



**THE SPIRITUALITY  
OF  
MARRIED LIFE**

SAMPLE





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**THE SPIRITUALITY  
OF  
MARRIED LIFE**

**JOHN COGAVIN**

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*As a young busy mum with three children I found the book helped me reflect on the need to invest time in my relationship with my husband. It is a good read for all couples trying to bring a deeper meaning into their busy marital lives.*

**Angela Guillemet**

*Every pastor and minister should have a copy of *The Spirituality of Married Life* as s/he ministers to numerous couples who struggle with an indepth understanding of their marital relations. As I read it I said to myself "Why did we not have a copy of such an inspiring instruction as we endeavoured to minister to married couples in the past. This book on *Married Spirituality* is a gift to all of us"*

**Mikie O Grady,  
Columban Father, Kwangju, S. Korea**

*From family car journeys to memories of sky high mortgage rates, the spirituality of marriage offered in this book comes from the living out of marriage and from the ongoing pondering of a couple on that experience. While also drawing on widely researched and thought provoking wisdom, the spirituality put forward by John Cogavin is deeply insightful yet compellingly human.*

**Andrew Fanthom & Emer Sinnott**

*I am convinced of one core truth about us all: without finding some constant spaces of support, in today's world we can suffer from a kind of malnutrition of our humanity and of our faith. This book is food in that desert.*

**Michael Paul Gallagher S.J.**

*What does it mean to love another human being and to commit our lives to them in marriage?*

*This book, which combines wide research with concrete life experience of marriage, identifies marriage as a lifelong journey needing constant attention and nourishment.*

*The structure of the book and particularly the questions at the end of each chapter provide a wonderful resource for any couple who seek to deepen their experience of marriage today.*

**Aileen Walsh**

*John and Elaine's book provides a rich cluster of contexts in which Christian Married Spirituality can be understood and lived by married couples. The end result is a book that makes the fruits of the work of Equipes Notre Dame available to all who seek a clear articulation of the spiritual richness of married life.*

**David Kelly OSA**

*Reading John's *Book on the Spirituality of Married Life* has given me a greater appreciation of the gift and sanctity of marriage.*

*I have come to the realisation that a marriage between a husband and wife is a vehicle whereby two become one in a living, mutual relationship of love.*

**Stephen Andrews**



# DEDICATION

To Elaine

For her Love, Friendship and Inspiration for this book

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Elaine has been the great inspiration and editor in chief for my work on this book. We were also blessed with many other friends who helped in various ways as I progressed through the development stages. The many academic staff of the Milltown Institute who helped me think deeper and broader on the subject of Spirituality. Especially David Kelly who directed me through the Masters programme to achieve the MA in Christian Spirituality. He also risked directing my main thesis in Married Spirituality. I also wish to thank the librarians and the Jesuit community for access to their wonderful library and for their hospitality.

Elaine and I have shared several years with multitudes of friends in Equipes Notre-Dame over most of our married life, each of them have helped in very different ways towards the development of this book.

Not being a writer or English scholar I had to rely on many friends to read through the work chapter by chapter. For their dedication, their challenges

and their friendship throughout I thank each one of them. Emer and Andrew, Stephen, Angela, Aileen thank you. Also Father Mikie who helped keep our old friendship alive through email from South Korea where he has served for over 40 years. Again in this regard Elaine was so patient, constructive and such a friend.

Our three sons Barry, Tony and Peter who at all stages along the journey were supportive and enthusiastic even though they probably wondered 'what is he up to now'.

Father Michael Paul who wrote the lovely inspiring foreword to the book was not aware that the first book on Spirituality which Elaine and I read and reflected on together was his earliest work *Free To Believe*.

To all of you and the many others not mentioned I say thank you.



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## FOREWORD

*“We all know that the perfect family does not exist, nor a perfect husband or wife.”*

This piece of realism was spoken by Pope Francis to thousands of engaged couples on St Valentine’s Day, 2014 in Rome.

His Holiness added some advice on how to protect a married relationship from being damaged by the inevitable tensions that arise.

He suggested three little expressions as marks of respect for the other person –

*“Can I?”*

*“May I?”*

*“Thank you.”*

His Holiness stated: “courtesy kindles love”. These expressions can be used as a constant manifestation of gratitude for the other person who is also “a gift from God.”

Also saying: “I’m sorry.” This admits one’s role in whatever may have gone wrong while seeking to heal the difficulties. He offered some examples: “I’m sorry if this week I was very silent,” also, “I’m sorry I was angry and I took it out on you.”

