



The Psalms in the Rite of Marriage

At some point in the interviews I have with engaged couples during their preparation for marriage, I give them the book *Celebrating Marriage* (OCP 6145TL) and urge them to take their time as they prepare for the ceremony. I suggest they pray over each of the Scripture readings in the marriage lectionary and then read the commentary provided in the book before sharing their responses and insights with each other. My experience tells me that married couples rarely share their religious experiences or insights. If couple do this as they prepare for their wedding, they will begin to create a healthy and beneficial pattern of spiritual conversation in their relationship and will also make the hearing and singing of the Scriptures at their wedding much more meaningful.

I suspect that priests, deacons or lay ecclesial ministers working with engaged couples usually expect them to choose the psalm for the wedding ceremony after their conversation with the parish musician. I would encourage pastoral musicians, therefore, to suggest to couples that they pray over the psalms one by one and, if recordings are available, listen to them and sing along. Only then should they pick the psalm for the ceremony that strikes the deepest chords for them and fits well with the first reading. (Note that *Celebrating Marriage* contains commentaries on the psalms.)

There are only seven psalms in the Lectionary for the rite of marriage: Psalms 33, 34, 103, 112, 128, 145 and 148. All but Psalm 148 appear in the Lectionary for Sundays and all of them appear in the weekday Lectionary. The psalm most frequently used is Psalm 34: "I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall be ever in my mouth." Some psalms appear more than once in the

Lectionary, and different verses of these are often used for different celebrations, which results in the feel and the message of the psalm being quite different depending on context, despite it being the same psalm.

To regular churchgoers, the psalms will be familiar and, as one would expect, are joyful, hopeful, and filled with praise, thanksgiving and promises of God's blessings. To pray over these and share one's reactions with one's fiancé could be a mini-school in fundamental Christian spirituality and could take the natural joy and gratitude the couple should rightly experience at their wedding to a much deeper level. Imagine how it could feel at the wedding liturgy if the psalm you and you fiancé prayed over and finally chose for your marriage ceremony were being sung along with you by the assembly of your family and friends.

This leads us to the topic of the performance of psalms. Most wedding assemblies today are a mixture of people from many different Catholic parishes, other Christian churches and those who don't regularly attend. These assemblies constitute both a challenge for participation and a great opportunity for evangelization. A well-celebrated wedding liturgy can be a strong, moving proclamation of the dignity, beauty and extraordinary importance married love has for the faithful. It can, and frequently does, give renewed hope and consolation to married couples in the assembly.

To ensure the quality of the celebration, a good worship aid is important and, ideally, will be one that contains not only the words of the antiphon for the psalm, but the musical setting as well. This can help all present to participate no matter what

their experience of church has been. Here's another important point: be sure the bride, groom and wedding party have participation aids on their chairs or in their pew and encourage them to sing.

The psalms in the Lectionary will be experienced as both consoling and challenging especially if they're prayed over by the couple. Those considered to be consoling are Psalm 34: "Taste and see how good the Lord is; blessed the man who takes refuge in him;" Psalm 103: "Merciful and gracious is the Lord, slow to anger and abounding in kindness"; and Psalm 145: "The Lord is near to all who call upon him, to all who call upon him in truth."

Two of those considered to be challenging are Psalm 148: "Praise the Lord from the heavens, praise him in the heights" and Psalm 34: "I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall be ever in my mouth." As we speak or sing these words, if we reflect sincerely on where our heart is at that moment, we may have to admit that we do not feel at all like giving thanks or praise to God; if we are honest with ourselves, we may have to admit that the invitation to praise the Lord is frequently a challenge to our hearts. Because liturgy is, by design, constantly calling us to conversion, texts used therein, be they psalms or readings, put in our mouths or proclaim in our ears the words or sentiments of the *ideal* person of faith and devotion. If we pay attention, we will notice that there is, at least occasionally, a disconnect between the sentiments expressed in the liturgy and the sentiments resident in our hearts. This is where the grace of the Lord is needed and the time we should ask him to grace us with transformation.

Psalm 148 provides us with another challenge, that of prayer: "The Lord is near to all who call upon him, to all who call upon him in truth." The frequent scriptural exhortations to pray

intimate that God doesn't want us to pray only when we need something. It becomes clear that God wants us to commune with him regularly; amazingly, God seems to want our company! And, after all, isn't that why God made us?

The consoling words in Psalm 103 ("Merciful and gracious is the Lord, slow to anger and abounding in kindness") can also be heard as a challenge; with them we are challenged to exhibit the mercy and forgiveness of God to one another, especially in our spousal relationship.

Some years ago, in my class at Georgetown University, a student came up to me after class. She had just seen the movie *Love Story* based on the best-selling book by the same name. She was gushing over what she said was a marvelous line in the movie. (It was such a shock, I have never forgotten it.) The line was, "Love means never having to say you're sorry." She was very young.

We know that the love that lies at the heart of married life (and indeed, at the heart of all successful long-term relationships) is the love where, when one partner says for the umpteenth time in a week, "Honey, I'm sorry," Honey can say, "It's OK; I forgive you." This type of love has the amazing, enduring capacity of forgiveness after the days of easy loving stop. It has the capacity of enormous patience and understanding. This is the love that is celebrated in marriage.

Peter Berger wrote once about the "signals of transcendence." He was referring to actions ordinary people sometimes take that do not make any sense to the rational mind, like when someone, on the spur of the moment, risks his or her life to save the life of a total stranger. The love we celebrate in marriage is one of those signals of transcendence. It points to the empowering love of God in the person

that enables behaving in ways that sometimes boggle the mind. It can actually be seen fairly frequently, thank the Lord, in the amazing love parents are able to show for their children, or spouses and friends toward one another.

Attention to the psalms can help illustrate love and lift the spirits of the engaged couple, filling them with hope, joy, and consolation and also calling them to that ideal love that makes married love a symbol of Christ's amazing love for his Church (see Ephesians 5:29-32).

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Jesuit Father Lawrence J. Madden has been the director of the Georgetown Center for Liturgy since its inception in 1981. He has served as an advisor to the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy and on the governing committee of the North American Academy of Liturgy. A member of the theology faculty at Georgetown University, he has also taught at the Washington Theological Union and at the Catholic University of America. He served as pastor of Holy Trinity Parish in Washington, DC, from 1993 to 2000. He is a frequent lecturer, the author of the Pastoral Press book The Joseph Campbell Phenomenon: Implications for the Contemporary Church (OCP 6054TL), and a contributor to Celebrating Marriage (OCP 6145TL).