

## Conversation in Holy Matrimony

Good communication is essential in any organization, and Matrimony is no exception. Husband and wife need to communicate on a regular basis, and their conversation should be marked by courtesy, charity, and clarity. But these can be rather abstract concepts, so is there a way to enliven these concepts; a practical way to put them into the communication?

Yes! One way is called mirroring (though I've heard it called by other names). If you've never done it before, it's a bit awkward at first, but practice it a while, and you'll get the hang of it in short order.

It begins with an invitation. That is, if a husband springs a serious question on the wife, and she is not prepared to speak about it, or even prepared to listen to the question, then the question may be in vain, or simply a cause for irritation.

What would make the wife unprepared? Perhaps she just got off the phone with her mom, and heard the bad news. This has her mind occupied. Or perhaps she is in the midst of a struggle with trying to help one of the kids with their algebra. Maybe the dog is becoming deranged from too close of proximity to the cat as a result of a lockdown. So this must be taken into account, and a kind of an appointment made.

"Is now a good time to talk?" That is a gentle, yet courteous assertiveness. The husband, who has just been asked this, may respond, "Yes, it is." If so, then it's time to talk about something serious. If not, then he might respond with "No, but give me about 20 minutes to get this thing done, and it will be." Being caught off guard can exacerbate the tension or the difficulty of the subject. Being willing to go into the subject can really help the communication. So the virtue of patience must be exercised; patience in the one who needs to talk, and patience in the one who needs to listen.

If the time is right then, begin the talk with a little prayer, to ask the good Lord to open not just the mind, but heart, to speak with and to listen with courtesy and charity.

When the initiator of the talk begins, it is best to keep the point short, and simple. Say the husband wants to talk about something that really irritates him, such as the wife not being frugal with the money.

This needs to be said with courtesy and graciousness of course, though it might not be received as such, though it should be. And realizing that this subject has already been broached numerous times, still, it may need to be addressed once more.

After he has said his piece, now it's time for the wife to respond. "Let me see if I understand you. You said basically that..." She now reflects or mirrors what he said. She doesn't try to parrot or memorized his exact words, but she puts them in her own words perhaps, and gives them back to her husband. And it's not just the words that matter here. She is attentive to the body language, the emotion that may be involved, and reflects that back too.

"And this has you frustrated, because you've already told me about this, and I haven't changed yet. Do I have this right?" He is either going to affirm this or deny it, or think that she left out something important. They go back and forth for a bit if necessary, and he affirms that yes, she understands and even sympathizes.

“And is there anything else you want to add?” He may say yes, and they go through the same process. Only when she has a good understanding, and he recognizes it, does she then present her own view of things. Now it is his turn to reflect and sympathize.

This takes time. It avoids the interruption, or the “Yes but” kind of listening that isn’t really listening at all. It’s just waiting for a lull in the words to jump in. It goes a long way to helping keep our tempers. It does not catch the spouse off guard.

And looking for a good time to bring something up is a skill that is acquired with experience. My mom knew that she should wait until dad had dinner before she brought something up. He was in a much better position to hear the difficulty.

Remember, good conversation is an art, not a science. If you walk up to your spouse and say, “We need to talk,” this might send a shiver up the spine of the recipient. Nonetheless, the conversation needs to happen, because the problem will not go away on its own.

In preparation for this conversation then, you can make a self-assessment to head off the normal things that derail the conversation:

1. Know your objectives. Are they reasonable?
2. What is the spouses’ likely position on this? Are you prepared for their reactions, or will these catch you off guard so that you respond inappropriately?
3. Will your spouse push your buttons again? If so, how are you going to react?
4. How will your feelings or emotions show up in the conversation? Are you disposed to peace for this?
5. Did you contribute to the problem? If so, how and to what extent? And have you taken responsibility for this? Have you expressed this to your spouse?
6. Can you approach this problem putting aside the bruised ego and the blame, and focus on solutions?
7. What about your body language? We communicate largely by words, body language and dress. Have you taken this into account?
8. Is saying “We need to have a talk” the best way to initiate the conversation, or should you say “I sure could use your help with something,” or “I would really like to hear what you have to say about this,” or “Could you help me understand something?”
9. Lastly, what spiritual preparation have you done? Is confession needed before the conversation?

The way we close the conversation is not without importance. Expressing gratitude by words or gestures, closing with a prayer and the Sign of the Cross, giving a compliment; having an idea of how to close is a good thing beforehand.

May all the married couples in our parish have good conversations.