*The Spirituality of Married Life* while written by John Cogavin, is in truth a book following the spiritual marital journey experienced by himself and his wife Elaine.

It is not a guide book on how to build a better relationship. Instead, it touches on how to safeguard the quality of a life-long relationship.

How within modern life-styles, with the pressures of jobs, of growing children, of all the ups and downs that happen – how can couples manage to preserve what is at the core of their hopes?

But probably its main focus, and perhaps its main gift to its readers, has to do with a liveable spirituality for couples today. How can they nourish their own adventure of mutual love and Christian faith? The two adventures of course are deeply linked. But, remembering always that there are no ideal marriages, how in daily reality can that double adventure be supported?

This book contains wisdom from one couple who have grown together in marriage.

It reflects on the Christian meaning of marriage, more in practice than in theory. It gives attention to the long history of Christian marriage, with sections exploring its various understandings within the Bible. It does not focus solely on problems within a marriage. In these pages John tells us about the supports that he and Elaine have found along the way.

They were married in 1976 and have lived through many changes since, not only in the family itself but in the larger world, in the surrounding culture, even in the Church. They experienced times of fragmentation and of what they call “parallel lives.”

Then a practical path of wisdom arrived through their encounter with the movement called Teams of Our Lady. This is where I can come into the picture a bit more. I was chaplain to a “team” in Dublin for about fifteen years.

What did we do? There were usually five or six couples in the team. We met in a different family house once a month. We had a structure that came from the foundation of this movement in Paris by Father Henri Caffarel just before the Second World War. It proposed a down-to-earth set of customs or “endeavours” that each couple tried to follow in their lives. For instance they were to have a “sit down” every month, an hour or so for themselves, with the object of really speaking and really listening to how they were finding everything.



Other practices were more predictable for a Christian group: some daily prayer, especially together if possible, some spiritual reading, and of course attendance at Mass and at the monthly meeting. This get-together involved a meal, a sharing of news from each couple, then a more spiritual moment of prayer with input from the chaplain, followed by talking together about the chapter of a religious book they were all reading.

I remain grateful for the memories of those years as a chaplain. It gave me an insight into the slow, very slow, movement of life. There was little drama, and few rapid developments.

But over time we could perceive a gradual spiritual growth in the couples, through trying to follow the practices of the movement, and through the support of listening to one another.

More than one member commented that with all the complexity of today's world and the fragility of faith, they might not have remained believers without the Team.

This support structure was also vital in times of major difficulty: people were able to voice their feelings in moments of serious illness or bereavement or when going through a time of tension with the children.

For me as a priest, it was a quiet eye-opener to the ordinary way of God's grace in family life. Sometimes I wondered whether the demands of married life were not harder to live out than the demands of celibate priesthood.

Even though my life moved away from Ireland and I lost this regular contact as chaplain, I am convinced of one core truth about us all – without finding some constant spaces of support, in today's world we can suffer from a kind of malnutrition of our humanity and of our faith.

This book is food in that desert. It challenges us to recognise our needs and to have the courage and imagination to seek companionship on the journey.

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**Michael Paul Gallagher S.J.**

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## **PREFACE**

What is Marriage? What is Married Spirituality? This book tries to establish a credible response to these questions by studying the history of marriage and spirituality and how they developed over the centuries. Through research and reflection it becomes apparent how beautiful, holistic and intimate the relationship of a husband and wife becomes when cultivated and nurtured throughout their life's commitment to each other. For me, marriage is an environment where a man and a woman together can experience a 'holistic spirituality'.

Since my wife, Elaine and I started our journey together we have experienced much fulfilment, while also experiencing the challenges that any two people of different gender, diverse family and cultural backgrounds experience. In such relationships each person comes with their own beliefs, ideas, desires and indeed baggage. For these reasons the development of a common shared vision for life is guaranteed to bring diversity and often conflict. However, marriage can also bring complementary values with potential for growth, friendship, fun and intimacy. The intimacy which grows from a holistic relationship I believe is Love. Such intimacy brings a realisation that love is all about relationships.

### **WHY A BOOK ON MARRIED SPIRITUALITY?**

Our own lived experience has been very positive despite journeying in a time when married couples are often greatly challenged. We have been blessed with many exceptional opportunities to live our married spirituality to the full as individuals, as a couple, as parents and sharing with other couples in developing an understanding of married spirituality. Recently

I had the luxury of a period of study of spirituality with major emphasis on: *The Spirituality of Married Life*.

