

Building a good marriage means construction without blueprints

By David Gibson
NC News Service

People say that it takes two to "build" a marriage. And there is truth in that.

But the process for constructing a solid marriage is rather unique. There is no step-by-step architectural blueprint to follow; no finished model of a "completed" product.

Twenty years after the wedding day, most couples would probably admit that in many ways their marriages "look" much different than they would have imagined. The blueprint they might have drawn 20 years earlier would not have included many developments that have occurred and that have contributed to making their marriage uniquely theirs.

Of course, certain aspects of marriage are fairly predictable. There are certain tasks that must be carried out as couples establish a life together and a home, for example. But, as time passes, many couples discover that the way these tasks have come to be performed is not as they would have predicted.

Perhaps their blueprint wouldn't have revealed which marriage partner would ultimately take responsibility for making sure the household bills are paid on time and that the checkbook is balanced. Perhaps, based on their blueprint, they couldn't have foreseen which partner would do most of the cooking, sweep the floors, wash the car or mow the lawn. For there is no marriage rule book with a formula that works for everyone when it comes to deciding which marriage partner will do these things.

The record will show that many couples have taken years to get comfortable with the way each partner handles money and to establish patterns each is relatively compati-

ble with when it comes to handling their expenses. This can be an ongoing challenge in marriage.

And the record shows that many couples work out one approach to household work in the early stages of their marriage, only to change and adapt it in many ways over the years.

In fact the record will show that time — the passage of weeks, or months, or years — can be a real friend of marriage. Over the course of time some things fall into place and new perspectives emerge in a marriage. The marriage begins in certain ways to "look" a little different than one would have imagined.

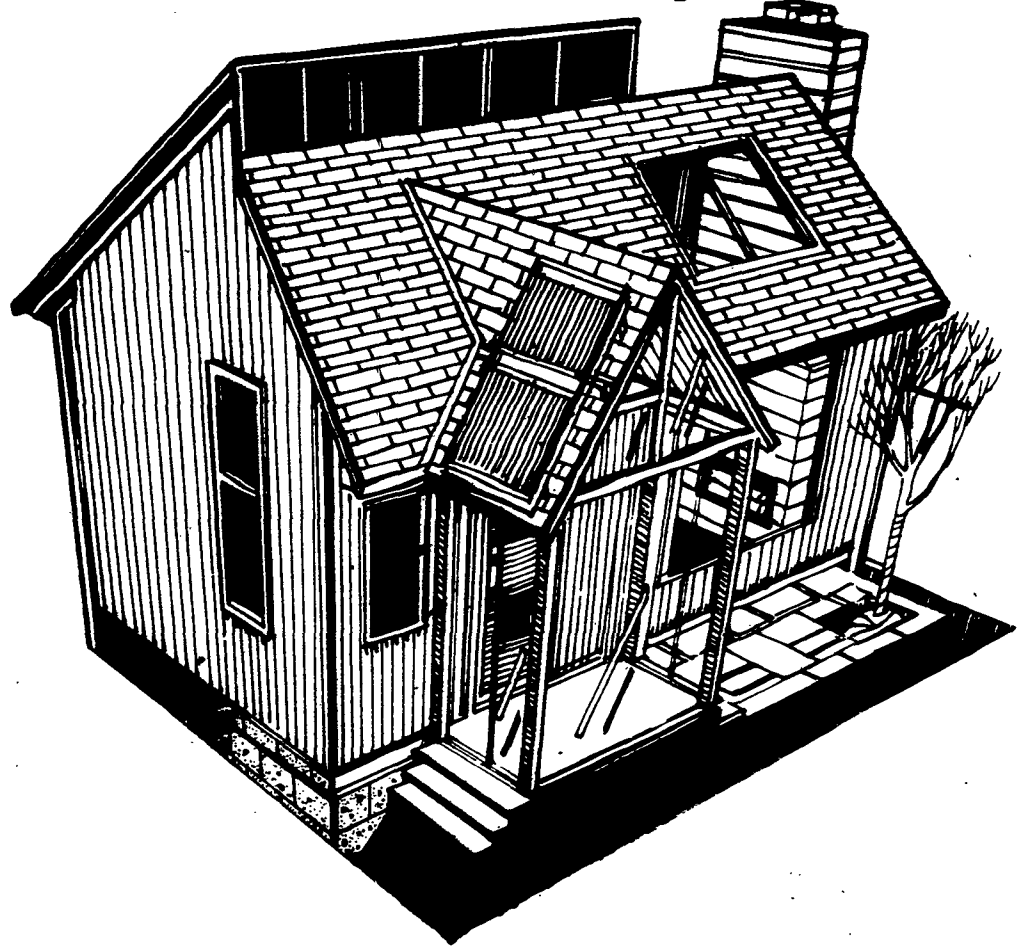
Then there are all the unexpected occurrences that influence people's lives and make an impact on their marriages. A period of joblessness, for example, can make a lasting impact on a couple.

