



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

[Home](#) - [Saint Josemaria](#) - [Talking to God](#) - 10 questions about marriage

10 questions about marriage

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St Josemaria answers ten questions about love, marriage, engagement, faithfulness, raising children, the main values in achieving a united family, what happens when a couple can't have children...

- 1- [What are the most important values in Christian marriage?](#)
- 2- [Father, what is your advice for a newly-wed couple seeking holiness?](#)
- 3- [The theory that love justifies everything is current today and as a result, engagement is looked upon by some people as a sort of 'trial marriage'. People say that it is hypocritical and reactionary not to follow what they consider to be imperative demands of love. What do you think of this attitude?](#)
- 4- [What would you advise married women to do to ensure that their marriages continue to be happy with the passing of the years and that they do not give way to boredom? This question may not seem very important, but it is one asked by many people.](#)
- 5- [Disagreements between husband and wife are also frequent and sometimes they seriously upset family peace. What advice would you give to married couples in this respect?](#)
- 6- [Many married couples find themselves confused regarding the number of children that they should have. What advice would you give them?](#)
- 7- [There are some women who are afraid to tell their friends and relations that they are going to have another child. They fear the criticism of those who think that large families are old-fashioned. What would you say to us on the subject?](#)
- 8- [The frustration caused by not being able to have children leads, at times, to](#)

discord and misunderstanding. In your opinion, what meaning should Christian couples who are childless give to their married life?

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10- You have just spoken about family unity as a great value. In the light of this fact, how is it that Opus Dei does not organize activities of spiritual formation for husbands and wives together?

Questions et réponses

1. What are the most important values in Christian marriage?

The majority of the members of Opus Dei are married people, so in this field I can speak from the experience of many years of priestly activity in many countries. For the married members of Opus Dei human love and marriage duties are part of their divine vocation. Opus Dei has made of marriage a divine way, a vocation, and this has many consequences for personal holiness and for apostolate. I have spent almost forty years preaching the vocational meaning of marriage. More than once I have had occasion to see faces light up as men and women, who had thought that in their lives a dedication to God was incompatible with a noble and pure human love, heard me say that marriage is a divine path on earth!

The purpose of marriage is to help married people sanctify themselves and others. For this reason they receive a special grace in the sacrament which Jesus Christ instituted. Those who are called to the married state will, with the grace of God, find within their state everything they need to be holy, to identify themselves each day more with Jesus Christ, and to lead those with whom they live to God.

That is why I always look upon Christian homes with hope and affection, upon all the families which are the fruit of the Sacrament of Matrimony. They are a shining witness of the great divine mystery of Christ's loving union with His Church which St. Paul calls *sacramentum magnum*, a great sacrament (Eph 5:32). We must strive so that these cells of Christianity may be born and may develop with a desire for holiness, conscious of the fact that the Sacrament of Initiation — Baptism — confers on all Christians a divine mission that each must fulfill in his or her own walk of life.

Christian couples should be aware that they are called to sanctify themselves and

to sanctify others, that they are called to be apostles and that their first apostolate is in the home. They should understand that founding a family, educating their children, and exercising a Christian influence in society, are supernatural tasks. The effectiveness and the success of their life — their happiness — depends to a great extent on their awareness of their specific mission.

But they mustn't forget that the secret of married happiness lies in everyday things, not in daydreams. It lies in finding the hidden joy of coming home in the evening, in affectionate relations with their children, in the everyday work in which the whole family cooperates; in good humor in the face of difficulties that should be met with a sporting spirit; in making the best use of all the advantages that civilization offers to help us rear children, to make the house pleasant and life more simple.

I constantly tell those who have been called by God to form a home to love one another always, to love each other with the love of their youth. Anyone who thinks that love ends when the worries and difficulties that life brings with it begin, has a poor idea of marriage, which is a sacrament and an ideal and a vocation. It is precisely then that love grows strong. Torrents of worries and difficulties are incapable of drowning true love, because people who sacrifice themselves generously together are brought closer by their sacrifice. As Scripture says, *aquae multae*, a host of difficulties, physical and moral, *non potuerunt extinguere caritatem*, cannot extinguish love (Cant 8:7).

[Conversations, 91](#)

2. [Father, what is your advice for a newly-wed couple seeking holiness?](#)

First, love each other very much, in accordance with God's law. Second, don't be afraid of life; love each other's defects as long as they don't offend God; and, for the wife: don't neglect the way you look, because you're no longer your own! You've been told, and you know it's true, that you belong to your husband, and he belongs to you. Don't let anyone steal him from you! He is a soul who should go to Heaven with you, and what's more, who should give real Christian quality, and human quality, to the children God sends you. Pray together. Not a lot, but a little every day. When you forget, he can remind you, and when he forgets, you remind him. Don't scold him when he does something wrong, and don't nag.