Today Marriage in general and Christian marriage in particular receives a poor press. Yet, throughout the world marriage remains the surest foundation for stable human relationships and for nourishing our shared humanity across most religious and cultural divides. We ourselves are strengthened by the vast number of friends, family members and other acquaintances who live happy fulfilled married lives. Because of this and conscious of the good it has brought to our own community of love and to many loving relationships around the world we believe it is important to present the positives.

### WHO AM I THINKING OF AS I WRITE?

This book should be of value to anyone who wishes to explore in greater depth the wonder of marriage and the promise of married spirituality. It will be of benefit to:

- Young couples anticipating their own wedding day, who would like to explore further the wonder and potential of the spiritual dimension of married life.
- Couples who are already on the journey but who may not have shared much on the spirituality of their relationship and may not be aware of the beauty and goodness of a more holistic approach, where body, mind, heart and spirit are integrated.
- Couples who at a time of change have an ideal opportunity to explore new and deeper dimensions to their relationship. This may be when starting a family, changing home or jobs, or when either spouse is retiring or suffering in some way.
- Parents whose children are planning to marry. Often parents will not have reflected on such a view of marriage themselves and reflecting together can be especially informative and transformative of their own relationship.
- Those who take responsibility for guiding couples in preparation for marriage, enriching existing marriages or dealing with mar-



riages that are challenged by the societal environment they find themselves in.

- Bishops, priests, other religious and lay ministers who celebrate so many wedding days and journey with many couples through life may find something new or helpful.

## HOW HAVE I DEVELOPED THIS APPROACH TO MARRIAGE?

Before Elaine and I married we reflected a lot on what our life long commitment together was going to be; how we were going to travel and change the world, learn more about each other and live a full and exciting life together. On the practical side we knew there were going to be commitments to each other, to family and to extended communities. Yet we mostly thought about our jobs, our home, our car and other material needs.

Our wedding day was blessed with a lovely marriage ceremony, followed by a joyous celebration with family and friends, very modest by today's standard. Then the great romantic era was underway, mixed with new unexpected joys and challenges. We were active in our social life with lots of friends, busy with sport and other individual pursuits. Life just kept getting busier. Some years later at a time in our marriage when we were beginning to live parallel lives, in our attempt to keep everything going, we received a welcome wake-up call. We were invited to join other couples to look at exploring the spiritual dimension of our marriage. Throughout the book I shall refer to how participation in this International movement became a major learning environment for us on the spirituality of our marriage. This small support group with a common aim to grow as individuals and as couples in our Sacrament of Marriage brought a whole new perspective to our life. It made us question: what is our purpose in life and in particular our married life together?

Over the years we began to talk together and share with the other members of the group on this question. We began to realise what the important aspects to life were and gradually saw change in our behaviour and lifestyles. Our busy lives, while still pretty hectic started to make space for time in reflection, time together sharing our dreams, what our values were, how we could be more attentive to each others' needs and feelings, and how we could share our journey and our load together.



Through gradual learning a deeper understanding of each other brought new realisation that the fulfilment of our married life was not about how much we could get done but how much we were able to be true friend, supporter and lover to each other. We awoke to the reality that spirituality was not so much a religious matter but how we learn and practice to be more human as persons and as a couple. Married Spirituality then started to make sense. Spirituality of couple becomes real when the husband and wife are able to share their lives in a truly holistic way. By that I mean, when every part of each other is engaged, the physical, social, emotional and the intellectual being and the deepest spirit within. When 'heart speaks to heart' the couple are at their most intimate and their most human. This is also where we encounter God and find Him journeying with us in all things and in the other. Spiritual and sexual intimacy is a gift from God and it is pure grace. How joyous and fulfilling married life is when a woman and a man enter into a relationship and gradually open to a mystical union of intimacy, where they can just be, and leave all and become for the other a pure object of their desire. An image beautifully captured in *the Dark Night of the Soul* by the 16<sup>th</sup> century mystic John of the Cross:

*I lay. Forgot my being,  
And on my love I leaned my face.  
All ceased. I left my being,  
Leaving my cares to fade  
Among the lilies far away.*

In 2001 Elaine and I were invited to give some voluntary time to the development of married spirituality on an international basis. We served six years on the Leading Team of the International Movement for Married Spirituality – Equipes Notre-Dame. This period working with a wonderful team of other volunteer couples gave us a new global dimension of what married spirituality is. This role brought us new understanding of marriage in its great diversity throughout many cultures. We found contrast within; the cultures of divorce in Europe and the USA, marriage flourishing in Africa with its tribal culture and emerging faith cultivated by Basic Christian Communities, India with its strong Hindu culture where most marriages are arranged, Latin America benefiting from community development through Liberation Theology, Australia and Great Britain with large numbers of mixed Christian marriages while much of Asia reflects a strong Confucius culture. These are some of the cultures we experienced, all of which are benefiting from emerging support for married spirituality.





