# Opening Prayer Service

## Gather

Lord God, from you every family in Heaven and on earth takes its name.

Father, you are love and life.

Through your Son, Jesus Christ, born of woman,   
and through the Holy Spirit, fountain of Divine Charity,  
grant that each family on earth may become for each successive generation  
a true shrine of life and love.

Grant that your grace may guide  
the thoughts and actions of husbands and wives  
for the good of their families and of all the families in the world.

Grant that the young may find in the family  
solid support for their human dignity and for their growth in truth and love.

Grant that love, strengthened by the grace of the sacrament of marriage,  
may prove mightier than all the weaknesses and trials  
through which our families sometimes pass.

Through the intercession of the Holy Family of Nazareth,  
grant that the Church may fruitfully carry out her worldwide mission  
in the family and through the family.

Through Christ our Lord  
who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life  
for ever and ever. *Amen.*

## Listen

Ask the reader to proclaim Luke 2:29-52, the Boy Jesus in the Temple

## Respond

**Leader:** Let us all pray for families, particularly those who lead our families: for wives and mothers, for fathers and husbands.

**Women:** As mothers and wives, watch over us, Lord, and keep our families safe, like the mother eagle who guards her young.

**Men:** O God, you spoke to Elijah not as a rushing wind but as a still, small voice. Help all fathers and husbands to find you in everything as small and ordinary as this and to share faith in you with their kids, no matter their age.

**Women:** We teach our little ones to stand and walk, carefully coaxing balance, then jump in when we can to teach them balance in work, in friendship, in serving others.

**Men:** O God, you trusted Noah with the care of your creatures while they weathered the storm. Help all fathers and husbands protect those they love, during tempests and travel, in pools and parks. Be the extra eyes they need to keep their family safe and guide all men through their fears.

**Women:** As wives and mothers, we deliver our children once, in joy and pain, then deliver them a hundred times more—to school, to practices, to doctors’ appointments.

**Men:** O God, as a father you put young Jesus under Joseph's care. Give all fathers love enough, patience enough, to help their families in whatever ways they can.

**Women:** Guide our families Lord, and keep them upright, falling neither into harm nor selfishness.

**Men:** God of us all, you've stuck with humanity for the long haul. Grace all fathers and husbands with a taste of your stamina. Make them strong enough to stay the course and gentle enough to know your care.

**Women:** We congregate as wives, moms, and family, whispering about worries and passing on what works, sharing wisdom from Grandma or Oprah, stories heard in parking lots or bleachers.

**All:** Teach us, Lord, to lead with our love instead of our fears, trusting that you are there beside us.

## Go Forth

Lord God, thank you for calling us into a special relationship with you. Open our ears that we may hear your words. Open our hearts that we may treasure your love for us. Give us the courage to live healthy family lives, and to remain faithful and true in our relationships. Amen.

**Handout #1**

**Things We Learn at Home**

With parents and children working together, write a definition and a home example for each of these traits:

**Love** means: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

An example of how **love** is shown in our family: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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**Respect** means: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

An example of how **respect** is shown in our family: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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**Gratitude** means: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

An example of how **gratitude** is shown in our family: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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**Honor** means: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

An example of how **honor** is shown in our family: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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**Obedience** means: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

An example of how **obedience** is shown in our family: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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**Assistance** means: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

An example of how **assistance** is shown in our family: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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# Handout #2.

# Our Family’s Strengths

Choose a different initial for each family member. Read each statement out loud. After each statement, allow each family member to write their initial on the line where it indicates their perception of that family strength.