Again, it would be hard to predict on one's wedding day how each partner will handle and be influenced by the lengthy illness of a parent.

And it is even hard to predict on the wedding day how each partner will feel and react to growing older — to entering his or her 40s, or 50s, or 60s.

Couples can't predict on their wedding day who their closest friends will be or how they'll prefer to pass their leisure time 20 years hence. They can't predict how each partner will react if one develops a desire to return to the university for further education, or if one wants to make a complete change of careers.

All these questions and developments can contribute to the shape of a couple's marriage. In a sense, couples learn — and then they re-learn again and again — how to live together.



But the fact that there is no finished marriage model to follow right down to the last detail on one's wedding day is not the bad side of marriage. This is not an article about the sorry plight of marriage.

Many couples would testify that their marriages have grown even more interesting over the years as they tried — imperfectly, perhaps, but with commitment — to meet the new challenges in their-life together.

Book puts forth unconvincing case for changing canons on marriage

Twenty-Third Publications (Mystic, Conn., 1985) 140 pp., \$8.95

Reviewed by Richard Doerflinger
NC News Service

This small volume by a professor of theology at Creighton University attempts an historical overview of Church traditions on marriage, with special attention to the problem suggested by the title: the distinction between secular and Christian marriage.

Lawler disagrees with current Church law,

which states that every valid marriage contract between baptized persons is also a sacrament. He favors an experiment begun in the early 1970s in the French Diocese of Autun. Church authorities stopped the experiment in which engaged couples were given a choice among strictly civil marriage, sacramental marriage celebrated in the Church, or a "welcomed civil marriage" in which the Church receives and blesses a couple who have stated that they do not believe in sacramental marriage.

Lawler thinks that this approach addresses a serious pastoral problem because a great many baptized Catholics have never made a personal act of faith. One may wonder whether this is true, and whether such lifelong atheists will take much interest in whether the Catholic Church wishes to bless their marriages.

Lawler's theological argument for his view is that sacraments are not validly received by adults except in a personal act of faith. His treatment seems to oversimplify Catholic sacramental theology, which strongly emphasizes the objective reality of grace and speaks of sacraments as being received "validly but unworthily" when the recipient's disposition is marred by serious sin or wrong belief.

It is also unclear what kind of faith should be seen as necessary for reception of the sacrament of marriage: Is it belief in God and Christ, in marriage itself as a sacrament, in the full range of Catholic doctrine? The last two of these would exclude baptized Protestant believers from sacramental marriage.

Finally Lawler argues that recognizing valid but nonsacramental marriages for some of the baptized will allow the Church to exalt true Christian marriage among committed believers to its rightful place as a prophet symbol of Christ's indissoluble covenant with his people.

In my view, this argument is weakened

when Lawler proceeds to argue that the Church should allow divorce and remarriage for believers who had entered such sacramental marriages. In part, this latter position is based on Lawler's view that the sacramentality (and hence indissolubility) of marriage is infinitely variable, depending on the degree of personal union achieved by the couple.

This view may dissolve many pastoral problems — one is tempted to say the only people obliged to retain their marriage bond would be those who want to anyway — but seems too facile and did not convince this reader.

Lawler touches upon other problems in the history of Christian marriage — for example, the relative priorities of procreation and personal union as ends of marriage — and gives some thoughtful observations on the ideal of Christian married life. As in the rest of the book, however, one has the feeling of running through an outline for a larger work.

Because Lawler's arguments are not allowed to benefit from serious confrontation with opposing arguments, they are ultimately unsatisfying. But the author presents his views in an appealing way, and is clearly interested in showing that certain changes he favors in canon law need not be seen as departures from the Church's rich doctrinal traditions.

Doerflinger is assistant director of the Office for Pro-Life Activities, National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

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