

Catholic Charities Counseling Services Help Heal Marriages

One of the things our Catholic faith is most known for is its emphasis on the importance of marriage. The Church has been a leader in developing programs to support couples at all stages of married life, including programs for engaged couples, family life education programs, couples' retreats, and Masses that celebrate marriage. Marriage Enrichment and Retrouvaille weekends, which are now used by couples of all faiths, had their origin in the Catholic community. Marriage counseling offered through Catholic Charities is another way that the Catholic community supports couples in the joys and struggles of married life.

While marriage is important, it is certainly not easy. Pope Francis has said that men and women "courageous enough" to face the struggles of married life "in the 'earthen vessels' of our humanity...are an essential resource for the Church as well as the whole world." Perhaps the difficulties of marriage are rooted in the reality that marriage involves two human people trying to accomplish a divine end.

All couples will experience problems. One difficulty many couples have is discerning when they are experiencing the normal ebbs and flows of married life, and when more serious problems are developing. One study found that the average couple that enters marriage counseling has experienced unhappiness in their marriage for six years before they began counseling. Deciding to start marriage counseling is not a sign of failure in marriage, but a sign of commitment. Taking this step before hurt and resentment have become entrenched will make healing easier.

So what happens when a couple comes in to Catholic Charities for marriage counseling? The process itself is not complicated, at least in general terms. The counselor helps the couple assess the problems they are facing, and together they identify the goals they have to improve their marriage. The counseling process focuses on helping them accomplish those goals. The counselor will help the couple discern how many sessions they will attend and how often they will come, but this decision is up to the couple. Sometimes a couple needs only one session to help them discuss an issue on which they have been stuck, or only a few to develop a plan to get back on track. When problems are complicated and have become entrenched, more sessions may be needed. It should always be said

when discussing marriage counseling that if there are problems of physical or emotional abuse, these issues must be addressed. Safety must be assured before couples counseling can take place.

What helps marriage counseling be successful? One key asset is when both members of the couple deeply want solutions to their problems that feel right for both of them. Judith Wallerstein has written that a key task of marriage is “to expand the sense of self to include the other.” This does not mean the others wants and needs are more important - many would consider that codependent - but it does mean that the others’ needs are equally valued with one’s own. Another key factor is a balance of *change* and *acceptance*. Both spouses have to be willing to change what they can to make the marriage more satisfying for the other; both are also called to love their spouse for who they are rather than who they want them to be. John Gottman’s research on successful marriages has found that all couples have what he calls “unsolvable problems,” often based on personality differences. The task for these enduring problems is to maintain “dialogue,” recognizing that in most all instances the tension grows out of the difference between the two people rather than being caused by fault in one of them. As Pope Francis has written, “We encounter problems whenever we think relationships or people ought to be perfect, or when we put ourselves at the center and expect things to turn our way.”

Sadly, when we talk about marriage counseling, we need to acknowledge that many people experience divorce. Over the course of almost 34 years of doing counseling, I have worked with many loving, committed and capable people who wanted nothing more than a happy, lifelong marriage but nonetheless have experienced divorce. Catholic Charities counseling services are also available to help people move through the pain of a divorce toward healing and wholeness.

Catholic Charities counseling services are offered throughout the diocese, in Winona, Rochester, Owatonna, Austin, Albert Lea, Mankato, and Worthington. Anyone interested in more information about marriage counseling, fees, and insurance questions can call any of our offices. Catholic Charities also offers a sliding fee scale for people without insurance. You can also visit the Catholic Charities web site. www.ccwinona.org, for more information.

Pope Francis described the richness of marriage and of family life when he wrote, "In the family we learn solidarity, how to share, to discern, to walk ahead with each others problems, to fight and to make up, to argue and to embrace and to kiss." We cannot promise a consultation with Pope Francis to anyone who makes an appointment at Catholic Charities, but our counseling staff is an experienced and compassionate group. We will do all we can to help any couple that comes to us reclaim the bond they felt with each other when they looked into each others eyes in front of God and everyone and said, "I do."

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