1. I feel we show care and respect for each other.

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*Always Usually Sometimes Hardly Ever Never*

2. We love each other and we express our love for each other.

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*Always Usually Sometimes Hardly Ever Never*

3. We spend time together.

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*Always Usually Sometimes Hardly Ever Never*

4. Problems are worked out in a positive way.

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*Always Usually Sometimes Hardly Ever Never*

5. We support each other even in difficult times.

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*Always Usually Sometimes Hardly Ever Never*

6. We express thankfulness and gratitude to each other.

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*Always Usually Sometimes Hardly Ever Never*

7. I know what my family believes about right and wrong and we show this by how we act.

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*Always Usually Sometimes Hardly Ever Never*

8. I know what my family believes about God and we do things together to live our faith.

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*Always Usually Sometimes Hardly Ever Never*

9. We ask for help from others when we need it.

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*Always Usually Sometimes Hardly Ever Never*

### Discuss these two sentences as a family:

10. Our best strengths are . . .

11. I think our family needs to work on . . .

# Handout #3.

# Characteristics of Strong Families

Family strengths enable families to operate effectively as a system, meeting the needs of family members and the family as a whole. Family strengths lead to the overall health of a family.

Though language may vary from study to study, a number of important characteristics have been identified as family strengths.

### The healthy family shares a sense of commitment.

This means that family members are dedicated to promoting each other's welfare and happiness. They expect the family to endure. They have a sense of shared responsibility for the family, and a commitment to stay connected during times of transition, difficulty, or crisis. Commitment in the healthy family means an investment of time, energy, spirit, and heart. A healthy family also has a support system beyond the immediate family, which might include extended family, friends, and others.

### The healthy family spends both quality and quantity time together sharing many areas of life.

They share leisure time together and have a sense of play and humor. Time together allows relationships and understanding to grow. Yet in healthy families there is also balance, so that togetherness does not become stifling. By sharing time together, the family develops a sense of family identity.

### The healthy family is developing and using skills in good communication.

Family members take the time to listen to one another. Spouses have a strong, loving relationship and are capable of sharing deep feelings with one another. The family has control over television and other electronic media which often impede good communication. Regular shared mealtimes often provide time for family communication. The family encourages individual feelings and independent thinking.

### Members of healthy families appreciate one another and take the time to let one another know this in a variety of ways.

Parents show affection toward their children and work to build trusting relationships in the family. Family members express their love for one another through caring, feeling responsible, showing respect, and learning to listen for the feelings of another. An environment of love, acceptance, and understanding helps children develop an inner strength for growth and development. As family members affirm and support one another, self-esteem is boosted.

### The healthy family has a shared religious and moral core.

Shared faith and religious practice provide a family with a common set of values and a purpose in today's world, and can be an important element in strengthening and promoting healthy family life. Sharing, love, and compassion for others are promoted. The family teaches a sense of right and wrong. There is a strong sense of family rituals and traditions. Faith is connected to daily living; in fact, the primary expression of faith for the healthy family is in daily life. They practice what they preach. The family values service to others. Parents feel responsible to "pass on the faith," but do so in positive and meaningful ways that allow for times of questioning.

### The healthy family is able to cope with crisis and times of stress in a positive manner.

Members of these families unite to face the challenges of a crisis by drawing on various family strengths, being able to adapt, asking for help, and accepting assistance from others. Drawing on spiritual resources, humor, and communication, the healthy family maintains a sense of hope and gratefulness, knowing that things will eventually get better. The healthy family expects problems and considers them to be a normal part of life. They admit to and seek help with problems that are beyond than their own resources.

“Because you are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with heartfelt mercy, with kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another; forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you. Over all these virtues put on love, which binds the rest together and makes them perfect. Christ's peace must reign in your hearts, since as members of the one body you have been called to that peace. Dedicate yourselves to thankfulness. Let the word of Christ, rich as it is, dwell in you. In wisdom made perfect, instruct and admonish one another. Sing gratefully to God from your hearts in psalms, hymns, and inspired songs. Whatever you do, whether in speech or in action, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus. Give thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:12-17).

# Handout #4.

# Family Action Plan

Identify one area to work on as a family. One member should write this down under “What we want to happen.” Continue the discussion by addressing “How we are going to do it,” and “When we will get started.”

### What we want to happen:

### How we are going to do it:

### When we will get started:

# Handout #5.

# My Family’s Strengths

Think about your family and decide how often each of the statements below applies by placing an X on the line.

