

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

ANNE AND THOMAS (France)

Anne: Hello, everyone. We are very happy to tell our story. We thank you very much for giving us the opportunity to look back and think about this year of married life. We were married on 2 May 2009. That is almost a year ago. We met in 2005 when we were both 18. We got engaged in 2007. Now we are 22 and 23 years of age. We are presently coming to the end of our studies.

Thomas: We would like to deal with the following points:

- 1) What we discovered and learned during this first year of marriage, especially the need to get to know each other and the difficulties we came across in this area.
- 2) The way we deepened our relationship with God, and how we allowed God to question and transform our lives.
- 3) The changes in our relationship with others: the fact of being a couple, the fact of being together, what that changed in our relationship with others and what it changed in ourselves.

Anne: I shall begin with the need to get to know each other. This is an aspect that we worked on particularly during our engagement. We thank God that we received so much during our engagement. The Church provided us with very good preparation. We were advised to dedicate one hour per week just on ourselves, sitting together and doing nothing else besides talking to each other. We had a notebook with a topic to discuss each week which had a biblical quotation and some questions. In this way we could speak about our relationship with our families, our hopes in life and our convictions regarding faith. We discovered that our experiences of the faith were different because Thomas comes from a Christian family and I do not. We talked a lot about that point. Now, one thing that we try to maintain during our marriage is the time and space devoted entirely to just talking to each other. If we did not do this, there is a risk that we would live side by side but not live one for the other.

Thomas: We try to find times that are suitable for both of us. For example, Anne likes to talk at night before going to bed, but I do not. I feel that it would be better to sleep. We have to try to be attentive and sensitive to each other. During the past year, we made quite an interesting discovery thanks to a couple of friends. They recommended a book called, "The Five Love Languages" by Gary Chapman. He is an American marriage counsellor who gives guidelines for married life. He

identifies five love languages which speak to everyone: gifts, acts of service, touching, quality time and words of affirmation. Each person has the tendency to express his/her love in a certain way and expect that the other should express love in the same language. We read the book and discussed it. We realised that we did not automatically prefer the same language. This book is very good because it insists on the notion of choice in love. We choose to love. We choose to learn the other person's language in order to show him/her love in a way that will touch him/her particularly. Anne is especially aware of "quality time", those moments when the two of us are together for the sake of being together. I appreciate this, but it is not necessarily my favourite language. Anne loves when we go for walks together on Sunday afternoons, and things like that. It happens that my mother used to like that too when I was a child – and I was less enthusiastic – and so now it is not the first thing that I would choose to do as a couple. However, we try to take time to be together in order to help the other to grow and to demonstrate our love for each other.

Anne: We also happily met at a very young age when we were not involved in any particular professional venture. I found this of great help during our engagement and marriage, because I did not know what I wanted to do with my life, especially as regards profession. I had several aspirations that were more or less contradictory, and Thomas helped me to put them together and make the right choice. There were some jobs that interested me but that I excluded because I felt that they were not compatible with life as a wife and future mother. For example, those who are familiar with consulting firms will know that they involve long working hours when one regularly returns home at between ten o'clock and midnight. I was interested in this, but I dropped the idea.

Thomas: At the same time, while we were learning to get to know each other, we realised that this exchange, the fact of knowing each other better, could also be a source of difficulties. I am referring in particular to when one of the couple is having worries or troubles, this necessarily affects the other. Through marriage we are called to experience these times as a couple. It is a grace, but it can also be a difficulty for the other. Recently we had the case where Anne was looking for a work experience placement. The economic situation being what it is, it was hard to find a really professional position in Lyon so that we could stay together. She spent a lot of time searching and had many negative responses, and this was hard on her. I found it hard to adopt the right position in this regard. At times like this we should listen, but we immediately tend to give advice like, "you should do that", "you should send your CV there", "you should send it to more places". Advice is not bad in itself, but there is a risk you could end up by saying, "you did not follow my advice, so hard luck". We can completely lose the idea of listening. We can very quickly forget that we are striving to do it together. Moreover, apart from listening, we sometimes want to relativise: "It is only a work experience position", "Your life does not depend on it", "If worse comes to worst, you could find job experience in Paris. We would see each other less often, but that is not a huge problem". This creates misunderstandings. We found ourselves

