



# The Family LifeLine

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## The Secret to a Happy and Holy Family

Interview with Dr. Tracey Rowland, Dean John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family



Not to long ago, The Straits Times featured a lovely story of Mr & Mrs Ratty who celebrated 72 years of married life. Yet on the very same day, an article reported on the rising number of date violence among teens and how what began as romantic bliss descended into bouts of abuse and even threats to life. In such confusing times, are there any "laws of happiness?" Or is a happy family and married life down to chance? We ask Dr. Tracey Rowland for her insights...

**On the one hand we have a story of a happily married couple of 72 years. On the other, we read that more young people are falling into abusive relationships with their partners. Your reactions on these polar opposites?**

In Tolstoy's novel Anna Karenina, there is a line which goes something like this: all happy families are happy in the same way, while all unhappy families have their own unique misery.

In order for young people to form healthy relationships, they need to begin from a position of having a certain amount of self-respect and knowing that they are worthy of love, and that their bodies and souls are a gift to be treasured by someone who is sufficiently worthy to receive that treasure and treat it with the honour and respect that it deserves. Unfortunately however, many young people already come from homes which are dysfunctional and where they have been abused. They begin from a position of not really believing that they are worthy of someone's lifelong love and fidelity. They are vulnerable to being used and abused and each time this happens their self-esteem is further eroded. They also end up in relationships of mutual emotional dependency in which there is little possibility for personal growth. They end up in a rut from which it is difficult to escape. Further, when there is a relationship of sexual intimacy, which tends to be the norm, the ability to distinguish between love and mere emotional and sexual dependency is diminished. The

ability to stand back from a relationship and analyse it objectively is undermined.

I think therefore that Tolstoy was right – there are certain ingredients or principles which if employed certainly dramatically increase the chances of being happily married.

**Holiness & Happiness, there are many who would consider these 2 words as incompatible with each other...**

The word holiness has really had a bad press. It often conjures up images of saints as depicted on religious book marks. They usually don't look all that attractive. They certainly don't look normal. However if we translate holiness as something like strong personal integrity based on a personal relationship with God buttressed by the sacramental life of the Church, then holiness certainly does improve one's chances of a stable and happy marriage. Catholics have always believed that at its best or most ideal, marriage is a sacrament. It is not a mere contract or social convention. It is nothing less than the couple's participation in the life and love of the Trinity. If a couple shares this vision of marriage it makes even the most difficult times seem bearable. In every marriage there are a fair share of Good Friday moments, Holy Saturday moments and jubilant Easter Sunday moments. Sense can be made of the suffering and the need for patience and forgiveness. This is of course assuming that the couple is originally validly

married. Some couples of course are so immature or psychologically unwell when they make the decision to marry that it really undermines the necessary freedom to offer one's life as a gift to another in this special way. In those situations the Church allows for annulments and each person has another opportunity in

then all our loves are of eternal significance. If one really believes this, it is possible to be happy even if not every single desire is satisfied.

**As growing children**

Obviously personal maturity builds on spiritual capital. Without spiritual capital it is difficult to mature in any kind of well integrated way. If one doesn't have a sense of who one is in relation to God, then one is likely to lack not merely a moral compass but any kind of lifestyle compass. It is

for this reason that there is a growth industry in personal lifestyle trainers. At best these people can present a person with a list of lifestyle options but they cannot answer the really fundamental spiritual questions. They cannot answer the question of whether there is a God, and if so, what God is like. They cannot say whether sexuality has any deeper meaning than the biological. They do not know if love is eternal or merely ephemeral.

Thus, children who grow up without any spiritual capital or very little spiritual capital end up with a serious identity crisis as adolescents.

**Older persons (especially when they need to cope with empty nest syndrome/illness)**

Loneliness is a common cross suffered by the elderly. It does undermine happiness because human beings were created for friendship with others. I think that our parish centers need to be more acutely aware of the degree to which loneliness is a problem, not only for the elderly but also for young mothers who are not in the

workforce and living away from parents and siblings.

**You yourself are happily married, what is your personal secret?**

I think that my husband was a gift of Providence. I think God just took pity on me and decided to deploy my husband in my direction! We are both Catholics and both converts from strong Anglican backgrounds. I think this means that our experience of our faith is very similar and we share similar cultural sensibilities. We don't have any conflicts over the big issues – our values are absolutely identical. In marriages where this is the case, that is where the values are identical, there are no disputes which require one party to sacrifice a part of themselves or their beliefs which they regard as central to their identity. However for those who marry others who do not share all or at least the majority of their values, then disputes cannot be resolved without an enormous amount of grief.

Thus, I think that my number one piece of advice to young people is only marry someone with whom you are in total agreement about all the big existential questions. Every thing else can be negotiated and personality differences can come to be understood and managed over time. It usually takes only a few weeks for an extrovert to learn that an introvert needs a certain amount of personal space, or for an introvert to learn that an extrovert likes parties. Understanding the needs of different personalities is part of the recipe for a happy marriage, but it is very much secondary to the fundamental principle of finding someone who shares your core values. Without such a foundation it can be extremely difficult. Core values literally define a person and if there are clashes on that level then disputes can never be resolved without a loss of one's sense of self and personal integrity.



**In every marriage there are a fair share of Good Friday moments, Holy Saturday moments and jubilant Easter Sunday moments.**

**Happiness & Holiness, how can the following groups of people live it out in their lives**

**Married couples**

I think that happiness is fundamentally a sense of peace which comes from knowing that one is loved and that in giving oneself to one's spouse, one is doing something of eternal significance. Cardinal Scola who is now the Patriarch of Venice once said that Christianity is the moment when the now meets the forever. I think in saying this he was making the point that if Christianity is true, if Christ was the second person of the Trinity,

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