Always Usually Sometimes Rarely Never  
  
1. I feel we show care and respect for each other. |--------------------------------------------------|

2. We love each other and we express our love for each other. |--------------------------------------------------|

3. I am satisfied with the amount of and kind of time we |--------------------------------------------------|

spend together.  
  
4. Problems are worked out in a positive way. |--------------------------------------------------|

5. We support each other even in difficult times. |--------------------------------------------------|

6. We express thankfulness and gratitude to each other |--------------------------------------------------|

7. I know what my family believes about right and wrong |--------------------------------------------------|

and we show this by how we act.  
  
8. I know what my family believes about God and |--------------------------------------------------|

we do things together to live these beliefs out.  
  
9. We ask for help from others outside our family |--------------------------------------------------|

when we need it.

**Reflect on the following sentences and write your answers on the worksheet.**

As a family, I think we have these strengths. . .  
  
  
  
I think our family needs to work on...

# Handout #6.

# Can You Remember?

Can you recall how you learned about the important traits we typically learn from parents and elders at home? Reflect on the list below. How did you learn about each trait? Who taught you?

**Love**

How did you first learn about this trait? Who taught you?

**Respect**

How did you first learn about this trait? Who taught you?

**Gratitude**

How did you first learn about this trait? Who taught you?

**Honor**

How did you first learn about this trait? Who taught you?

**Obedience**

How did you first learn about this trait? Who taught you?

**Assistance**

How did you first learn about this trait? Who taught you?

# Handout #7.

# The Sacred Nature of Family Life

The Church’s theology recognizes the family in a special ecclesial way. We believe in the holy and sacred nature of family and household living. The words of the U.S. Bishops in their 1994 pastoral message to families, *Follow the Way of Love*, say it well:

“A family is our first community and most basic way in which the Lord gathers us, forms us and acts in the world. The early church expressed this truth by calling the Christian family a domestic church or church of the home. . . . Your domestic church is not complete by itself, of course. It should be united with and supported by the parishes and other communities within the larger Church” (p. 8).

Pope John Paul II recognized the variety of ways that families grow in faith. In his exhortation on the family, *Familiaris Consortio*, he outlined four distinct but interdependent tasks for families: form a loving community, serve life by bearing and educating children, participate in building a caring and just society, share in the life and mission of the Church. In more contemporary language, the US Bishops, in their pastoral message to families, *Follow the Way of Love*, also extend four particular challenges to families: live faithfully, give life, grow in mutuality, and take time together.

Consider these quotes from key Church documents about the sacred nature of family life.

* “Parents are the primary educators in the faith” (*GDC* #255).
* “The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion, and for this reason it can and should be called the domestic church” (*CCC* 2204).
* “As Christian families, you not only belong to the Church, but your daily life is a true expression of the Church” (*Follow the Way of Love*, p. 8).
* “. . . all the members make up the family, and each can make a unique contribution to creating the basic environment in which a sense of God’s loving presence is awakened and faith in Jesus Christ is confessed, encouraged, and lived” (*NDC* 100-101).

Yet as you know, our practice does not always reflect the Church’s vision. Families find it difficult enough to *talk* about faith and religious practice, let alone actually share faith with one another. For a great many Catholics in North America, the home is no longer viewed as a center of religious activity. *We simply must rekindle the family’s desire, effort, and ability to be a center of religious activity.*

In claiming the holy and sacred nature of family living, the Christian tradition has always recognized that God is active in the ordinary and extraordinary events in our lives. God lingers in the creases and folds of family living. When the family becomes aware of God’s gracious activity in their lives, they are challenged to respond, both for the sake of their own faith growth, and for the sake of the larger community.

There are a variety of channels through which God’s initiative touches family life, and then, in turn, the family responds and grows in faith. It’s not enough to simply declare that the Christian family is holy and sacred, and therefore all the events in the life of that family are potential moments of faith growth. While this is certainly true, the vastness of possibilities may render the family blind to all but the most obvious.