Colegio Tabancura, Chile, July 1974

3. The theory that love justifies everything is current today and as a result, engagement is looked upon by some people as a sort of 'trial marriage'. People say that it is hypocritical and reactionary not to follow what they consider to be imperative demands of love. What do you think of this attitude?

Any decent person, and especially a Christian, would consider it an attitude unworthy of men. It debases human love, confusing it with selfishness and pleasure.

Reactionary? Who are the reactionaries? The real reactionaries are the people who go back to the jungle, recognizing no impulse other than instinct. Engagement should be time for growing in affection and for getting to know each other better. As in every school of love, it should be inspired, not by a desire to receive, but by a spirit of giving, of understanding, of respect and gentle consideration. Just over a year ago, with this in mind, I gave the University of Navarra a statue of the Virgin Mary, Mother of Fair Love, so that the undergraduates who study there might learn from her the nobility of love, human love included.

A trial marriage? How little anyone who uses the term knows about love! Love is a much surer, more real, more human reality. It cannot be treated as a commercial product that is tested and then accepted or rejected on the basis of whim, comfort and interest.

This lack of moral standards is so pitiful that it does not even seem necessary to condemn people who think or act in this way. They condemn themselves to the barrenness, the sadness, the desolate loneliness they will suffer within a very few years. I never stop praying for them, loving them with all my heart and trying to make them understand that the way back to Christ is always open. They can be saints, upright Christians, if they make an effort. They will lack neither the necessary grace nor our Lord's pardon. Only then will they really understand love — divine Love and also noble human love. And only then will they experience peace, happiness and fruitfulness.

Conversations, 91

4. What would you advise married women to do to ensure that their marriages continue to be happy with the passing of the years and that they do not give way to boredom? This question may not seem very important, but it is one asked by many people.

I think it is in fact an important question and therefore the possible solutions are also important even though they may seem very obvious. If a marriage is to preserve its initial charm and beauty, both husband and wife should try to renew their love day after day, and that is done through sacrifice, with smiles and also with ingenuity. Is it surprising that a husband who arrives home tired from work begins to lose patience when his wife keeps on and on about everything she thinks has gone wrong during the day? Disagreeable things can wait for a better moment when the husband is less tired and more disposed to listen to them.

Another important thing is personal appearance. And I would say that any priest who says the contrary is a bad adviser. As years go by a woman who lives in the world has to take more care not only of her interior life, but also of her looks. Her interior life itself requires her to be careful about her personal appearance; naturally this should always be in keeping with her age and circumstances. I often say jokingly that older facades need more restoration. It is the advice of a priest. An old Spanish saying goes: 'A well-groomed woman keeps her husband away from other doors.'

That is why I am not afraid to say that women are responsible for eighty per cent of the infidelities of their husbands because they do not know how to win them each day and take loving and considerate care of them. A married woman's attention should be centered on her husband and children, as a married man's attention should be centered on his wife and children. Much time and effort is required to succeed in this, and anything which militates against it is bad and should not be tolerated.

There is no excuse for not fulfilling this lovable duty. Work outside the home is not an excuse. Not even one's life of piety can be an excuse, because if it is incompatible with one's daily obligations, it is not good, nor pleasing to God. A married woman's first concern has to be her home. There is a Spanish saying which goes: 'If through going to church to pray a woman burns the stew, she may be half an angel, but she's half a devil too.' I'd say she was a fully-fledged devil.

Conversations, 107

5. Disagreements between husband and wife are also frequent and sometimes they seriously upset family peace. What advice would you give to married couples in this respect?

I would advise them to love one another and to realize that although disagreements and difficulties will crop up throughout their lives, if they are solved with ordinary common sense they can even contribute to the deepening of their love.

We each have our own character, our personal tastes, our moods — sometimes our bad moods — and our defects. But we all have likeable aspects in our personality as well, and for this reason, and many others, everyone can be loved. It is possible to live happily together when everyone tries to correct their own defects and makes an effort to overlook the faults of others. That is to say, when there is love which cancels out and overcomes everything that might seem to be a motive for coldness or disagreement. On the other hand, if husband and wife dramatize their little differences and reproach each other for their defects and mistakes, they put an end to peace and run the risk of killing their love.

