



## FORGIVENESS IN THE COUPLE

### “It is so hard to say I am sorry”

*René & Vee Pols*

#### **VEE**

When we were asked to write a testimony about the way we live forgiveness in our marriage, we felt very inadequate because we struggle to say “I am sorry” to one another. So we thought we should reflect on what has kept us together since our wedding day 48 years ago.

#### **We as Sacrament:**

We started our journey with a Nuptial Mass that gave witness to our belief that God would always be there for us and our family. Gradually, we have come to understand that love and forgiveness are cornerstones of our relationship; our Sacrament of Matrimony. When we allow God into our lives, we open our hearts to love and when we exclude God, forgiveness becomes much more difficult. It all seems so simple. Why then is it so difficult for us to forgive, especially when bleak and sad times have caused us to seriously doubt if we made the right decision to live together ‘until death do us part’.

#### **All relationships have highs and lows:**

One such bleak time in our relationship was when our 5 boys were teenagers; a particularly demanding time both physically and emotionally. Rene was busy with work and I was busy working part-time and caring for the family. There was little energy to spend time together and, I often felt frustrated, lonely and sad. During a **sit down** we started to talk about our sexual relationship which was not going well and we realised it had become more like a duty or a need rather than an experience of joyful intimacy. We knew we had been avoiding talking about this; after all, in other ways, life was good and we had survived times like this before. Both of us were tense and unsure about what to say but we knew that we needed to talk and we felt secure in our awareness that Jesus is part of our relationship. This made it possible for us to focus on the goodness in each other and to decide to trust the other and share more deeply.

I said I often felt that I needed to curl up inside my shell like a snail where I could feel safe and I never seemed to have time to do things I enjoy. Tears came to my eyes, Rene took my hands and asked: “What is making you so sad?” More tears came and I said: “I feel so alone and maybe it might have been different if we had



a daughter”. It is true that I was disappointed after the birth of our last two sons; but I immediately focussed on loving each new baby and simply buried the sadness. It dawned on me that I had blocked it out, only for it to return at this time. I could see that Rene also sensed my deep sadness about not having a daughter and being totally isolated as a woman in our male household. He said that he felt he had let me down. Our sharing was like a breath of fresh air; there was healing and a greater closeness, as well as work to do to change things in our home. That led to important family discussions about our very male household and about my needs and rights as a woman in our home.

### **RENE**

Conflict happens in all relationships. Vee and I are both strong and assertive people so we can think very differently and disagree. Disagreements can quickly escalate and before we know it we are saying hurtful things to each other. Fighting to hurt the other person is not a fair fight. We learned some helpful rules for fighting during a Marriage Encounter retreat. We are responsible for our own feelings and we need to own them and not blame the other for the way we are feeling. An argument can be constructive and help us grow to understand each other better.

### **Acts of reconciliation in our marriage:**

We have grown in our understanding that the sit-down can be a loving act of reconciliation. For us, it is a deliberate decision to sit-down together in the presence of God for the sake of our relationship. At the International gathering in Lourdes in 2006, we witnessed an inspiring spectacle; hundreds of couples sitting; so also in Brazil. Fr Caffarel was wise to challenge us to dialogue in this way, at least once a month, not only about the easy things but also about the challenges.

***Greetings and goodbyes*** can also help us to let go of anger and resentment. In spite of the way we might be feeling about each other, we always welcome and farewell each other with a kiss. This helps us to know that the other is with us in their thoughts during the day and that they wish us well. In the same way, a kiss after an entanglement of our bodies in a cuddle of physical closeness as we turn over to go to sleep, or when we have woken in the morning, can help us to let go of feelings of anger or resentment that may be lingering.

***Duty, obligation, responsibility and routine*** can also be acts of love and reconciliation. The reality that I promised to “love, honour and respect” Vee “in sickness and in health” really hit home last year when she was diagnosed with a



very early cancer, which hopefully has been fully removed. However, she is being monitored and with others amongst our family and friends who are dying from cancer we realise our life together is precious and should never be taken for granted.

There is a lot of routine in our life; we share the household and garden jobs. The rhythm of our lives is punctuated by obligations that we have taken on with our children, grandchildren, parish and community. There is much to do, and whenever I do these routine things I am committing myself to Vee and I renew my marriage vow to be her life-partner ‘in sickness and in health’.

**Kindness as reconciliation:** I am sure you have come across the idea that we should all do “random acts of kindness” each day. The principle is that when someone does something for you it evokes from the recipient a positive emotional response. Caring days can be any day, like making a cup of coffee in the morning and giving it to the other in bed. Vee taking a bit more time and trouble to prepare a nice meal; bringing home a bunch of flowers. They require a decision to love and forgive if needed. These loving acts become an essential component of another of our Team’s endeavours the “**rule of life**”: they are acts of reconciliation that build warmth and closeness in our relationship.

### **Barriers to closeness:**

For us, attitudes of superiority can be significant barriers to our unity because they stop us from truly accepting each other and can be triggers for resentment. I can assume that I know what is right for us. Of course this is a problem especially if I have not asked Vee what she thinks. She may well have a different opinion. Disrespect like that can lead to resentment, resistance and difficulty in reaching a compromise.