Therefore, the following principles form a framework for making the connection between ordinary (and extraordinary) experiences of life and the sacred. These principles recognize the full range of faith encounters that families can have. They offer seven separate “lens” from which to view them.

1. *Intentional.* Parents are the first and most influential educators of their children. Families provide the foundational setting in which a young person’s faith is formed.
2. *Daily Life.* Families grow in faith when they “stop, look, and listen” in order to recognize God’s gracious activity in their daily lives.
3. *Wholeness and Well-being.* When families build healthy relationships with each other through positive interactions, sharing meals, solving conflicts, and the like, they also grow in faith together.
4. *Change.* While sometimes resisted, moments of change and transition in family life open windows for faith growth. Several predictable transitions correspond with Sacramental moments.
5. *Religious Practice.* When families practice their faith—through conversation and discussion, ritual and celebration, outreach and service to others—they grow in faith together.
6. *Worship.* When families participate in the liturgical feasts, seasons, and rhythms of the Church, they make connections between their faith encounters and the faith life of the larger community.
7. *Contemporary Culture.* Families meet the challenges of contemporary culture by articulating their values, establishing clear priorities, and making careful decisions, all in an atmosphere of community support.

When family members, particularly adults and teens in the family, become familiar with and understand these seven principles, two things occur quite readily. First, they will more easily and more often recognize the “moments of meaning” that occur in their families. Second, they will have a clearer sense of how to respond to the movement of the Spirit in a way that benefits all.

# Handout #8.

# Learning about Sex at Home

Family life plays an important role in forming a person’s sexual identity. In our families we have our first experiences of being and acting as sexual persons. The family climate and the family members interact to create teachable moments where we learn basic values and behaviors about what it means to be a sexual person. These learnings either assist in or hinder the journey toward sexual maturity.

Reflect upon and write your responses to the questions:

1. What have you learned from your family about giving and receiving affection? When, and how is affection shared in your family?
2. What have you learned from your family about being male and female? What have you learned from your family about acceptable and non-acceptable behavior for boys and girls, women and men?
3. What are your family “rules” about privacy and modesty?
4. When and how is information about sexuality shared in your family? What does your family believe and value about sexuality? How are those values shared?

# Handout #9 .

# A Catholic Perspective on Sexuality

We will now look at values and beliefs of the Catholic Church related to sexuality. The Church’s teachings are based on Jesus’ message of love and they promote a respect for life in all phases. The following principles can be a guide in forming our own personal values and beliefs about sexuality.

### Gender

A Catholic sees sexuality as a gift created by God. Sexuality is part of who we are as human beings. We do not need to feel embarrassed or ashamed of our sexuality.

A Catholic respects his or her own body and the bodies of others. Scripture tells us that our bodies are temples of God. As we mature, we learn about and become more comfortable with the body that God has given us. Eating healthy, exercising, and staying away from harmful substances are ways to care for our body and say thank you to God for creating us. To respect the bodies of others is to acknowledge that God is present in every person.

### Roles

A Catholic recognizes and affirms the equality of males and females. Scripture tells us God created us male and female, and God saw that it was good. We believe as Christians that male and female represent two ways of being in the world, complementing the gifts of each other. Any suggestion that persons of one sex are better or more gifted than the other is a misunderstanding of God's creative purposes. We can recognize differences in males and females without developing negative stereotypes.

### Expression

A Catholic builds healthy relationships through the values of commitment, faithfulness, honesty, and a concern for the other person. Each of us builds relationships with many different people through our lives. The quality of our relationships depends on the values of commitment, faithfulness, honesty, and a concern for the other person. The challenge of building healthy relationships begins with our own family (though sometimes it feels like this is the most difficult place to begin), and then extends outward to others.