Couples have the grace of the married state — the grace they receive in the Sacrament of Marriage — which enables them to live out all the human and Christian virtues in their married life: understanding, good humor, patience, forgiveness, good manners and consideration in their mutual relations. The important thing is not to give up the effort, not to give in to irritation, pride or personal fads or obsessions. In order to achieve this, husbands and wives must develop their interior life and learn from the Holy Family the best way to practice the virtues of a Christian home, for both supernatural and human reasons. I repeat again that God's grace will not be lacking.

Anyone who says they cannot put up with this or that, or finds it impossible to hold their peace, is exaggerating in order to justify themselves. We should ask God for the strength to overcome our whims and to practice self-control. When we lose our temper, we lose control of the situation. Words can become harsh and bitter, and we end up by offending, wounding and hurting, even though we didn't mean to.

We should all learn to keep quiet, to wait and say things in a positive, optimistic way. When her husband loses his temper, the moment has arrived for the wife to be especially patient until he calms down, and vice versa. If there is true love and a real desire to deepen it, it will very rarely happen that the two give in to bad temper at the same time.

Another very important thing is to get used to the fact that we are never a hundred per cent right. In fact one can say that in matters like these, which are usually so debatable, the surer we are of being completely right, the more doubtful it is that

we really are.

Following this line of reasoning makes it easier to correct oneself later on and if necessary to beg pardon, which is the best way of ending a quarrel. In this way peace and love are regained. I am not encouraging you to quarrel but it is understandable that we should fall out at times with those we love most, because they are the people we are always with. We are not going to fall out with someone in Timbuktu! Thus small rows between husband and wife, as long as they are not too frequent, (and they should see to it that they are not) are not a sign that love is lacking; and in fact they can help to increase it.

Finally, I would advise parents never to quarrel in front of their children. They can remind each other of this with a certain word, a look or a gesture. If they cannot avoid the argument altogether they can, at least, put it off till later when they are calmer. The family atmosphere should be one of peace between husband and wife because peace is a necessary condition for deep and effective character training. Children should see in their parents an example of dedication, sincere love, mutual help and understanding. The small trifles of daily life should not be allowed to hide from them the reality of a love that is capable of overcoming all obstacles.

Sometimes we take ourselves too seriously. Each of us gets angry now and again. Sometimes because it is necessary; other times because we lack a spirit of mortification. The important thing is to show, with a smile that restores family warmth, that these outbursts of anger do not destroy affection. In a word, the lives of husband and wife should consist in loving one another and loving their children, because by doing this they love God.

Conversations, 108

6. Many married couples find themselves confused regarding the number of children that they should have. What advice would you give them?

Married couples should remember, when they receive advice and recommendations on this matter, that what they have to do is to discover what God wants of them. With sincerity, a right intention, and a minimum of Christian formation, our conscience knows how to discover God's will in this sphere as in others. There are cases in which we seek advice that will favor our own selfishness, and suppress with its apparent authority the voice of our inner convictions. Then we even go from adviser to adviser until we find a 'benevolent'

one. This is a pharisaical attitude which is unworthy of a child of God.

The advice of another Christian and especially a priest's advice, in questions of faith or morals, is a powerful help for knowing what God wants of us in our particular circumstances. Advice, however, does not eliminate personal responsibility. In the end, it is we ourselves, each one of us on our own, who have to decide for ourselves and personally to account to God for our decisions.

Over and above any private advice stands God's law, which is contained in sacred Scripture, guarded and taught by the Magisterium of the Church with the assistance of the Holy Spirit. When a particular piece of advice contradicts God's word as taught by the Magisterium, we have to reject it decisively. God will give His grace to those who act with an upright intention. He will inspire them as to what to do and, when necessary, He will enable them to find a priest who knows how to lead their souls along pure and right paths even though at times they may be difficult ones.

Spiritual guidance should not be used to turn people into beings with no judgment of their own, who limit themselves to carrying out mechanically what others tell them. On the contrary, it should tend to develop men with their own Christian standards. This requires maturity, firm convictions, sufficient doctrinal knowledge, a refined spirit and an educated will.

It is important for married people to acquire a clear sense of the dignity of their vocation. They must know that they have been called by God not only to human love but also to a divine love, through their human love. It is important for them to realize that they have been chosen from all eternity to cooperate with the creative power of God by having and then bringing up children. Our Lord asks them to make their home and their entire family life a testimony of all the Christian virtues.

I shall never tire of repeating that marriage is a great and marvelous divine path. Like everything divine in us, it calls for response to grace, generosity, dedication and service. Selfishness, in whatever shape or form, is opposed to the love of God which ought to govern our lives. This is a fundamental point which one must always bear in mind with regard to marriage and the number of children.

Conversations, 93

7. There are some women who are afraid to tell their friends and relations that they are going to have another child. They fear the criticism of those who think

that large families are old-fashioned. What would you say to us on the subject?