This married life experience with Elaine and our sons Barry, Tony and Peter and with all the great people who have helped us learn and grow as persons and in faith over our married life are the basis for this approach to married spirituality.

## HOW THIS BOOK SHOULD BE READ?

To get most from this book one needs to understand how multi-disciplinary the spirituality of married life is and how much one needs to understand each discipline in itself and in its integrated form. I have tried to set out each chapter as a unit in itself with its own content and learning and focused questions to help a deeper search into the particular subject matter. I search throughout for integration of anthropology, psychology, sociology, theology and spirituality knowing that each has its own historic perspective. Ideally the book should be shared by a couple who read, study and dialogue around each chapter in a spirit of listening, learning and love. In this way it can be used as a base for developing as an individual your own Spirituality and together as a couple your shared married spirituality.

The individual chapters are not stepping stones along a spiritual journey but can help with content and learning on the various subject areas being explored. Because of this structure each chapter can be read and reflected on separately.

- The first chapter presents a broad overview of all integrated aspects of married spirituality. This as with each of the other chapters contains my thoughts on the specific subject and also identifies challenges facing all of us in our lived experience.
- Chapter two establishes the cultural context that married couples experience in today's world. It naturally reflects a western world view coming from an island culture in a twenty-first century Europe.
- Chapter three I dedicate to the uniqueness, wonder, wholeness and dignity of the human person, which needs to be explored before we can truly understand the spiritual potential.

Spirituality I divide into two chapters

- Chapter four takes a general view. This involves a background picture, a historic perspective and a look at aspects often presented



as spirituality but which are better described as a culture focusing on the individual.

- Chapter five takes a more personal view of spirituality, first reflecting on what a Personal Spirituality is, what Christian Spirituality is and finally what is Married Spirituality?
- Chapter six presents both an objective and subjective response to the great question for humanity and for this book: What is Love? This enormous question requires deep soul searching and understanding of the stages, value and beauty of how a community of life and love grow in the fullest possible way.

Journeying through these complex subjects one finds that the true intimacy of love grows between a woman and a man in their human beauty and beyond when God who is Love joins them in a Trinitarian embrace. God shares in our humanity so that we may share in Divinity. This is the enormity of the promise of the Sacrament of Marriage, the only community based on a Sacrament.

- Chapter seven traces the history of marriage.
- Chapter eight goes deeper into a modern understanding of the sacrament in particular the emphasis on the relational, experiential and community nature of this special call to holiness.
- Chapter nine returns to the lived experience. Here we explore how deep relationships are the basis for a community of love. In such a community each can grow from their fragile dependency to the freedom of independence while journeying together in a true spirit of interdependence. A place where each can be vulnerable can belong and in a communion of hearts surrender to the other in the intimacy of love.

## WHAT THIS BOOK IS NOT

Because this is my own story and our joint reflection on our spiritual journey it does not enter into the many other stories which need to be addressed. I do not deal with the many difficult stories of brokenness and separation. Neither do I try to explain or form opinion on the modern debate that exists on the legal and political aspects and challenges to mar-



riage. I try to remain faithful to what it is that I have learned and experienced. Based on this I express in as helpful a way as possible for the benefit of any reader who wishes to deepen their understanding of marriage. And especially when two searchers wish to develop as a couple in intimacy their own married spirituality. Pope Francis invites us to such an art of accompaniment: ‘Which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other’.

Spirituality is a reflection on one’s own lived experience, ones encounter with others on the journey, and with our Creator God. This book relates to such a journey and shared experience. Because of its spiritual nature, I find it necessary to share on my own personal journey and take responsibility for all that is expressed. Elaine however is truly co-author as well as my dearest friend, critic and a primary influence; on the book, on my spiritual journey, and in building together our married spirituality.

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**John Cogavin**

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