in a position where I wanted to relativise, because it did not seem so serious and because I did not have the perception that I was directly involved. However, it was Anne's experience every day. She had so many rejections and she knew the time she was spending on it, so for her my attitude was hard to understand. This made us realise the need to be together, to listen, to learn to be with the other, to share our concerns and difficulties with each other.

Anne: Another challenge is to accept your spouse's faults. When the "love at first sight" period has passed, faults make themselves clearly seen. As there is not much time, I shall just make a rough caricature of what we are like. Imagine that Thomas is quite an impulsive person with not much patience, but who is very straightforward and has great integrity. I am more inclined to have the opposite faults. I repeat: this is a caricature. It can be seen when we go to parties. If we enter into a discussion with someone who holds different views, the two of us present our viewpoints. If I see that the person does not want to dialogue, I let it go. I go and speak to someone else. Thomas, on the other hand, is the kind who drives that kind of person into a corner on the subject and continues with the discussion until it becomes almost a bit too heavy. It is the kind of thing that could provoke tension between the couple if we do not have the same approach to faults and qualities. There is a risk that we could continue to reproach each other, and that is not charitable. Naturally, in marriage we want the other to be successful so that we are both successful. Therefore we encourage our spouse in order to help him/her along, but we must not exaggerate.

Thomas: Other causes of difficulties are all these questions about sexuality, the need to find a rhythm, to learn to adapt to the other, to try to reach out to the other. About our relationship with God...

Anne: Thomas is very attached to praying as a couple every night. Personally, this has helped me to progress in the faith because, as I said earlier, I do not come from a Christian family. Praying is more difficult for me than for Thomas. The fact that Thomas is so attached to this has encouraged me to pray and to get to know God better and to relate to God.

Thomas: In our search for God, we have always been lucky, in our preparation for marriage and in our group of young couples where we reflect on the role of sexuality in marriage. We were educated by our parents to be faithful and to be involved, but not particularly in the sacramental dimension of sexuality or in continence before marriage. We did not necessarily accept it in the way the Church encourages us. The fact of being with groups that help us to reflect shows us how to progress along this path. We are aware of the gift we have received and this helps our sexuality to be happier and to flourish.

Anne: The fact that we are still students means that we are postponing the desire to have a child immediately. Until now I have been taking the contraceptive pill. I have decided to stop because this has become inconsistent with my faith. Now we are in a period of continence so that we can learn to master natural methods of birth control.

Thomas: Finally, we shall speak of how we relate to others. The fact that we are a couple obliges us to have a certain kind of relationship with others, I would say. We have to exercise time management for two. Each person will have requests from friends. There is a risk of accepting invitations and of taking the other for granted. It is not very pleasant to return home to hear; “my friends are suggesting we go away for a weekend in three weeks time. We are going!”. It was not that the weekend in question was unpleasant, it is just that one would like to be consulted and not have the feeling that things are not being decided by the two of us. Now we try to work on this and to have a common agenda. We allow time so that each of us can give our opinion. We try to plan in advance.

Anne: Because of this approach, my single friends do not necessarily understand why I am not available twenty-four hours a day. Then, there is a final point that we think is important, and that is the importance of witnessing to our families and friends. In most cases, they are not so advanced in their choices and in their vocation. Most of all, we try not to have arguments in front of others and to give an impression of disharmony. It has not happened often, but once or twice we have argued in front of other people. We realised then that this caused us harm, not so much because we had quarrelled, but because we had given an image of discord between us while we really want to witness to the joy we experience in our marriage. Thank you very much.