I bless parents who, joyfully accepting the mission that God entrusts to them, have many children. Moreover, I ask married couples not to block the well-springs of life and I invite them to have enough supernatural outlook and courage to bring up a large family, if it is God's will.

When I praise large families, I do not refer to those which are the result of mere physiological relations. I refer to families founded on the practice of human virtues, which have a high regard for personal dignity and know that giving children to God consists not only of engendering their natural life but also undertaking the lengthy task of raising them. Giving them life comes first, but it is not everything.

There may be particular cases in which God's will, which shows itself in ordinary ways, is precisely that a family be small. Nevertheless, the theories that make birth control an ideal, or a universal or general duty, are criminal, anti-Christian and humanly degrading.

To appeal to a presumed post-conciliar spirit opposed to large families would be to adulterate and pervert Christian doctrine. The Second Vatican Council has proclaimed that 'especially worthy of mention among the married people who fulfill the mission entrusted to them by God, are those who, with prudent mutual agreement, generously accept a more numerous offspring to educate worthily' (Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 50). Moreover, Pope Paul VI, in an address on 12 February 1966, commented 'that the recently concluded Second Vatican Council should diffuse among Christian couples a spirit of generosity in order to increase the new People of God... that they should always remember that this expansion of God's kingdom and the possibilities of the Church's penetration among mankind in order to bring about eternal salvation and the salvation of the world are also entrusted to their generosity'.

The number is not in itself the decisive factor. The fact of having few or many children does not on its own make a family more or less Christian. What matters is the integrity and honesty with which married life is lived. True mutual love transcends the union of husband and wife and extends to its natural fruits — the children. Selfishness, on the contrary, sooner or later reduces love to a mere satisfaction of instinct and destroys the bond which unites parents and children.

I was saying that, in itself, the number of children is not a decisive factor. Nevertheless, I see clearly that attacks on large families stem from a lack of Faith. They are the product of a social atmosphere which is incapable of understanding

generosity, trying to conceal selfishness, and unmentionable practices under apparently altruistic motives. Paradoxically, the countries where most birth control propaganda is found, and which impose birth control on other countries, are the very ones which have attained a higher standard of living. Perhaps their economic and social arguments in favor of birth control could be taken more seriously if they led them to give away a sizeable part of their great wealth to those in need.

Until then it will be hard not to think that the real motive behind their arguments is hedonism and ambition for political domination, for demographic neo-colonialism.

I am not unaware of the great problems facing humanity, nor of the actual difficulties which a particular family can confront. I often think of this and my fatherly heart, which I have to have as a Christian and as a priest, is filled with compassion. Nevertheless, it is not lawful to look for the solution in this direction.

Conversations, 94

8. The frustration caused by not being able to have children leads, at times, to discord and misunderstanding. In your opinion, what meaning should Christian couples who are childless give to their married life?

In the first place I would tell them that they should not give up hope too easily. They should ask God to give them children and, if it is His Will, to bless them as He blessed the Patriarchs of the Old Testament. And then it would be good for both of them to see a good doctor. If in spite of everything God does not give them children, they should not regard themselves as being thwarted. They should be happy, discovering in this very fact God's Will for them. Often God does not give children because He is asking them for something more.

God asks them to put the same effort and the same kind and gentle dedication into helping their neighbors as they would have put into raising their children, without the human joy that comes from having children. There is, then, no reason for feeling they are failures or for giving way to sadness.

If the married couple have interior life, they will understand that God is urging them to make their lives a generous Christian service, a different apostolate from the one they would have fulfilled with their children, but an equally marvelous one.

If they look around they will discover people who need help, charity and love. There are, moreover, many apostolic tasks in which they can work. If they give themselves generously to others and forget themselves, if they put their hearts

into their work, they will be wonderfully fruitful and will experience a spiritual parenthood that will fill their souls with true peace.

The particular way of doing this may vary in each case, but in the last analysis it is a matter of being concerned for others with a sense of loving service. God, who always rewards, will fill with a deep joy those souls who have had the generous humility of not thinking of themselves.

Conversations, 96

9. There are couples who separate, in degrading and unbearable conditions. In these cases it is difficult for them to accept the indissolubility of the marriage bond. Those who find themselves in these situations complain that they are denied the possibility of building a new home. What answer would you give to people in such a situation?

While understanding their suffering, I would tell them that they can also see in their situation God's Will, which is never cruel, for God is a loving Father. The situation may be especially difficult for some time, but if they go to our Lord and His blessed Mother, they will receive the help of grace.