Such attitudes are common in all cultures particularly in the power relationships between women and men. We can do nothing about the socialisation we received in childhood, where we were born or in whatever culture we are imbedded; however, as a couple we are created “in God’s image” and are called “to be one”, so that, in our unity as a couple we must strive with great humility to manifest a tangible image of the co-equal “love of the Trinity”, as well as the “relationship of Christ and the Church” for all the world to see.

### **Acceptance; underpinning reconciliation:**

I often aim too high; I dream and take on too much and I get angry about I can become quite passionate and challenging in discussions. At times, Vee gets impatient when I talk like this even though she also longs for a better world. In spite of her annoyance, she accepts me even though she judges that I am



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dominating the conversation especially if wine has fuelled the fervour. She taps me on the leg and that irritates me but reminds me that others do not necessarily share my enthusiasm and I become more considerate of others.

Acceptance shows a capacity to love unconditionally in spite of aspects of our personalities that will irritate our spouse. The real danger is to allow these feelings to ‘take. Pope Francis puts it like this in ‘Amoris Laetitia’ (paragraph 108): *“If we accept that God’s love is unconditional, that the Father’s love cannot be bought or sold, then we will become capable of showing boundless love and forgiving others even if they have wronged us.”*

## VEE

### Reflection and Learning as Reconciliation:

Our base team is Team 7 South Australia: we have journeyed with this team for 42 years; a truly amazing blessing. Indeed, several members of our Team are here with us today. Last year we studied “Amoris Laetitia” and at times, we were deeply moved, particularly when Pope Francis spoke about ‘Love forgives’ in this way (paragraphs 105):

*“Once we allow ill will to take root in our lives, it leads to deep resentment ... The opposite of resentment is forgiveness which is rooted in a positive attitude that seeks to understand other peoples’ weaknesses and to excuse them”*

Even though it was difficult to share about my loneliness in our family, we knew we needed to talk. We gained so much from that short time of deep sharing which Pope Francis calls ‘Dialogue’: (paragraphs 136 – 141) and we feel inspired and supported by this passage:

*“Dialogue is essential for experiencing, expressing and fostering love in marriage and family life. Yet it can only be the fruit of a long and demanding apprenticeship. ... We need to develop certain attitudes that express love and encourage authentic dialogue*

*Take time, quality time. This means being ready to listen patiently and attentively to everything the other person wants to say. It requires the self-discipline of not speaking until the time is right. Instead of offering an opinion or advice, we need to be sure that we have heard everything the other person has to say ...”*

Pope Francis wants all couples to ‘dialogue’ as we do in Teams **in our sit down** by listening actively, so we can be ‘authentic’ when we share deeply at our **monthly Team meetings**. In the same way, when it is our turn to prepare the **study topic**, we need to reflect and learn about the impact God has on our relationship and in our lives.



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### **Our Monthly Team meeting as reconciliation:**

We aspire to live the endeavours of *prayer, conjugal prayer and reading of the scriptures*. Our *monthly Team meeting* is part of the rhythm of our lives. It reminds us that we are a couple, especially when we are not living like a couple. Before the meeting, we may be cool and distant with each other. The focus of our dear friends is simply to listen with love and concern and this helps us to listen better to each other. At the end of the meeting, we are nearly always closer, more united and have a sense that we have participated in an act of reconciliation. Indeed, we now know that every act of reconciliation is a prayer for unity and love in our relationship.

### **“Love is not love until you give it away”; Christian Mission:**

We know that Matrimony is a Sacrament for others and responding to this call is life giving and it has become a way of life for. We have done many things in Equipes Notre Dame, the parish, with our work and in the community. We are no different than so many other Teams couples who do much for others. We work well as a team and we know we can complement each other’s gifts to get a job done. For example, it took lots of discussion and many drafts going backwards and forwards between us to write this testimony.

We know too, that through our relationship we have the power to make God’s love obvious throughout the world. Henri Caffarel knew this intuitively, when he agreed to journey with the first couples. In turn, we are inspired by loving couples when we see the fruits of their love through the many things couples make happen: like caring for children and grandchildren, the elderly and volunteer work in our communities.

Couples are the cornerstone of society. Weddings are special because the couple in love give us renewed hope for a world that Christ wished for when he taught us the Our Father and prayed “thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven”. All loving couples are powerful instruments of God’s love in the world. They challenge us realise this power and use it to the full. However, to do this we must first be reconciled so we can be ‘authentic’ when we share our love with others.

### **Conclusion:**

Marriage is a ‘demanding apprenticeship’. We, Vee and Rene, are two independent and separate individuals. Sometimes we see life very differently and we can hurt each other as we struggle to find a way forward. Anger and resentment can consume us and it become more difficult to be reconciled and say ‘I am sorry’.



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But, each month we can prepare for our Team meeting by sitting down to listen to each other and reflect on God’s influence in our lives. At the meeting, we share in the joys and struggles of our “Companions on the journey”; we learn from them as we listen, love and respect their efforts to grow as couples, individuals and with our spiritual counsellor. In turn, they help us to love and accept each other more completely and unconditionally. Equipes Notre Dame has had a major impact on our lives and we understand much better now that the discipline of the Endeavours gives us many opportunities for reconciliation every day.

Thank you.