

for REFLECTION

You Have to Work at It, But Marriage Is Worth It!

by Kathleen Billings

Sitting above my kitchen sink is a small flip chart that contains daily reflections either spoken or written by Pope Francis. Today's quote reminds me of the tall order we are charged with in marriage: "When a man and woman celebrate the Sacrament of Matrimony, God as it were 'is mirrored' in them; he impresses in them his own features and the indelible character of his love. Marriage is an icon of God's love for us" (General Audience, April 2, 2014). An icon is "a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol of something" (Oxford Dictionary). We are called in marriage to represent God to our spouse; our love for each other is symbolic of God's love for us. The good news is that this tall order comes equipped with the sacramental grace we need in order to fulfill this very important role in our marriage.

I quickly discovered in my own marriage that while God has this amazing plan for us and gives us the tools necessary to implement it, we need to have a game plan to live it out, and a knowledge of how to utilize the tools he gives us. Marriage takes effort. Great marriages don't just happen; they are the result of a consistent investment of time, love, forgiveness, affection, thoughtfulness, mutual respect, and prayer. Any goal or value that we want to achieve in life requires daily work and diligence to obtain. Marriage is no different. If we want to have an exceptional, fulfilling marriage, one that is worthy of God's calling and design, we have to be willing to daily put the effort in, in order to get the results we long for.

I try to work out every day—a combination of cardio and strength training. Sometimes I don't feel like it, or fitting it into my schedule is complicated, but I know how good I feel after I work out and how good it is for my overall health, physically, spiritually, and emotionally. Therefore, I make the time, and do it even when

I don't feel like it. The days that I don't make exercise a priority, I feel the lack on all levels. Being married requires me to "work out" every day also—work out my mind and my heart. There is a line in a famous country song, *A Little Bit Stronger* by Sarah Evans, that I often think of: "**Every day I get a little bit stronger, even on my weakest days, I get a little bit stronger.**" As long as we put the effort in, a little bit each day, our marriages will become stronger. Even on our weakest days, the days we lash out instead of love, the days that we give in to pride instead of practicing humility, the days we are selfish instead of selfless, the days that we hurt instead of heal, the days that we retreat instead of reaching out, we still get a little bit stronger. The strength comes from the battle fought—the battle to fight for your marriage. As long as you keep yourself in the ring and stay engaged, you will find your marriage blossoming in ways that can only come from the daily diligence of your commitment to love.

Troy and I both strive to make time for each other a priority every day, even when we are exhausted, overwhelmed, and preoccupied. We have found if we do not take this time to connect, we quickly become disconnected and walls rapidly build up. Time for each other alone is vital to the health of our marriage and family life.

I love my husband, but there are moments that loving him is not easy and spending time with him is not appealing. I am confident that he would say the same about me! It is in these moments that we must choose to love each other. Love is a decision. Feelings are blissful and a gift from God to help sustain our love for our beloved, but feelings are not the foundation. A decision to love in good times and bad, in sickness and in health: that is the foundation that you can build together on. Marriage is not 50/50; it is 100/100—giving a sincere

gift of yourself without expecting anything in return. Make your marriage your own. Don't look at other marriages that you perceive to be successful and feel discouraged. Rather, be inspired and motivated by couples that you look up to, but shape your marriage into the unique design that God created for you and your spouse, the design that fulfills your hearts as husband and wife and draws you as a couple deeper in holiness.

Marital love is like fine wine. It gets better with time: time that has been invested in making the marriage real, the love alive, and the bond strong. It is normal to experience difficult and perplexing seasons that strike at the foundation and heart of your marriage. But it is important to remember that during those times of adversity, your marriage is actually being strengthened. Do not be afraid to push your heart

into the pain of the moment. Pushing into it is how you come out stronger as a person and as a couple. If necessary, seek help. Reach out in honesty to others couples that have been there and can guide you with wisdom acquired from lived experience. You have to work at having a strong marriage, but the deep love that develops and that you experience along the journey is worth it! God made it that way, and his plan is perfect, perfect love.

Troy and Kathleen Billings live in a rural western suburb of Chicago with their five beautiful children, ages baby to college bound, and have three little souls in Heaven. Kathleen has a BA in theology from Franciscan University of Steubenville, which she leverages as a project manager of her home, a homeschooler, and inspiring others through her blog: "Seasons of the Heart and Home." Together Troy and Kathleen started from the ground up and currently direct a vibrant parish-based marriage ministry.

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