The indissolubility of marriage is not a caprice of the Church nor is it merely a positive ecclesiastical law. It is a precept of natural law, of divine law, and responds perfectly to our nature and to the supernatural order of grace. For these reasons, in the great majority of cases, indissolubility is an indispensable condition for the happiness of married couples and for the spiritual security of their children. Even in the very sad cases we are talking about, the humble acceptance of God's Will always brings with it a profound sense of satisfaction that nothing can substitute. It is not merely a refuge, or a consolation, it is the very essence of Christian life.

If women who are separated from their husbands have children in their care, they should understand that their children continue to need their loving motherly devotion, and especially now, to make up for the deficiencies of a divided home. They should make a generous effort to understand that indissolubility, which for them means sacrifice, is a safeguard for the integrity and unity of the great majority of families and ennobles the parent's love and prevents the abandonment of the children.

Surprise at the apparent hardness of the Christian precept of indissolubility is nothing new. The Apostles were surprised when Jesus confirmed it. It can seem a

burden, a yoke, but Christ Himself said that His yoke was sweet and his burden light.

On the other hand, although recognizing the inevitable hardship of a good many situations, which often could and should have been avoided, we should be careful not to overdramatize. Is the life of a woman in these circumstances really harder than that of other maltreated women, or of people who suffer any of the other great physical or mental sorrows that life brings with it?

What really makes a person unhappy and even destroys a whole society is the frenzied search for well-being and the attempt to eliminate, at all costs, all difficulties and hardships. Life has many facets, very different situations. Some are harsh, others may seem easy. Each situation brings its own grace. Each one is a special call from God, a new opportunity to work and to give the divine testimony of Charity. I would advise those who feel oppressed by a difficult situation to try to forget about their own problems a bit and concern themselves with the problems of others. If they do this they will have more peace and, above all, they will sanctify themselves.

Conversations, 97

10. [You have just spoken about family unity as a great value. In the light of this fact, how is it that Opus Dei does not organize activities of spiritual formation for husbands and wives together?](#)

In this, as in so many other aspects of life, Christians can choose different solutions in accordance with their own preferences or opinions, and no one may impose an exclusive system upon them. We would flee like the plague from that approach to pastoral work and the apostolate in general which seems to be no more than a revised and enlarged edition, in religious life, of the one party system.

I know that there are Catholic groups that organize retreats and other formative activities for married couples. I have no objection whatever to their doing what they think is best nor to people taking part in their activities if they find that they help them live their Christian vocation better. But I do not consider this to be the only way of doing things and it is by no means self evident that it is the best.

There are many facets of Christian life in which married couples, and in fact, the whole family can, and sometimes should, take part together, such as the Mass and other acts of worship. I think, nevertheless, that certain activities of spiritual

formation are more effective if they are attended separately by husband and wife. For one thing, it highlights the fundamentally personal character of one's own sanctification, of the ascetic struggle, of union with God. These certainly affect others, but the role of the individual conscience in them is vital and irreplaceable. Furthermore, it makes it easier to suit the formation given to the particular needs, circumstances and psychology of each person. This does not mean to say that in these activities the fact that the participants are married is disregarded; nothing could be further removed from the spirit of Opus Dei.

For forty years I have been preaching and writing that each person has to sanctify himself or herself in ordinary life, in the concrete situations of every day. Married people, therefore, have to sanctify themselves by living their family obligations perfectly. One of the aims of the retreats and other means of formation organized by Opus Dei for married men or women is to make them more fully aware of the dignity of their vocation to marriage and help them prepare themselves, with the grace of God, to live it better.

In many aspects the demands which married love makes on men and on women are different and their love shows itself in different ways. With specific means of formation they can be helped effectively to discover these details of love in their daily lives. In this way, separation for a few hours or a few days will, in the long run, make them more united and help them to love each other more and better than they did before, with a love full of respect.

I repeat that we do not claim that our way of acting in this is the only good one, or that it should be adopted by everyone. It simply seems to me that it gives very good results and that there are strong reasons — as well as long experience — for doing things this way, but I do not take issue with the contrary opinion.

Furthermore, I would add that if in Opus Dei we adopt this procedure in certain types of spiritual formation, nevertheless in numerous other activities married couples, as such, participate and cooperate. I am thinking, for example, of the work which is done with the parents of pupils in schools conducted by members of Opus Dei, in the meetings, lectures etc., especially arranged for the parents of students who live in halls of residence run by the Work.

So you see, when the type of activity requires the presence of the married couple, husband and wife both take part. But these types of meetings and activities are different from those that are directed towards personal spiritual training.

Conversations, 99

See further: the chapter on marriage in the [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#).