A Catholic believes that sexual intercourse is an expression of love reserved for those in the permanent, life-giving commitment of marriage. Sexual intercourse (along with other acts of physical affection) is a special way in which a man and woman pledge themselves to one another and to all that their lives together will demand of them. This pledge required a serious adult commitment. Sexual intercourse is also the expression of love that God has given man and woman to share in the creation of a new life. It is only within marriage that sexual intercourse can be a sign of committed love and be open to bringing forth new life. Only in this relationship does sexual intercourse find its full meaning.

A Catholic has the right to say no to and reject sexual activity for any reason. Sexual activity is not the same as love. Sexual activity can be a loving expression of commitment, or it can be used as a means of force to violate a person's dignity and self-worth. It is wrong to pressure another person with words or actions that do not respect his/her rights.

### Values and Beliefs

A Catholic believes in a loving God, who creates each person as a unique expression of love and calls us to care for and serve others. We believe that all life and all people are a part of God's creation. Therefore, we must show respect for others through our words and actions.

A Catholic believes that the gift of human sexuality carries with it the responsibility to grow into the person God created each one of us to be. This is a lifelong process of saying yes to the way God calls us to mature.

A Catholic does not see abortion as a solution to an unwanted pregnancy. The Catholic Church teaches that human life is present from the moment of conception. All life is a precious gift from God. Regardless of the circumstances in which a child is conceived, the new life is no less a person and no less precious and deserves protection, care, and respect.

# Handout #10.

# 6th and 9th Commandments

## Exercise One

The sixth commandment states: “You shall not commit adultery.”

Re-write the sixth commandment in your own words so that it reveals its full meaning to you. What does the commandment say to you about faithfulness and fidelity in *all your relationships* with others? Write the commandment in first person beginning with “I” rather than “you.” Here is an example: “I will do all I can to remain true and faithful in my relationships with others.”

## Exercise Two

The ninth commandment states: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife.”

Re-write the ninth commandment in your own words. And, like the previous one, write it in first person, beginning with “I” rather than “you.” Here is an example. “I will cherish those I love with exclusive intimacy and fidelity.”

Share your re-written sixth and ninth commandments with others in your group.

# Handout #11.

# Marriage: An Image of Fidelity

Marriage, the Council teaches, is characterized by two essential elements, communion and fruitfulness, both of which play a role in reflecting our creation in God’s image and likeness. Referring to the first, the Council Fathers proclaim that “by the marriage covenant of conjugal love,” a couple is “no longer two but one flesh” (Mt. 19:6).

According to God’s design, marriage is much more than a legal arrangement whereby two individuals enter into a pact with certain rights and duties; it is a communion of persons which “wells up” from the very “fountain of divine love.” United in this covenant of love, the couple is to “render mutual help and service to each other through an intimate union of their persons and of their actions.” As a mutual gift to one another, this “intimate union. . .imposes total fidelity on the spouses and argues for an unbreakable oneness between them” (*Church in the Modern World*, Art. 48).

Marriage is also characterized by fruitfulness. The Council declares that “marriage and conjugal love” are in fact ordered to the procreation and education of children who are seen to be “the supreme gift of marriage.” Just as communion and procreation are the essential elements of the marriage covenant, so they are the primary means by which a married couple reflects God’s image and likeness. The conjugal union is an image of the inner life of the Trinity for just as the Father and Son are united in the bond of love which is the Holy Spirit, so the bond of love unites the married couple and makes them one.

In like manner, just as God’s inner life of love and communion extend out beyond itself in the work of creation, so the love between a husband and wife goes out from them in the procreation of offspring. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* captures the significance of the marriage covenant well when, speaking of the Christian family, it says it [the Christian family] “is a communion of persons, a sign and image of the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. In the procreation and education of children it reflects the Father’s work of creation” (2202).

Marriage, then, is a profound and beautiful reality. As such, Scripture has seen it as an apt image of God’s relationship with His chosen people. The prophets especially employ it to express God’s love and fidelity to His people despite their unfaithfulness to Him. “On that day. . .I will take you for my wife in righteousness and justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord” (Hos. 2:16, 19).

