple living, social justice, community, and spirituality. These parents of three young children consider these values to be “anchors” or “hooks to hang so much of our life on,” and claim that these cornerstones have been important in their “conversations and growth” as they have moved through their nineteen years of marriage. Kelly explained, “We want to live our life in a way that matters. That has been our grounding. [Our marriage] is about us, but it has been about more than us.”

Frank and Kelly make concrete choices, big and small, that reflect these core values. For example, they intentionally choose to live in a condominium rather than buy a house in the urban community in which they live, which frees them to financially support community organizations and do service work, such as running a food pantry, supporting at-risk youth through housing and educational support, and teaching. They see the “choice to live simply as a way to be closer to God as a family.” They are explicit about the motivation for such choices with their children, hoping to pass along these values to them. Kelly emphasizes that “we’ve always supported one another and encouraged each other in [living out their four values] and made the sacrifices that are required as well.” In friendship, Kelly and Frank protest the dominant values of American culture with their very lives.

Al and Christine Kozak emphasize cooperation and teamwork in their home, where they are raising their five children. Countering the rampant individualism in our culture, Christine identifies herself primarily as part of a unit: “I just think of *us*, because we’ve known each other so long, it’s like left foot, right foot, Al and Christine.” Right foot, left foot: it is *one body* imagery.<sup>37</sup> Al described “an epiphany” he had after his wife delivered twin babies, and the couple was juggling work and family responsibilities. He realized, “There’s just no way you can get everything done at this house. It’s just impossible.” Although at that time Christine was a mother who stayed at home full time, Al committed himself to helping out more around the house and with the children, in addition to working full time: “If you’re

going to make it work, you can't just put it all on one person's shoulders. You've got to divvy that up. In our culture now, people talk about being on a team, but [authentic teamwork] is actually countercultural because in education you get an individual report card and in the work environment typically you get a performance appraisal on you . . . really it's about the individual, even if we use the language of being a team. For our family, we have to do things as a team."

Al recalls a conversation that they had with their children at the dinner table when Christine was going back to part-time work outside the home. Al and Christine told the children that the change "means we're all going to have to help out. If we all help out, we'll still be able to have a lot of good times together, but everybody's going to have to pick it up a little bit." Al and Christine see each other—and the wider family—as a team, and they talk to their children regularly about helping out in whatever ways they are able in order to make their household function, but also to instill the values of helping others and being responsible to a common good. Rather than "competition and rivalry," the children are learning cooperation and responsibility to the group. Al teaches them: "If you help somebody, I call it the boomerang effect; it comes back. If you help people, it comes back ten times that. And that's what God wants you to do."

Al spoke, too, about a willingness to ask God for help in prayer. In Al's mind, God expects a great deal from them as parents of five children, but God is also there to help: "Sometimes people think it is on themselves to do it all themselves. For whatever reason, when you ask for help, people think that's a sign of weakness. To me, it's a sign of strength because you realize that you need that help."

In conclusion, we are convinced that married friends delight in the other, support and challenge one another, want and do what is best for the other, and—most fundamentally—share in the common project of bringing each other more deeply into friendship with God. We therefore affirm the excellent advice offered by Jerry Simms at the beginning of the chapter: marry a friend!