

Making the early years of marriage memorable

By David M. Thomas
NC News Service

My research into the complexities of married life suggests that there are two kinds of couples. One kind smiles when thinking back on their early years of marriage; the other kind frowns.

For married couples, the first years of marriage are very significant, not only for what they reveal or conceal, but also for the patterns established as the marital journey begins.

What's frightening about those years is that they are often experienced without outside help or companionship. How common it is for newlyweds to pack up their wedding presents in a U-Haul trailer and move to a distant destination.

Typical are the couples who find themselves "alone" during the first year of marriage. This is not entirely negative. New space can provide a special environment for establishing a new life, a new home and a new pattern of relating that can be the foundation for a healthy marriage.

But some find being alone more a threat than a benefit. Ties with our families of

origin may not easily be severed. Eventually, our spouses may even be viewed as those terrible people who took us away from all that we cherished.

In such situations, the couple may experience difficulty, because something that happened after the honeymoon brought uninvited challenges and predicaments. Where good will and courage remain, these couples can help themselves and be helped by others.

Conscious of the great number of divorces that occur during the first years of marriage, the Church is beginning to create programs and support for these couples.

A good number of dioceses and parishes now have specific opportunities for new couples who want to enrich their relationships. A research study on this topic has been published by Abbey Press (St. Meinrad, Ind. 47577). Entitled *Newly Married Ministry*, this book outlines the basic components of this new ministry and provides suggestions for creating helpful programs.

It is important to alert couples to the "normal" stresses and strains of marriage,

according to the study. If newlyweds naively bought the "happily ever after" myth of romantic love, they would not be prepared to confront the normal feelings of frustration and loneliness that occur in virtually every marriage.

Another area of concern for newlyweds is the need to go beneath surface appearances to define the substance of a new marriage. The period before the wedding often becomes a time of "putting your best foot forward," because neither member of the engaged couple wants to threaten the relationship. We can argue forever about the need to be honest in all matters, but our words may well fly into the wind, since few of us are able to be deeply candid in self-revelation.

Communication skills are an essential acquisition for newly married couples. A good marriage enrichment program can help newlyweds to a promising start at effective verbal exchanges.

Newlyweds must also consider the practical issues of money management,

career planning and household maintenance. Once the more glamorous aspects of marriage have been put in perspective, it's time to seek a deeper spiritual and theological understanding of marriage as well.

In general, all those topics and skills instilled by good marriage preparation programs can now be repeated, with a successful outcome more likely. Of course, anyone in the business will tell you it is much easier to get couples to participate in a marriage preparation program than a marriage enrichment program. Too bad, I say, for once such couples begin, most of them would probably love it.

As the Church becomes more sensitive to the real needs of married couples, it will create better opportunities for newlyweds to enhance and deepen the bonds of their marriages. After all, such enrichment is in the best interests of the Church.

The mature life of love lived by all its members is the most important ingredient for the development of the Church as a community in love with life — which fosters more than all else a life of deep love.

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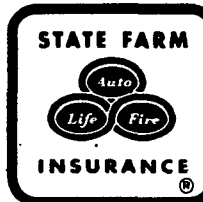
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