In like manner Isaiah proclaims, “For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; . . .For the Lord has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like the wife of a man’s youth when she is cast off, says your God” (Is. 54:5a, 6; Cf. also Jer. 2-3; 31; Ezek. 16; 23).

Marriage as a symbol of God’s covenant with the people carries over into the New Testament, only here it comes to symbolize the relationship between Christ and the Church. John sees the “the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:2). Paul also relates marriage to the love that Christ has for his Church: “’For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:31-32).

# Handout #12.

# Imaging the Trinity

The married couple represents an image of the Trinity. Their bond of love unites them and makes them one. How does the life of a married couple continually live and nurture this unity? In other words, how can spouses develop a spirituality of marriage? We suggest at least three responses to this question:

1. Their daily lives reveal God to each other. They each experience God through the intimacy of marital love, and through their permanent commitment they become grace to each other.
2. Their marriage reaches beyond itself. Their relationship remains fundamentally open—to children, to family, to the community, and beyond. They give each other strength to serve the needs of others and participate in the transformation of the world.
3. While imperfect, their love is still sacred. They know that God remains present and faithful to them amidst their chaos, busyness, and shortcomings. Further, they know that grace is revealed in their brokenness, for that’s when the need for God is made clear.

### Exercise One

Whether you are married or not, take a few minutes to reflect upon and then discuss these questions:

* Are there additional characteristics you might add to this list?
* Of the married couples you know, who exhibits some or all of these characteristics? Just how do they do so?

### Exercise Two

If you are married, discuss this additional question with your beloved:

* Are any of these three characteristics present in your marriage today? If so, how are they lived out?

# Handout #13.

# The Enduring Challenge to the Sacrament of Marriage

As God ordained it, marriage is meant to reflect the profound communion and creative love of God.

In like manner, sexuality is sacred because the sexual act is the unique manifestation of married love, being both an expression of the love that unites the couple and the way of sharing in God’s creative work. Thus, the sexual act is far from something that is barely tolerated because it teeters on the edge of sin. It is good, indeed even sacred. But it is also reserved to the sacred covenant of marriage, for only there does it derive its full meaning.

It takes little imagination or research to see the profound challenge facing marriage and sexuality in our contemporary culture. In his 1995 encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul spoke of “the culture of death.” While that encyclical deals with life questions, Pope John Paul’s description aptly describes our society’s attitude toward marriage and sexuality as well. It is an attitude that ridicules the claim that the sexual act must be reserved to marriage, dismissing such an idea as oddly quaint and hopelessly old-fashioned. And in so doing, it creates a culture that leads to death.

How does one explain such rejection? A short answer is that in our day (as in every age of the past) the covenant of mutual love has been undermined by covetousness. “To covet,” of course, is prohibited by the ninth commandment: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife.”

“Covet” is defined as “to want something ardently.” Desire in itself is not wrong. However, in Catholic moral teaching “coveting” is understood as “lust” or “disordered desire.” According to the *Catechism* (cf. #2516) it can be described as the pull of warring tendencies within us. Saint Paul describes this as a struggle between the “flesh” and the “spirit.” By this he does not mean that the opposing sides are the body on the one hand and the soul on the other. Rather, he is referring to the deeply rooted tendency to sin on the one hand, and the longing for what is good and true on the other.

Most of us know this tug of war from personal experience. It can take many forms, but we experience it in a particularly prominent and nagging way in our sexual appetite. As many of us know only too well, if left to its own devices it “desires ardently” whatever will satisfy it, even if the object of desire happens to be someone else’s spouse.

Traditionally, this disordered desire is called concupiscence. To yield to it is to be ruled by the vice of lust. Because lustful acts are of the “flesh,” that deeply rooted tendency to sin of which Saint Paul speaks, they inevitably lead to death. Hence the ninth commandment is set before us like a traffic barricade, warning us not to go down that fatal road.

The union which God intended, the marriage covenant between a man and a woman, is much different. Founded not on disordered desire, but on ordered fidelity and love, the covenant between husband and wife leads to life. That is, it directs us to our proper goal or end, which, as the *Baltimore Catechism* taught, is beatitude: to be happily united with God for all eternity after knowing, loving, and serving God here on earth.

