

Panel discussion: Newness of Christian life experienced in marriage: fruitful love!

PAULA AND JOSEPH (Ireland)

Joseph: We are overwhelmed by the beauty and diversity here today in this room and we are humbled by the fact that you speak better English than we do. So, just to say “hello” in our native tongue, we’ll say in Irish “*Dia dhiobh*”.

Paula: That means ‘God be with you’, and the response to that is: “*Dia is Mhuire dhiobh*” which means ‘God and Mary be with you’.

Joseph: In the next ten minutes or so, we hope to share with you what we have discovered through our marriage. I will start off by telling you a bit about myself. I was born in Belfast in Northern Ireland during the difficult times of the conflict. People were getting killed. I lost my grandfather in the conflict. Friends’ fathers were killed. There was an absence of love in the environment in which I grew up. God for me was a mechanical God. I was brought to church by my parents and I learned about God through the educational system, but love was not really there for me. I tried to find love in different places through sex before marriage, through drugs and through bad behaviour. These are some of the challenges and difficulties I had, and this came into my marriage as well.

Paula: Other things that we both know is that when we actually met as a couple we had both already met God through different movements. Joseph was involved in the Cursillo Movement which really led him to knowledge of God. Through the chaplaincy at university I became firm in my faith in God. I have to say to the people from Nicaragua that during the summer at university I used to go to Nicaragua with teams of young people and that is where the vibrancy of God came into my life. One of the pieces of scripture that really reflects the beginning of our relationship is that “a three-stranded cord is not easily broken” (*Ecclesiastes* 4:12). Both Joseph and I had a relationship with God, and it was a case of bringing my relationship with God and Joseph’s relationship with God together in this one cord. In many ways what was important for us was that we both came to our relationship with a knowledge of God. We met each other through Christian friends who were prepared to introduce us to each other. I think that it is important that

in our communities we help and facilitate relationships to happen. We have heard a lot about giving and receiving love, and when we think about love we think about forgiveness. Both of us in our past have had issues and things that have happened. If we agree that love embodies forgiveness, then when we come together with this knowledge of love, we have to forgive each other for what happened in the past. Sometimes in other groups that I look at, people have an ideal of what Mr Right or Ms Right is going to be like. We have to lose that idea and remember that we are all human. We are all flawed. In order to truly love we need to take people as they are and forgive them and love them.

Joseph: When we were engaged, we had a new vibrancy in the faith. We made a commitment that we would try to live in chastity before we were married. Being a man, it is the most difficult thing I have ever done in my life. However, God was there through it all and gave me strength. When I got married I experienced the sacrament. We were taught in school that a sacrament is a visible sign of God's grace. I experienced for the first time that God valued me. Until then I had been like a dirty 50 euro note. If I were to offer you a 50 euro note, would you take it? If I spat on it, rubbed it in dirt and tore it up, would you take it? Maybe not. In marriage Paula forgave me my sins and took me as I was, and I felt worthy again. Paula gave me love and hope. That encouraged me to be chaste during our engagement and also to take it into marriage and share this together.

Paula: We were talking about the process leading up to our wedding day with our Filipino friends yesterday. Sometimes in our relationships a lot of pressures come from outside. As soon as you start going out together people ask when you are going to get engaged, and as soon as you are engaged they ask when you are getting married. As soon as you are married the question is when are you going to have children. We asked our Filipino friends who have two children if this ever stops and they said that no, that people keep asking when they are going to produce a boy. It does not seem to stop. We need to appreciate the space given by the engagement period. It is about learning to come together and not just about buying the wedding dress and planning the wedding day. In the lead-up to our wedding we tried to help people focus on the spiritual aspect of the event and to emphasise that it was more important than a nice dinner afterwards. We were careful about choosing readings and getting as many people involved as possible in the ceremony. One of the readings we chose was from the book of Tobit. It tells the story of a woman who had been married many times, but her husbands all died on the wedding night. This was about the eighth marriage, and before going to bed that night they both prayed. One of the strong aspects of our relationship is intimacy in prayer. It is hard to pray together because you are so used to your relationship with God as an individual, and

then you bring this third person into the relationship of prayer life. A message I would like to convey is that you need to learn to be intimate in prayer before you become intimate in your sexual life.

Joseph: The question was: what have I discovered in marriage? Being a boy from Belfast, I had a mother who did my washing, ironing and who fed me. I discovered those things in marriage. On a deeper level I discovered that marriage is something amazing, something spiritual and heavenly. You can really feel Christ's presence in your relationship. In the early days of our marriage there were things I did wrong, for example, I gambled away two thousand pounds of our savings on soccer matches. I kept this a secret from my wife. It was eating me up inside. I went to my wife and spoke to her. She forgave me and helped me to stop gambling. That was great. It was like community helping me – like Christ helping me. Once again I felt forgiveness and encouragement. One of the challenges we are facing in our marriage is the question: when are you having children? We have been trying to have children for two years, and we are starting to wonder if God wants us to have children. It is a deep personal struggle that we have talked about. We find it emotional and feel like grieving when we think that we may not have children. One thing that could help us with this challenge could be if other Christian couples that have had this experience could share it with us. It is important to share experiences. It can be a lonely time if no one is sharing with you. We find it helpful to talk to other married couples.

Paula: We are just going to close with a little section from one of the readings at our wedding: “May you be blessed, Lord God of our fathers. May your holy and glorious name be blessed forever. May the heavens and all the creatures bless you. You created Adam and you gave him his wife Eve to be helper and companion so that from these two the human race might be born. You said that it is not good that man should be alone. Let us give him a companion who is like himself. Now Lord, I take my sister to myself in sincerity and love, not merely seeking pleasure. Have mercy on us and grant us a long life together. Amen.” (*Tobit 8: 5-7*).