But how can such a lofty ideal actually be accomplished? The obvious answer is that we must choose this way of life. *Choosing* to live according to the order which God intended and which is marked out for us by the commandments puts us on the way of life.

## Chastity

In matters of sexuality, this decision and its implementation is facilitated by the virtue of chastity. What is chastity? It might be described as a quality that enables a person to achieve personal integration. Specifically, it enables a person to manage that “tug of war,” so that he or she can master the sexual appetite and direct his or her sexuality only to the end that God intended.

Being a virtue, it must be cultivated by choosing to perform chaste deeds, that is, by acting chastely. Chastity is fostered by what the *Catechism* calls purity of vision, which entails disciplining our thoughts, imagination and desires, as well as by purity of action, which includes such things as custody of the eyes and even old-fashioned modesty. From this it is evident that one can hardly hope to be chaste if he or she doesn’t monitor the movies or television viewed, the fantasies entertained, the conversation engaged in. It takes hard work to become chaste!

Chastity is also a gift. Hence, one must pray to receive it (cf. CCC 2520-24). In this way, gradually and at times with slips and falls, one eventually arrives at that purity which puts us on the path of life, and brings us to our goal of seeing God.

Indeed, Jesus told His disciples that the “pure in heart” are those who “will see God” (Matt. 5:8). The *Catechism* explains this point well. It notes that “the pure of heart” refers to those who have attained what might be called a harmony of intellect and will, not only within themselves, but also with God (cf. CCC #2518).

The pure of heart see as God sees. Thus, one who is chaste can “perceive the human body—ours and our neighbor’s—as a temple of the Holy Spirit, a manifestation of divine beauty” (CCC #2519), for that is how God sees it.

## Reflection and Discussion

In light of the information you just read (or heard), consider the following questions:

Bring to mind a married couple whom you know who truly reflects God’s unconditional love and fidelity for the world and Christ’s love for the Church. Without revealing the couple’s identity, what characteristics do you see in that couple that show the quality of their love?

If you had just one sentence to describe the meaning of what you just heard or read to the following people, what would you say to each one?

A TV sitcom producer:

A couple living together outside of marriage:

A young teen who dresses provocatively:

A teen idol (such as rock or athletic star):

A person who frequents pornographic web sites:

Other \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_:

# Prayer Service: Breakfast on the Beach

### Gather

Let us conclude our session with a Gospel story about Jesus and his friends gathered for a special meal. As you listen to the story, remember that Jesus and his disciples lived together for three years or more. They were like family. So in a sense, this is a story of a family meal and a special time for the “family” to heal and reconcile.

### Listen

“Breakfast on the Beach” from John 21:1-19

### Respond

So that we learn how to truly love one another in our families each day…

We seek your guidance, O God.

So that we grow in respect for each other while living under one roof…

We seek your guidance, O God.

So that we express our gratitude to each other for all the good deeds done and for simply being…

We seek your guidance, O God.

So that we honor and obey our parents and grandparents to the best of our abilities…

We seek your guidance, O God.

So that we offer genuine care and assistance to one another in times of hardship and struggle…

We seek your guidance, O God.

So that we grow in our commitment to each other as a family…

We seek your guidance, O God.

So that we spend good, quality time together, and that we grow in our ability to communicate with one another…

We seek your guidance, O God.

So that we grow in faith together as a family…

We seek your guidance, O God.

So that we develop a healthy respect and understand of the gift of sexuality...

We seek your guidance, O God.

### Go Forth

O God, we are grateful for the rich wisdom embedded in all your commandments. You tell us to honor our mothers and fathers, and in turn we learn what it means to be a healthy and whole family. You warn us against unfaithfulness and infidelity, and in turn we learn how to appreciate the extraordinary gift of our sexuality. For all this we are truly grateful, and even more so knowing that you are there to guide us on each step of our journey. Amen.